

# Branding the big art award at the top end

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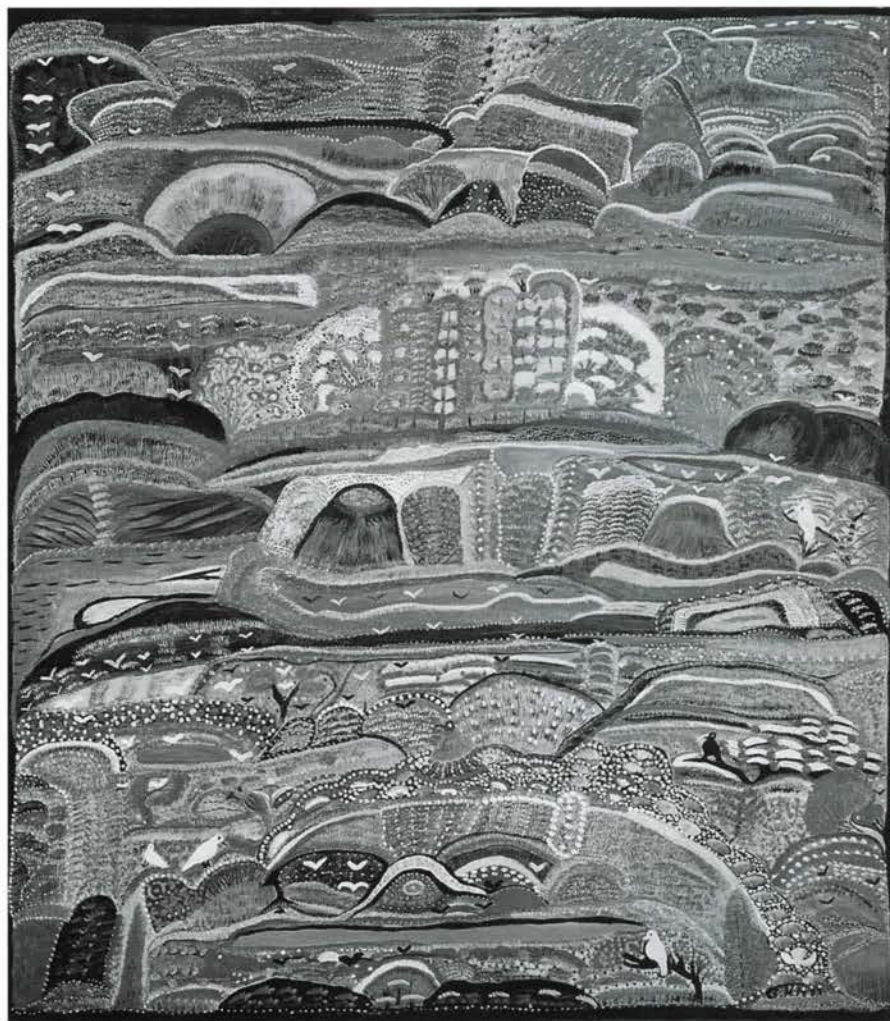
*'Each year... I have seen these Awards presented and each year the work of those taking part is more creative, more technically sophisticated and more innovative.'*

*Banduk Marika – Opening Address to the 1997 Award<sup>1</sup>*

This year marks the sixteenth year of the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award and next year will see the first retrospective, so it is an appropriate time to look back over its history and to consider how it has achieved and sustained its pre-eminence.

