Adelaide hosts a huge celebration of indigenous art

NICOLAS ROTHWELL

Deep reds and oranges, burnt umber, the blushing yellow-orange of the sun's arc, whorls, concentric circles, all seen in a darkened space, lit by sharp spotlights against a backdrop of black as night — this is the spectacular "desert salon" gallery at the heart of Tarnantyi, a landmark survey exhibition of indigenous works on view at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide.

The product of an unprecedented level of collaboration between the leading curators and experts of the indigenous art establishment, augmented and brought together by artist-director Nic Cumpton, Tarnantyi 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 Torrens Strait, west to Brooma, south to Lauceston and east to Redfern."

The range of media on view is diverse as well: not just bark, carvings, prints and sculptures but also film and video, ceramics and glass, paintings and installations in curated and in blown glass. All in an inclusion, celebration, initiation. It is Cumpton'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 comprehensive view of contemporary Indigenous art-making.

"Tarnantyi is a Kaurna language word from the Adelaide plains. It means the first light of day. It signifies the beginning of new opportunities for artists and audiences". It is a well-chosen title for the most ambitious of recent indigenous exhibitions.

The substantial collection of new works brought together at AGSA is supplemented by a separate display of works by Ngarinyunj Erauwe周期, the native artist from the Western Desert, who furthered 22 smaller-scale satellite shows were launched across Adelaide and its surrounds in tandem with the art fair on Tarnantyi's opening night.

Cumpton's aim is straightforward, and she sets it out in a brief manifesto, printed in the front of the richly illustrated catalogue which 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, the political, the environmental, the colonial."

Clockwise from main picture, Yhonnie Scarce's Thunder Raining Potion; Jason Wing's Overthrow/Officer; installations by Barbara Minjawa Moore, Nora Nungka, Nora Womby and Begla Ngwathrending Mrs Pompy and a selection of carvings by Josie Kunoth Petyarre, Dean Kunoth Kemarre, Simon Kunoth Pwerle, Patricia Kunoth and Alan Kunoth Pwerle; Ngunnarrurra Ngurra below, Sebastian Arrow's Jaliny.