

Franchesca Cubillo (ed.),

Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award 1984-2008: Celebrating 25 Years,

CDU Press, Darwin, 2011, 250pp, rrp\$55

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This book spans the history of the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAAs), from its genesis in 1984 as the National Aboriginal Art Award through to 2008, and is a welcome addition to scant material documenting this highly significant annual forum, Australia's only national annual survey of Aboriginal art. *Celebrating 25 Years* is only the second book to focus on the Awards, despite their prominence in the Aboriginal art world's psyche and calendar. It follows *Transitions*, published in 2000 by the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) to accompany a touring exhibition of selected acquisitions from 1984-1999.

Celebrating 25 Years is structured with an introductory essay offering a broad historical overview and thirty essays on select artists by scholars and staff from MAGNT. It also features lists of all prize category winners and reproductions of the major award winners, and bonus visual material in the form of official posters for each of year of the Awards and five touring exhibitions. Rather unexpectedly, and unlike *Transitions*, there are no in-depth critical essays on the current landscape for Indigenous art, or the art market.

What the two publications have in common is a focus on Indigenous rights. The Preface to *Transitions* reference Indigenous rights in the very first sentence, and the association between the rights agenda and the Awards is expounded in the Director's Foreword and seven essays. This agenda is also reinforced in thematic sections reproducing the works of art: 'Aboriginal History', 'Aboriginal Life'; 'Cultural Continuums and Transitions'; and 'The Politics of Survival'.

Celebrating 25 Years also makes the connection between the NATSIAAs and

Indigenous rights upfront, noting in the Introduction that the decision to hold the first show in 1984 to coincide with National Aborigines Day Observance Committee activities was intentional. And yet the current book is much more tentative in its positioning of the Awards within the Indigenous rights agenda than was *Transitions*. In fact, the new release is a much more tempered publication overall, and despite its significant increase in scale – double the size at 250 pages – feels less weighty than *Transitions*, chiefly due to the focus on artist profiles rather than critical essays about the Awards themselves.

The Awards' significance is, of course, addressed in *Celebrating 25 Years*, where the Introduction asserts three inherent trends: 'Art and politics'; 'Diversity and innovation'; and 'The rise of Indigenous women artists'. The second and third phenomena are broadly accepted and uncontroversial. The discussion



in 'Art and politics', however, focuses on post-colonial discourse and rights, saying little about Indigenous art market politics per se. The latter is mentioned obliquely in the conclusion, in reference to the 2007 Senate enquiry into Indigenous Art Practices in connection with the problems caused by the expansion of the Aboriginal art market. There is no mention of the rise of the art centres politics, which has clearly influenced government policy, nor the tensions between centres and some commercial quarters, which has fundamentally changed the market's character and performance.

The Awards are not without controversy on this point, such as the alleged art centre ring that was widely reported to have resulted in the exclusion of certain artists from pre-selection in 2008, the last year covered in the *Celebrating 25*

Years publication. As they are Australia's only national Indigenous art awards, the NATSIAAs present a strategic opportunity to advance Indigenous political agendas in a high-profile arena. It is not surprising that the book doesn't stray into the tortuous path of art market politics, but the book's header 'Art and politics' points to a highly visible component of the NATSIAAs and obfuscations warrant exploration.

A clue to the tenor of the book's approach is found in the Introduction, where Dr Sarah Scott suggests the Awards are not curated. On the most prosaic level this contradicts a number of readily available PR statements made by Awards representatives; a more critical appraisal would be that all award entrants, whether in the NATSIAAs or the Archibald, are subject to the curatorial bent of a pre-selection panel.



Curatorial bents extend beyond an aesthetic paradigm to socio-political frameworks. In the case of the NATSIAAs, this has been documented. Avril Quail's essay in *Transitions* openly records her intent to promote certain sectors, and her stated resolve to award the major prize in 1996 and 1997 to an urban artist.

It may have been pure coincidence a year later that Jody Broun's land rights lesson in *White Fella Come to Talk about Land* won the major award, the same year the federal government's legislative amendments reduced Indigenous Australians' access and control over lands. In this regard, including details of the pre-selection panels and judges over the twenty-five years would have made a valuable addition to the current publication as a potential source for critical re-appraisal of the Awards' transparency, process and history.