The Award was the brainchild of Margie West, who was its instigator and has been its curator and coordinator throughout. From the outset West set a clear agenda – 'Indigenous Art was just beginning to gain some momentum in terms of its recognition and popularity (and while) most of the visual artists at the time were located in the Northern Territory... the ultimate aim of the Award was to recognise the important contribution made by artists nationally... most people's perceptions of Aboriginal art at the time were shaped by their exposure to the classic style forms from Arnhem Land and central Australia. Because of this the work from other regions of Australia was often dismissed as not being "authentic" Aboriginal art.'<sup>2</sup>

The National Aboriginal Art Award initiated by the NT Museum of Arts and Sciences, began in 1984. It offered three prizes, first, second and third, with unspecified categories. The first winners reflected the main players at that time – traditional bark painters and the newly established Central desert acrylic dot painting, third prizes were won by a silk batik from Utopia and a European style painting. In 1986, the Award was restructured to have an overall winner and two other awards – best painting in traditional media (bark or rock paintings) and best painting in European or 'introduced' media (acrylic, watercolours,



*Gertie Huddleston, Garden of Eden II, acrylic on canvas. Awarded the \$3,000 Telstra General Painting Award. Photo courtesy the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.*

oils etc). In the early years of the award about half the entries were bark paintings; nowadays about eighty per cent are in introduced media in all its many forms.

In 1987 the Memorial Award for Mawalan's Eldest Son was established, and in 1993 the embargo on the name was lifted and it was called the Wandjuk Marika Memorial Award honouring the great Yirrkala artist and early chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board. This award was for the best artwork in open media, glossed at the time as mixed media

(batik, sculpture, pottery etc) although in its first year there was a hand painted silkscreen print by the Tiwi artist Bede Tungatalum. By 1990 almost half of the open media category were works on paper – silkscreens, lino cuts and etchings, suggesting that this category was in need of redefinition, and the 1991 gloss included 'prints'. In 1993, West remarked, 'it's getting more and more difficult to make simple categories'.

In 1995 the Open Media Category was split into a separate prize for Works on Paper

