

Adelaide hosts a huge celebration of indigenous art

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Deep reds and oranges, burnt golds, the blazing yellow colours of the sun: arcs, whorls, concentric circles, all seen in a darkened space, lit by sharp spotlights, against a backdrop black as night — this is the spectacular “desert salon” gallery at the heart of *Tarnanthi*, a landmark survey exhibition of indigenous works on view at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide.

The product of an unprecedented collaboration between the leading curators and experts of the indigenous art establishment, harnessed and brought together by artistic director Nici Cumpston, *Tarnanthi* serves as a detailed guide to the latest trends and tastes in its field. The geographic spread of the works is wide, “from as far north as the Torres Strait, west to Broome, south to Launceston and east to Redfern”.

The range of media on view is diverse as well: not just barks, canvases, prints and sculptures but filmed and photographic pieces, weavings and installations in carved wood and in blown glass.

All is inclusion, celebration, invitation. It is Cumpston’s trademark — she has always been among the most open-hearted of Aboriginal art practitioners and curators. This show, long in development, provides her at last with a chance to display a continent-wide map of contemporary indigenous art-making.

*Tarnanthi* is a Kurna language word from the Adelaide plains. It means the first light of day. Here it signifies “the heralding of new opportunities for artists and audiences”. It is a well-chosen title for the most upbeat of recent indigenous exhibitions.

The substantial collection of new pieces brought together at AGSA is supplemented by a separate display of work by Ngarrindjeri weaver Yvonne Koolmatrice, while a further 22 smaller-scale satellite shows were launched across Adelaide and its surrounds in tandem with the art fair on *Tarnanthi*’s opening night.

Cumpston’s aim is straightforward and she sets it out in a brief manifesto, printed in the front of the richly illustrated catalogue: she wishes to highlight “the immediacy and diversity of 21st-century Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art — art that draws on ancient traditions and cultural knowledge while alert to current experience, shifting identities, personal and social ideals, and the politics of change”.

Banners hanging from the Art Gallery’s North Terrace facade present images of the most demotic group of pieces in the exhibition, statuettes of AFL players made by Dinni Kunoth Kemarre and Josie Kunoth Petyarre from Utopia.

Close by, in the dark recesses of the galleries, are lustrous blue and green-hued canvases from the most tradition-minded of remote community studios, the Spinifex Arts Project in the Great Victoria Desert. *Tarnanthi* suggests the range of local styles and movements alive across the face of the inland by judicious selection, rather than by any attempt at encyclopedic coverage.

Each gallery contains cameo displays of fresh works by stars from far afield: among them Cornelia and Delores Tipuamantumirri from Garden Point on Melville Island, Mavis Ngallameta from Aurukun on Cape York and Nyapanyapa Yunupingu from



Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land.

Several of these little capsule shows are fleshed out by the satellite exhibitions: Nyapanyapa features in *The World is not a Foreign Land* at the Flinders University Art Museum, while a survey of the past two decades of printmaking from the Yirrkala Art Centre is on view at the Adelaide College of the Arts’ Light Square gallery.

Cumpston places a strong, admiring emphasis on desert paintings, above all on the loose, expressionistic large-scale pieces made in the Pitjantjatjara lands: hence her “desert salon”, with canvases selected by art centres — compositions by well-known figures such as Papunya Tula artist Walangkura Napanangka hang alongside collaboratives from the more recently established Tjala studio.

But the most striking exploration in visual display is a wall of large canvases by prominent female artists from the western desert. Together, sharing symbols but

differing in style and palette, are paintings by Barbara Moore, an Anmatyerre artist who lives in Amata, Nyarapayi Giles of Tjukurla community on the western edge of Lake Amadeus, and a collective canvas by women from the distant Sandy Desert outpost of Well 33.

From this central core, the art radiates out, and the exhibition traces its many transformations. One of the more intriguing displays tracks the recent evolution of the Hermannsburg watercolour artists, descendants and followers of Albert Namatjira’s example.

In an attempt to reconceive their work, the core group of painters at the Ngurratjuta art centre have set out on a path of formal innovation, making 360-degree landscape circles, and printing their precise renditions of country on linen-cotton dress fabrics — experiments that stand out in *Tarnanthi*’s dark spaces to good effect.

But the show’s deep grounding in tradition is balanced by its keen, committed focus on questions of contemporary Aboriginal experi-

ence. For most regional and urban indigenous artists, identity and its affirmation through material and form or in subject is the crux of all their creative endeavour: this is the thread that dominates modern Aboriginal cultural expression, and binds up the work by many of the best-known artists here.

Cumpston is herself a member of this company: her large-scale, evocative photographs of empty river landscapes, key items in recent AGSA exhibitions, rely for their resonance on the context of the artwork; they are images that deal in absences, memories, in the continued insistence of the order of the past.

