



Garawan Wanambi, Marrangu (detail), natural pigments and synthetic binder on bark; installation view, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2013; courtesy the artist, Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre, Yirrkala, and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne; photo: Vicki Petherbridge

Celestial bodies: The Kate Challis RAKA Award 2013

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How to settle on one star from among the galaxy of Aboriginal contemporary art practice? Most awards are bestowed on one that burns the brightest – a showy Venus in the night sky – but the AU\$25,000 Kate Challis RAKA Award is more academic. Much like astronomers looking to track a comet or asteroid, the RAKA aims to pinpoint an elusive celestial body – in this particular edition, an Indigenous visual arts practitioner – orbiting in a five-year cycle.¹

As with the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards, the finalists are selected by curatorial invitation and the artists are represented in competition by a body of work. Unlike the Telstras, the RAKA does not aim to present a survey of Indigenous visual art practice. It's the product of a very personal endeavour by co-curators Joanna Bosse and Suzette Wearne and must be seen in this context. Much like an astronomer's telescope, the visual field will therefore necessarily be small, but with the hope of revealing magic in the detail. To refine this focus, Wearne told of extensive research:

We took a very catholic approach, looking far and wide. I compiled a vast database of art centres and artists who work in them and spent a long time speaking with managers and coordinators. Joanna and I also compiled information on Aboriginal artists working in urban centres. We looked at work made by artists known and unknown, of high and low profile, established and emerging, recognised and marginalised. It wasn't a case of 'who's been a finalist in, or won lots of prizes' or 'who's in the NGA shows' or 'who's been exhibited in a lot of institutions'. In fact, two of the artists have never been seen in an art museum context before. The RAKA takes place every five years, so we decided to shortlist artists whose work in that period was particularly dynamic and interesting.²

From the Indigenous arts creative cosmos, the curators selected 32 works by nine artists. The curatorial rationale for

numbers allotted to individual artists, choice of medium and targeted loans may have raised eyebrows, but this is, after all, a highly personal selection, so fully-fledged criticism in this regard would need to address personal and professional idiosyncrasies and bents (extending to the judging panel which comprised Tony Birch, Alison Inglis, Elizabeth Heathcote, Jolanta Nowak and Bala Starr), and by necessity out of place here.

In this mix, the 2013 recipient, Gija elder Mabel Juli, is an apt awardee. Her winning work from 2010, *Garnkeny Ngarranggarni (Moon Dreaming)*, with its star, moon and earth iconography, offered literal resonance to the curatorial framing of the exhibition, which was subtitled 'Under the Sun'. Within the exhibition, Juli's quiet and still works glowed, rather than burning brightly, like a distant red planet among a sparkling Milky Way; not immediately obvious, but mesmerising once observed. In commentary, the judges reflected on the potency of the winning work's aesthetic appeal and iconographic power: 'It is a poetic, sophisticated work which is deeply grounded in Indigenous tradition but also extends outwards to suggest the complex relationships existing between a diversity of cultural and natural human experiences.'

Juli's paintings drew one closer on every passage through the gallery until the canvases' velvety pigments beckoned actual physical contact. With their powerful and stark negative space, the works offered a fascinating balancing act between representational references and that which for cultural reasons couldn't be depicted: the connections between heaven and earth, spirit and place, the tangible and immutable, things attainable and forbidden. This precarious tension was the dominant feature of the winning work, whose story of the man and moon was grounded by very real consequences for transgressing Aboriginal law.

Acknowledging the field, the judges noted that ‘there is an exciting energy about both the individual works and between all the works as they collectively reflect on an intricate range of histories and cultures’. And herein was the success of the RAKA’s endeavour and the 2013 exhibition, in particular, with its tantalising scope narrowing in on common, if not shared, artistic and cultural concerns.

Framing a corner of the exhibition on converging walls, Tiwi painter Timothy Cook’s mellifluous ceremonial moon mantras and Mabel Juli’s cosmos images created a striking contemplative space. Cook’s wall label stressed the importance of repetition in his oeuvre. All examples on show were works on paper, and one wondered why a work on canvas was not among the mix of five. Certainly a different ground, with his typically luscious ochres, might otherwise have offered a stronger counterpoint to Juli’s works. That said, the lovely expressiveness apparent in his application of white ochres on black painted paper may not have been accentuated in denser layers on canvas.

A step backwards into the centre of the room and Yolngu artist Garawan Wanambi’s four carved hollow log poles anchored the space. The tension between the intricate geometric design on these 3D objects and the resulting fluid optical effects representing water were immensely visually satisfying and deliciously confounding.