Politics, penchants and personal preference is also clearly a factor in the choice of artists selected for extended essays, which vary greatly in approach and the calibre of critique. There are worthy additions to writings on the artists, offering insights to their practices and importance, such as those by Danie Mellor on Judy Watson, Franchesca Cubillo on Julie Dowling, Stephen Gilchrist on Richard Bell, Margie West on Ginger Riley, and Luke Taylor on John Mawurndjul. Others offer little other than profiling MAGNT acquisitions.

Christiane Keller, MAGNT's current curator of Indigenous art, has indicated that Cubillo (primary author and at the time of the book's production MAGNT's Senior Curator of Aboriginal Art and Material Culture) was keen to reflect the ongoing support of certain artists in view of the fact that the list of winners is relatively small compared with the number of artists who had 'successfully participated' in the NATSIAA exhibitions by making final selection.

Only one of the profiled artists could arguably stand up to this measure: Bardayal Lofty Nadjamerrek AO, who featured in twenty of the twenty-five Awards. Instead, nearly 25% of profiled artists made the final cut less than five times, suggesting they were profiled for other reasons. Common amongst their profiles is a contribution to Indigenous issues with causes ranging from promoting greater recognition of the scale of displacement and injustices, to advancement of specific rights agendas. Another group with participation of around 30% is noteworthy for each artist's involvement in pivotal moments in the history of the development of Aboriginal art. Many in this group have never been commercially successful; a few were market favourites, albeit temporarily; most have highly idiosyncratic styles.

Acting as an overall component of the book, the artist profiles together work hard to support the Introduction's claim that the NATSIAAs are distinguished by three historical trajectories: 'Art and politics'; 'Diversity and innovation'; and 'The rise of Indigenous women artists'. There is definitely more political critique in *Transitions*, the first publication on the Awards, but in the end *Celebrating 25 Years* adds some panache to the body of published material on the NATSIAAs and some additional critical texture, if one takes the time to dig through all the profiles, and can read between the lines.

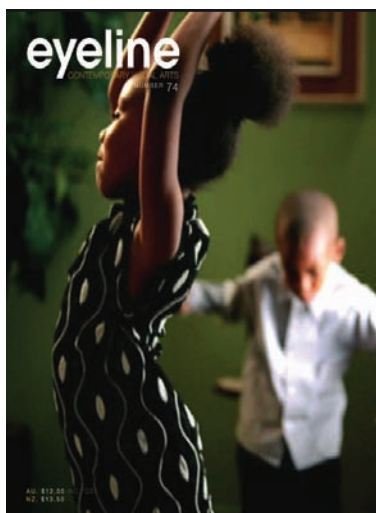
Jane Raffan, principal of Artifacts art consultancy, has twenty-plus years experience working in both public and commercial art sectors, and writes regular art market commentary.

P48: 1/ Poster series, 1st National Aboriginal Art Award, 1984, offset print on paper, 76 x 51cm. Image design by Ray Young.

2/ Jody Broun, *White fellas come to talk about land*, 1998, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 153 x 187cm. Winner of the Telstra First Prize, 15th NATSIAAs. Purchased MAGNT Collection 1998. Image courtesy the artist and Mossenson Galleries, Perth and Melbourne.

P49: 1/ Dennis Nona, *Ubirkubiri*, 2007, cast bronze, 123 x 358 x 123cm. Winner of the Telstra Award 24th NATSIAAs; private collection. Image courtesy the artist and the Australian Art Print Network.

2/ Gawirrin Gumana, *Birrkuda ringgitj (Wild honey design)*, 2002, natural pigments on wood, 324.5 x 24 (diam.)cm. Winner of the Telstra First Prize, 19th NATSIAAs; purchased Museum and Art Gallery NT Collection 2002. Image courtesy the artist and Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.



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Image: Soda_Jerk, *Astro Black (Episode -1: The Race for Space)*, 2010. Detail of still from digital video, 6:34 mins. Courtesy the artists.

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