In similar vein, allusion takes centre stage in the works shown by several of the artists she highlights.

Thus Raymond Zada’s photography explores the hidden Kaurna face of Adelaide, Tasmanian Vicki West’s complex installation, on view at

the Adelaide Central Art School, is a modern emblem of relationships between the Tasmanian Aboriginal groups in their prelapsarian world, and Jason Wing’s manacle sculpture, *Overseer/Officer*, showing at the Contemporary Art Centre in Parkside, serves as a narrative about deaths in custody.

A separate set of works by



Clockwise from main picture, Yhoni Scarce’s *Thunder Raining Poison*; Jason Wing’s *Overseer/Officer*; installations by Barbara Mbitjana Moore, Nora Nungabar, Nora Wompi and Bugia Whyoulterm, Mrs Pompey, and a selection of carved birds by Josie Kunoth Petyarre, Dinni Kunoth Kemarre, Simon Kunoth Pwerle, Patrick Kunoth and Alan Kunoth Pwerle; Nungabar’s *Kunawarritji Ngurra*; below, Sebastian Arrow’s *Jalinyi*

young artists from regional centres stake out slightly different ground, as projects of cultural renovation. Here tradition acts as a guide, a template, but not a straitjacket.

The act of making art, in ventures of this kind, is itself a means of performing one’s Aboriginal identity and claiming one’s heritage: art is serving as title deed, not so much to country as to background, affiliation and descent line. Several of the most striking artworks and objects exhibited explore this sense of connection.

Dale Harding, from Queensland, developed his daguerreotype photographs in *Shimmer*, on view at the Jam Factory, after examining items in the rich historical collections of the South Australian Museum. Also in *Shimmer* are carved pearl shells by Sebastian Arrow, the continuator of a tradition of refined workmanship pion-

ered by the Broome-based master of the genre, Aubrey Tigan: in this evolution, items of sacred power that once circulated in the far western desert are gradually being turned into a new kind of commodity — objects of art and desire.

In this same satellite show are the bright-coloured neckpieces made by Cairns-based designer Grace Lillian Lee. These captivating “wearable sculptures” stem from Lee’s fascination for microscopic, self-concealing marine invertebrates, and the parallels with human behaviour that their intricate structures suggest.

Here is Lee, in the catalogue, with telling words: “Discovering the deep depths of the ocean and what these creatures do to camouflage themselves made me think about my family’s stories and what they have done to fit in and not stand out.

“Being able to look through microscopes to see how detailed a small piece of coral can be made me think about how short our lifetime is. It compelled me to con-

sider what impression or mark I wish to make.”

Similar remarks and comments are strewn through the support materials for the many exhibitions: they paint a picture of the emotional force that lies behind the wide diaspora of indigenous artmaking today.

Men and women, experimental and established, remotely placed or in urban centres — they engage in their work not merely because a place and niche awaits them in the state-backed cultural economy of this country but because indigenous art can be an art in service to cause, true to a sense of identity and a way of being that is felt as precious and in need of prolongation.

Hence the fervour: the drive to

The bravura piece is a spectacular installation by Adelaide-based glass artist Yhoni Scarce

record, to testify after long, inherited silence, to express and intensify a sharp nostalgia.

It is this love for culture that is dominant in the galleries of Adelaide caught up in the net of *Tarnanthi*, and the presentation of work of such range and complexity would itself justify the enterprise. But expansive shows of this kind sometimes help engender art that goes beyond the immediate flash of exposure and publicity — and so it is here.

The bravura piece at the core of the AGSA exhibition is a spectacular installation by Adelaide-based glass artist Yhoni Scarce. It is a work on a large scale, overwhelming in the manner of installations by contemporary artists of the international circuit such as Olafur Eliasson or Ai Weiwei.

Scarce, who traces her indigenous descent from the Kokatha of the southern desert, has built a strange memento, a gleaming chandelier cloud of blown-glass shards. It is suspended from long bright stems in a dark gallery — 2000 fragments, much like vitreous versions of the bush yam food plant, fragments falling, caught in their descent to earth. The work’s resemblance to the Maralinga nuclear blast that fused the southern desert’s surface into glass six decades ago is more than a mere visual rhyme.

Form, substance and concept come together in this piece in a fashion rarely achieved by contemporary artists.

It is, it seems clear, the masterwork that Scarce was meant to make in her life, and the work that justifies all her endeavours and her training in her arduous craft. It serves as a sombre capstone, looming above the visitors to *Tarnanthi*: for those who have seen it, the impact will linger long, like fallout, in the mind.

The main *Tarnanthi* exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia is on view until January 17, and the key associated art shows remain on view until December.