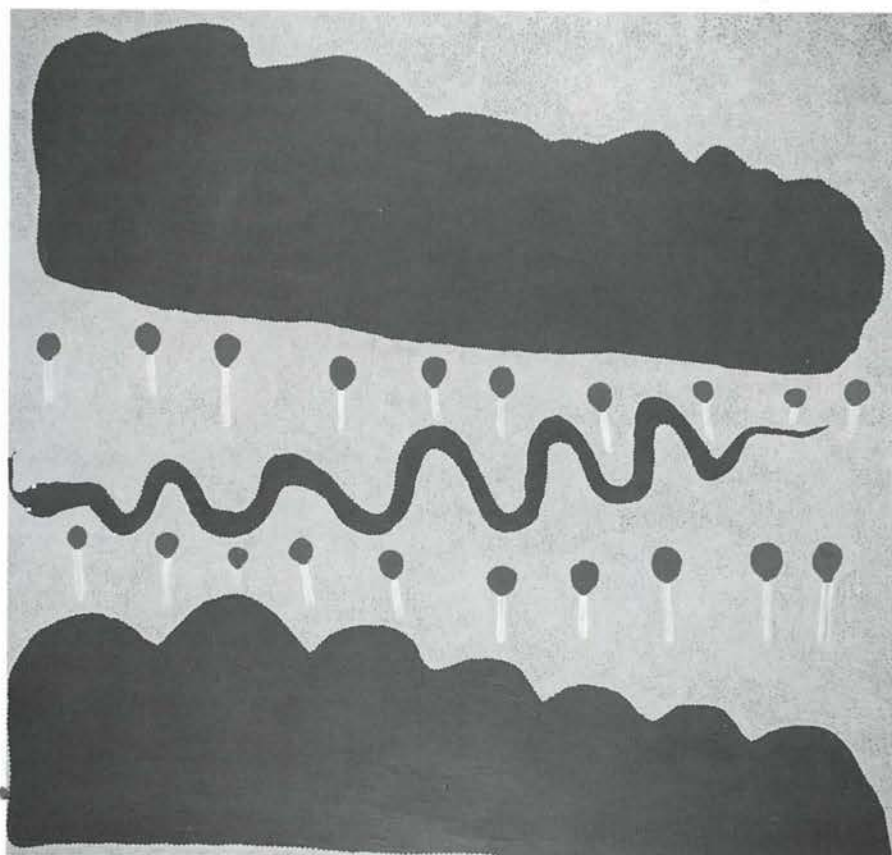


and the Wandjuk Marika Award was reserved for 3D works. Works on Paper encompassed prints and photography but also a new development representing a hybrid of traditional painting – works in ochre on paper in traditional bark painting style first taken up by the Oenpelli artists at Injalak and later by Tiwi Artists. It also accommodated another development, the choice of older women artists at Fitzroy Crossing who began working on big free paintings on paper in 1990 and entering the Award with a splash in 1992 with Daisy Andrews winning the overall prize in 1994.

Over the last five years the categories have been stable – Overall Winner, Bark painting, Open Painting, Works on Paper and the 3D Award and this expansion and stabilising of the categories coincides neatly with the completion of the branding process of the Art Award, by both its auspicing body and its sponsor. It all happened just in time it would seem. In the early years the Art Award attracted up to 100 entries, and all were exhibited; by 1989 it had settled at exhibiting 140 works. During the early nineties entries increased and by 1995 the Award attracted over 200 entries. In 1999 that number has doubled to over 500, of which about 140 are selected for exhibition and forty of them are selected for the Touring show. In the mid nineties the selection process was formalised and artists were required to submit a photographic reproduction of the work first and from these the exhibition was selected by a panel of MAGNT curators and several outside arts representatives.

In 1992, after a three year sponsorship period with Robert Holmes à Court (1989-91), Telecom began sponsoring the first prize. By 1995 when it was transformed into Telstra, they became the major sponsor for all the prizes, at the same time the museum rebranded itself with a corporate logo and a new name the MAGNT, the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT. In 1996 the award expanded its own name to become The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award and people began referring to it by the awkward acronym of NATSIAA.

The mid nineties marked the maturing, or the corporatising, of the award and coincided with the appointment of Jackie Healy as the Director of what became the MAGNT. Healy was interested and supportive of the Award and keen to see its profile and influence increase. The original sponsorship with Telecom negotiated by West in 1992 completed its three year cycle and Healy renegotiated it with what was by then, Telstra. In addition to sponsoring all the prizes, Telstra provided funds to publicise the event and to tour a selection interstate. In 1995 the practice was instigated of



*Long Tom Tjapanangka, Ulampuwarru (Haasts Bluff Mountain). Awarded the \$20,000 Telstra Overall Winner prize. Photo courtesy the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.*

reproducing the previous year's overall winner's work on the invitation and the poster advertising the award. In 1996, when Telstra began touring the pick of the Art Award interstate, a glossy full colour catalogue was produced featuring the winning work on the cover. At this year's award it was confirmed that in 2000, to coincide with the Sydney Olympics, the first retrospective of the Art Award will be presented at the Djamu Gallery, Customs House, Sydney.

One of the Award's greatest strengths is its diversity, which is ensured by each artist only being allowed to submit one work and by the choice of judges. There are two new judges every year, each with different perspectives on Aboriginal Art and this translates ostensibly into – one man, one woman, one Indigenous artist and one art expert who need not be Indigenous.

The Award attracts entries from across Australia but the winners list is dominated by Northern Territory artists with only three of the overall winners coming from outside the NT and last year's winner Western Australian painter Jody Broun was the first urban artist to win. Of the fifty winners in the other categories, only fourteen came from outside the NT, however this figure is skewed as the bark painting category is exclusively the domain of NT artists. It also reflects the

strong visual arts base in the NT and WA where over fifty percent of practicing artists live. Nonetheless it is instructive that even in the realm of introduced media – (works on paper and open painting) and 3D which encompasses the traditional, eg. carving as well as the introduced, eg. pottery, NT artists are still dominant, indicating the willingness of people living in remote communities to take up new materials and explore new forms.

