

Visions of Capricornia: recent Northern Territory art

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The Northern Territory is small in population but it produces more significant contemporary visual art than other states or territories because of the vast number of Aboriginal artists whose national and international pre-eminence tends to overshadow the non-indigenous artists producing important contemporary Australian work.

The relationship between black and white art in the Territory is complex, dynamic and paradoxical. Aboriginal art from the NT has a high profile internationally and is seen as quintessentially Australian art, while non-indigenous art from the NT is circumscribed by its locality and its distance from the southern art centres of Melbourne and Sydney, and so is frequently reliant on its exotic far-awayness to make its mark outside the NT.

This year, with statehood in sight and a seachange on the national arts agenda, *Contemporary territory*, the biennial survey exhibition of recent Northern Territory art at the Museum and Art Galleries of the NT (MAGNT) in Darwin, for the first time adopted a theme - 'Sea Harvest Earth Harvest'. A less romantic theme was chosen for this year's annual Members show at 24HR Art, the NT Centre for Contemporary Art in downtown Parap, *Roadtrains to the sea*, perhaps emphasising as much the commodification of nature as the importance of road transport in linking the vast land area of the NT. An even less romantic but decidedly more inflammatory title was chosen for an exhibition by Chips Mackinolty and Therese Ritchie, *If you see this exhibition you will know we have been murdered*, which took on NT politics in *extremis* (and oxymoronically). *Contemporary territory* now in its 6th year and its 3rd exhibition was a direct result of the appointment in 1994 of the first curator of NT Contemporary art, Danae Murray (formerly known as Dawn Mendham). Murray responded to the desire of local artists for a regular public venue for their work. From the outset the decision was made to show Aboriginal artists alongside non-indigenous artists under the rubric Contemporary art of the Northern Territory. As Mendham/Murray said in the introduction to the first exhibition in 1994, *Contemporary territory* acknowledges 'the existence of western art practice in the



Chips Mackinolty, *Signs we should have*, (detail), inkjet on paper

Territory, alongside the substantial achievement of Territory Aboriginal art'. It was a powerful recognition that Aboriginal art represents both the strength of a local tradition and much of it is also contemporary in the wider sense of innovative and non-traditional. It was a bold decision at the time given the perception that the MAGNT through the annual National Aboriginal art award, was already well serving Aboriginal artists in the NT who invariably make up the majority of entrants in the award.

Murray's mix of black and white artists has varied, but averages out over the three shows as 2:3 in favour of the non-indigenous, although this year it is virtually equal with six Aboriginal artists and seven non-indigenous. What is most striking statistically in reviewing the progress of *Contemporary territory* is that it captures the transience of the non-indigenous population

and the correlative permanence of Aboriginal artists. Of the twenty six non-indigenous artists shown in this period, a third have left the Territory, since they were shown in *Contemporary territory*. This translates into a sense that there is an endless pool of Aboriginal artists to feature and a correspondingly shallower pool of non-indigenous artists to draw from. To date there have been no repeat appearances, however I suspect that by the year 2000 Murray may well wish to look again at some artists.

In a departure from the previous shows the centrepiece of *Contemporary territory* 98 is a specially commissioned work by Chilean born artist Techy Masero. Called *Bote pájaro* it is a large scale bamboo sculpture installation set in the grounds of the MAGNT and on the beach immediately below, and comprises three bird boats on the



Sheena Wilfred Huddleston, *Campsite-tools and weapons*, 1997, synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Collection Karen Brown.

sand guarded by a ritual tower on the cliff. Over the last five years, since moving to Darwin from Groote Eyelandt, Masero's bamboo ceremonial structures have been the defining visual characteristic of The Festival of Darwin, both in her individual sculptures and in her work with different ethnic communities in creating floats for the street parade. In 1996 as part of Art Head Land Masero made *Taking off*, the precursor of *Bote pájaro*. Set on the shores of Fannie Bay, it was a giant bird carrying on its back a boat poised to set sail.