Wanambi’s bark painting nearby offered another optical intrigue. The thick lines of white *rarrk* and unpainted diamond-shaped edging brought depth to the work and created the appearance of soft folds from afar; playfully suggestive of crocheted cloth stretched across a table, its installation next to works by masterful Ngan’gikurrunggurr weaver Regina Wilson was surely not coincidental. Wilson’s robustly woven sun mat stood in solid contrast to her expansive yet delicate painted *syaw* (fish net). Nearby, her wispy dillybag stitch painting with its flat plane of understated ellipses was somewhat eclipsed by the strength of the other examples.

Fibre and fibreglass are used with flair in Torres Strait Islander Alick Tipoti’s meticulous, modern embellished *Mawa* (sorcerer) masks. Flanking the wall between rooms, the masks’ anima and collective brazen stare made it hard to ignore their powerful message about artistic individuation, innovation and cultural continuum. Utilising museum collections as inspiration for his work, Tipoti’s masks also offered striking critical and iconographic resonance with Daniel Boyd’s painted male figure in ceremonial dress seen through the doorway in the room beyond.

While still exploring postcolonial imperatives, Boyd has moved away from the satire and parody of his ‘No Beard’ pirate works that earned him early acclaim last decade to focus on imagery reflecting his mixed Pacific Islander heritage. His current technique utilises glue dots overlaying monochromatic painted imagery. By obfuscating his pictorial references, Boyd reveals the obliteration of Indigenous histories and culture and illustrates the power of the museum archive, which is being reclaimed from anthropologists and curators to reinvigorate Indigenous sovereignty claims. The works present us with a curious, calculated and clever postcolonial encounter.

Boyd’s dotting also served to draw attention to the desert paintings installed adjacent, where the technique was born of a desire and need to create paintings for outsiders that reverberated with messages about connection to country, sacred spirits and place, but which protected culture by hiding secret detail.

Pitjantjatjara elder Hector Burton’s stated mission is to protect culture through preservation of secret or sacred material from prying eyes. Unlike his classic, more refined style, which utilises familiar desert designs and patterns, the works chosen for ‘Under the Sun’ concentrated on his new tree iconography. Stretching to the edge of each canvas, they acted like giant arms reaching out to protect and nurture country. As Frank Young, Director of Tjala Arts, explained on the accompanying wall label: ‘We’re painting the outside story in these trees: the leaves, the branches, the stories that spring from them. But the secrets beneath the trees, the root of the story – that we can’t tell.’

In this room, colours of the desert leapt off walls. Recently deceased Ngaarnyatjarra elder Kunmarnanya Mitchell’s indicative gridded compositions drew us along with him on his peripatetic journey through country, his busy dotting within planes and squares suggestive of both place and purpose. The youthful Pitjantjatjara artist Teresa Baker produced map-like images of country consistent with the painting traditions from her region. Her renditions were, however, more highly stylised than her forebears, including her grandfather, the late Jimmy Baker. Tapestry-like with a close-knit weft and weave, the resulting aerial perspectives of her country resembled archaeological schematic site diagrams, showing resonances of settlement and passage across millennia.

Wandering back into the first room, the reverberations between works utilising optical effects reminded us, again, of Indigenous art’s power to transmit aspects of the sacred. Unlike the idiomatic understanding of the common expression, RAKA’s ‘Under the Sun’ did not suggest that the state of Indigenous contemporary visual arts practice in 2013 was everything that already existed, or that was ever possible. Rather, its mix of youth and age in artists spread across urban, regional and remote Australia, offering a tantalising glimpse of a small cluster of stars twinkling brightly in the current night sky.

1. The award was established in 1988 by the late Professor Emeritus Bernard Smith in memory of his late wife, known in her youth as Ruth Adeney (RAKA is an acronym for the Ruth Adeney Koori Award). The prize’s five-year cycle alternates between creative prose, drama, scriptwriting, poetry and visual arts. Past visual arts winners include Gali Gurruwiwi (2009), Ricky Maynard (2003) and Brook Andrew (1998).
2. Correspondence with the author, 22 October 2013.

‘Under the Sun: The Kate Challis RAKA Award 2013’ was at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, from 10 August to 3 November 2013.



'Under the Sun: The Kate Challis RAKA Award 2013', exhibition view, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne; including the work of Garawan Wanambi (foreground), Timothy Cook (background, left) and Mabel Juli (background, right); courtesy the artists and the Ian Potter Museum of Art; photo: Vicki Petherbridge