The overall winner this year was Long Tom Tjapanangka with his large acrylic painting, *Ulampuwarru*. Tjapanangka is a senior man from Haasts Bluff and of the same generation as the well known Papunya painters who started painting in the seventies, however he only began painting in 1993 at the Ikuntji Women's Centre alongside his wife, Mitjili Napurrula. His style eschews the dot and circle, but is bold and innovative in its use of solid blocks of colour and images of landscape and animals in profile. His earlier entries in the Award particularly the 1995 and 1996 paintings were more startling, with an austere lyricism, than this year's winning work, but in terms of his oeuvre the prize was well-deserved. The sight of Long Tom in his cuban-heeled riding boots, blue jeans, flash cowboy shirt and hat dancing with the ochred dancers at the presentation ceremony of his award was a

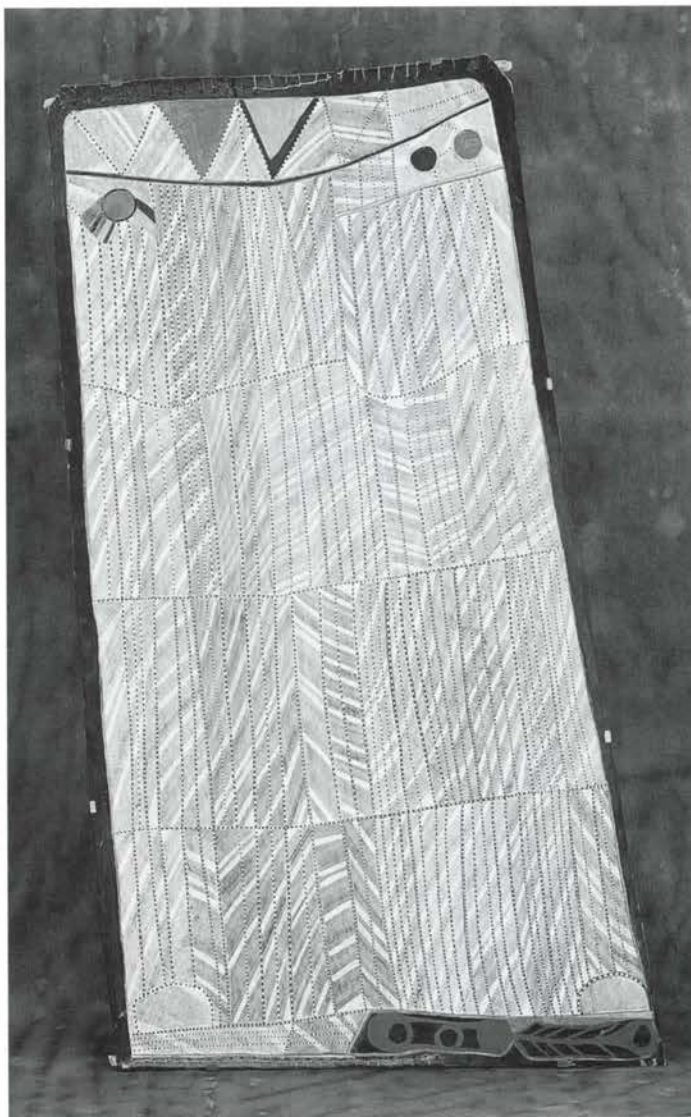


reminder of both his past as a stockman and his status as a ceremonial man.

The winner of the Open Painting Award, Gertie Huddleston is a painter from Ngukurr in South Western Arnhemland. She is one of the five talented Joshua sisters, all of whom are older women who began trying out acrylic painting on canvas and paper in the late eighties inspired by the example of Willy Gudabi and his wife Moima Willie. In the 1992 Award the Ngukurr artists – Ginger Riley, Sambo Burra Burra and Willy Gudabi featured and in 1993 they were joined by Amy Johnson, Gertie Huddleston and her sister Dinah Garadji and Amy Johnson won the award for the best painting in European media. This year Gertie exhibited along with her sisters, Dinah Garadji and Angelina George and her former daughter-in-law, Sheena Wilfred (Huddleston), whom Gertie in her turn inspired to take up painting.