Masero describes her sculptures as 'drawing with bamboo', and it is bamboo's tensile flexibility which she exploits. Masero relies on the great strength of these structures which are anchored to the rock ledge beneath the beach to resist the comings and goings of the tides and yet look as delicate as lace or filigree silver. They are perpetually framed by sea and sky and cast the most wonderful shadows on the sand. At sunset or under moonlight they are quite otherworldly. *Bote pájaro* is the synthesis where the boat is the bird, the body is based

on the Brown Booby, and the sails are a stylised Oceanic sail or Asian kite shape. At high tide the birdboats appear to float away out to sea. Overlooking them is the ritual tower topped by a school of bamboo fish swimming in the sky, heading out to sea.

Inside the MAGNT, *Contemporary territory* featured paintings by Gertie Huddleston from Ngukurr on the Roper River and Daisy Jugadai from Ikuntji, Haasts Bluff in Central Australia. Their work shows a remarkable affinity in both subject and style - flattened perspective, vibrant colours and highly decorated surface. They both make bright gardens of earthly delight - flowers, plants and animals are set like small jewels amongst the verdant topography of their different countries.

Sheena Wilfred Huddleston is a younger Ngukurr painter, also featured in *Contemporary territory*. She has emerged as one of the most distinctive and exciting of the many Ngukurr painters. Her work features the everyday women's tools, dilly bags and digging sticks alongside plants and foods. Each thing is dramatically delineated

and separated against a very painterly abstract backdrop of Fauvist planes of tonally related colours in gorgeous hues.

Aboriginal classicism was represented by two artists from Maningrida, works on bark by Jimmy An-gunguna and the series of minimalist and beautifully functional pandanus woven fish fences by Shirley Miniyinjarla.

Darwin painter Jan Heisner showed a new direction in her meditative works. For some time she has been working on a very dark thick palette of sombre enamelled surfaces like icons. In these new paintings, there is a welcome movement toward light, by way of water and reflections upon it. In each of her three panels which bear a triptych relation to each other there is a precise and differently located vanishing point where the darkness recedes out of the frame, and we are left bathed in light. Winsome Jobling is a papermaker of exceptional technical ability and continual innovation. Her work in *Contemporary territory* was part of a solo exhibition, *Journal*, shown in Adelaide earlier this year at the invitation of the International Papermakers Conference. Jobling's two metre lengths of hand made paper using a flat bed technique are a triumph of the art. Made from banana fibre which produces a fine, pale, particularly translucent paper, Jobling then inscribes, embeds or embosses each sheet to create a highly wrought yet very subtle and delicate work. There are ten of these large lengths, each sheet or 'page of an artist's book' is different. One is self striped, another contains a whole palm frond, the next is bisected by a warp of strings, another self chequered. In all there is a constant contrast between translucent and yet more translucent, each page extending the limitation of fragility and dissolution, tempting it to break up.

Alongside these large suspended sheets there is another artist's book of small sheets showing the many different types of paper Jobling has made - from pandanus, paw paw, sugar cane, globe artichoke, pineapple fibre. Some are heavily flecked like a terrazzo floor, but the banana fibre paper is the most beautiful with a creamy colour and a special sheen that gives it the most life; it's easy to see why it has become her preferred medium. Jobling's work establishes its own context but other artists' work seem to jostle against each other in an unsatisfying way.

Contemporary territory seems to cry out for a much tighter curatorial premise, a greater focus on fewer artists and the opportunity to show more examples. The audience is more than ready to make comparisons and draw conclusions. We are surely past the stage of feeling there has to be a white artist from Central Australia or it won't be representative of the Territory. I would have

found the show infinitely richer and more satisfying if it had, say, only concentrated on Masero, Jobling and Hiesner and the Aboriginal women artists, leaving out, as would have happened, all the male artists; but that would have been bold and controversial indeed. However it would have made for a much denser reading of what emerged as the strongest theme - the response of women artists to the natural world in the Territory.