Gertie's early paintings were quite similar to the work of the late Willie Gudabi and Moima Willie but she soon found her own distinctive style. It is characterised by a rich palette of colours and minutely detailed flora and fauna of her country lovingly rendered in a complex repertoire of differing types of brush strokes which recall the embroidery stitches she learnt and excelled at as a young girl growing up on Roper River Mission. Her winning work, *Garden of Eden II* is infused with heavenly light on a jewel like landscape.

The Bark Painting Award was won by the Eastern Kunwinjku artist, John Mawurndjul who was a previous winner in 1988 and has never diverged from bark painting. He is a mid career artist who has established an enviable reputation both within his community and in the market. His work has developed from a rarrk infill on food animals floating on a dark background to an increasingly decorated surface. The other main subject of Mawurndjul's work is based on the sacred body painting designs of the Mardiyani ceremony such as his winning entry this year, in which the whole surface of the bark is filled with a rarrk. The distinctive feature of his use of rarrk is that it is not predictable or uniform but sets divided sections at



John Mawurndjul, *Mardiyani at Mulkamukka, ochres on bark*. Winner of the \$3,000 Telstra Bark Painting award. Photo courtesy Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

angles to one another creating a dynamic and shimmering effect, which Mawurndjul has likened to the quality of the skin of the Rainbow Serpent, Ngalyod.

The Work on Paper award was won by Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek, a senior Kunwinjku speaker from Gunbalanya in Western Arnhemland, for *Ngalyangdoh*, a finely rendered and elegant image of two women with their dilly bags and hunting dogs. The women are entwined by Rainbow Serpents, and about to be transformed into Yawk Yawks, the mermaid like spirits who inhabit rockholes in the escarpment country. Lofty is one of the last of the true rock art painters and uses the distinctive parallel hatched rarrk in his paintings on both bark and paper just as is done in rock art, rather than the more common cross hatched rarrk found in other bark paintings.

In recent years the Bark Painting category has been revived with a host of works from Yirrkala that each year got bigger than the

previous ones until last year they reached the upper extremities of the exhibition space.

In 1997 big Yirrkala barks up to three metres in height won both the Bark Painting category and the overall award. Although there have been artists who have tackled contemporary life in bark paintings most notably Brian Nywaninga from Maningrida and Marrnyula Munungurr from Yirrkala, this particular hybrid has never featured in the Award. It seems the market does not readily tolerate the secular or the contemporary in a bark painting.

I vividly recall Dorothy Bennett telling me in 1987 when I first arrived in the NT that the real bark painters were all long gone and the rot had set in when they put in modern subjects like pedal radios! The 3D award was won by the well known Tiwi carver, Cyril James Kerinauia assisted by first timer, Sylvester Victor Robert Fernando for a ceramic sculpture of a truck, *Hunting party*, which marked a new development in the recent revival of Tiwi Pottery. The use of secular contemporary life as subject matter recalled an earlier entry in 1991, a lithograph by another Tiwi artist Fatima Kantilla, called *This mob going hunting*, which also featured a truck crowded with eager hunters after bush tucker.

The continuing strength of the Award has been its ability to sustain and support traditional practice and respond to and encourage innovation. This year all the winners came from the Northern Territory and the majority are senior people in their communities, but sixteen years ago when the award was established, only half of them were working as artists, and of those who were working then, all except one have expanded their repertoire to include introduced media, which reflects both the growth and the dynamism of contemporary Aboriginal art and the proper persistence of the traditional.

1. Telstra presents 14th National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, 1997 introduction p.3. Banduk Marika has been a participating artist, a judge in 1990 and a member of the Board of the MAGNT.
2. Telstra presents 12th National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, 1995, introduction p.4