During the same period as *Contemporary territory*, 24HR Art instituted an annual Members show based around a specific concrete theme. During the time Steve Fox was the Director, a major effort was made to sign up Aboriginal art centres in communities as members and by some clever choices of theme, in particular, *Snakes and serpents* and *CROC(odile) show* encourage their participation in the Members show. 24HR Art also put on a number of individual and group shows of Aboriginal art again notwithstanding the perception that it was the white artists who were most overlooked. For whatever reasons, *Roadtrains to the sea*, did not seize the imagination of Aboriginal artists, however roadtrains to and from Jabiluka mine did feature. The opening party displayed an edible exhibit, Rowena Ivers' *Yella cake*, a banana cake roadtrain, and Val Stuart's collage *Stop the roadtrains* made the connection between mining and big rigs. Kate MacNeill paid witty homage to Ian Burn with a series of roadtrains labelled - *This road train is bigger than the next one*. But sculptor, Geoff Sharples stole the show with a teeny tiny K Mart toy roadtrain in a dinky diorama - its big load under tarp turning out to be Uluru itself, entitled *The Rock and Olgas' fantasy, sorry the Olgas' trailer's bogged*. Sharples' wit invoked the fantasy of every NT Tourism Minister to move these two great tourist icons to Darwin and centralise territory tourism in their backyard once and for all.

If you see this exhibition you will know we have been murdered, an exhibition of prints by Chips Mackinolty and Therese Ritchie was appropriately opened by Mick Dodson, formerly Social Justice Commissioner and an ex-Northern Land Council lawyer, and shown upstairs at The Roma Bar, a downtown coffee shop frequented by Darwin's lefties, a venue frequently named in parliament by the CLP as a den of iniquity. Mackinolty and Ritchie are in many ways quintessential contemporary Territory artists



Therese Ritchie, *Guess who's coming to dinner?*, inkjet on paper

and yet have never been shown in *Contemporary territory*; whether they have ever been approached is another matter.

They have been living and working in the NT as artists, graphic designers, photographers and journalists for longer than anyone remembers and have produced a vast body of work about contemporary life and politics in the Territory; over the last decade via their graphics arts business, Green Ant Research and Media. They are artists for hire on the side of the angels working closely with numerous indigenous organisations. In keeping with Mackinolty's background as one of the original Tin Sheds poster artists, they produce on their own initiative, and on a fairly regular basis, biting works directed at the latest egregiousness perpetuated by the NT government. They are committed supporters of 24HR Art and always make special works for the Members show, however this is their first duo show and represents a swag of new work and some older works which are still topical. Their targets have broadened to encompass national villains, like Hanson and Howard as well as the perennial local contenders.

The largest and the wittiest amongst

much wit was Mackinolty's massive *Signs we should have or Road signs of the Northern Territory*, which was made for the *Roadtrains* show. It is a compendium of conventional road signs cunningly altered to comment on the state of things in the state that is not yet a state. To wit under the railway crossing X it says, 'just kidding' and under the Give Way triangle it says, 'Or Else' and under the car on a slippery road sign it says, 'statehood ahead' in precisely the right typeface so that from a distance they look like the genuine article. Ritchie's *Mandatory man* reconfigures the Marlboro Man and warns 'rednecks are bad for your health' commenting on the recent and disreputable NT Mandatory Sentencing Act. In another Mackinolty comic masterwork, a man sits reading the *NT News* and a woman says 'Betty wants a cowboy outfit for Christmas'. He replies, 'No worries, let's buy her the NT Government'. Ritchie in *Half boy half reptile* depicts an image of a lurid green plastic crocodile waterpistol transforming into Howard's head, in another, *Guess who's coming to dinner?*, Hanson is a gaping suckling pig about to be liberally doused in soya sauce and devoured by a pair of maniacal gollywogs (or gollypersons as I

conscientiously taught my children to refer to them).

The more benign strain of their work is represented in the many heroic and romantic posters celebrating the struggle for Aboriginal self-determination, created for The Northern Land Council and The Jawoyn Association. The supreme example is Mackinolty's striking and taut three colour composition - black, red and yellow, showing God's finger pointing skyward vide Michelangelo, diagonally splitting the picture plane and the words OUR LAND above, and OUR LAW below.

From these three exhibitions one can deduce not only the state of contemporary art in the Northern Territory but the state of the place itself, creative, vibrant and critical. Recently, in all the flurry of coming statehood, a southern columnist moaned that in its new manifestation it might be called ridiculously The State of The Northern Territory, and proposed instead the new state be called, Capricornia. I say why not?