



# Culture caught in the crossfire

*Federal intervention in the Top End threatens hundreds of art-related jobs, reports Miriam Cosic*

**A**LAN Eggleston, the West Australian Liberal senator who chaired the review of Aboriginal art that was tabled in federal parliament in June, must have expected his report to make waves. What he didn't know was that it was about to be overtaken by the tsunami triggered by the Little Children Are Sacred report, detailing sexual abuse, delivered to the Northern Territory Government.

Eggleston told *The Australian* this week that he had not known the wide-ranging emergency intervention into indigenous communities was coming. When he did find out, the first thing he asked a colleague involved was whether the legislation would recommend abolishing the permit system that keeps unauthorised people off Aboriginal land.

It was, but the review and the legislation were at odds over other things: Community Development Employment Projects payments, for instance, which the arts review wanted strengthened and the federal Government is about to abolish.

Critics of the intervention — including federal Labor politicians who debated the proposed legislation when it was rushed through the lower house in one day last week, and NT government spokespeople — say abolishing permits will leave communities more open to the carpetbaggers who exploit artists, especially in relatively accessible communities near highways.

And yet Eggleston's committee wanted the permit system abolished to "outmanoeuvre the carpetbaggers", as he puts it. "By letting tourists come in and buy from the arts centres directly," he says, "it would undermine the carpetbaggers, who come in and set up exploitative relationships with the artists."

The arts review's opinion of CDEP as vital to arts centres has been overtaken. The federal Government's legislation says it keeps those who receive it dependent on welfare in makeshift work and unable to join mainstream Australia as financially independent, even economically dynamic, individuals.

Public discussion of Eggleston's report has been drowned out by the uproar surrounding the emergency response. Some indigenous people are calling it overdue. Warren Mundine, chief executive of NSW Land Titles Services and immediate past national president of the Australian Labor Party, says the legislation is racially discriminatory but positive discrimination, and he endorses it.

Women in Fitzroy Crossing, where artists are not supported by CDEP, have run with the proposals, demanding a moratorium on all

alcohol for a year and then a review of the results. Many, however, including senior figures in the art world — the Yunupingu clan in eastern Arnhem Land, for instance, which hosted the annual Garma festival last week — are variously calling the intervention racist, a land grab, neocolonialism in the guise of concern for children and cultural genocide.

Inevitably, perhaps, the heat of the arguments loomed over the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards announced in Darwin last Friday night. Missing was the warm and celebratory glow in which the NT Government and the awards' long-time sponsor, Telstra, usually bask.

The NT Arts Minister, Marion Scrymgour, an indigenous politician, made an unscheduled trip to Canberra on Thursday to address the Senate's review of the emergency response proposals. Standing in for her at a NATSIAA preview, NT Deputy Chief Minister Syd Stirling urged guests to consider the ramifications of the intervention for artists.

He said that while the NT Government supported welfare reform, it did not support the compulsory acquisition of leases over Aboriginal towns and communities: "We do not support the measures that break down the fundamental basis of the relationship with land that inspires the work of artists whose works we are privileged to see tonight."

He said the abolition of CDEP would threaten thousands of Aboriginal jobs in the NT, including hundreds in the arts sector; six in Yirrkala, a community famous for its sophisticated barks and hollow logs, in his electorate.

Hanging on the walls inside was another sign of the times. There were the usual bold colours of the Western Desert painters, including Naata Nungurrayi, Makinti Napanangka, Walangkura Napanangka and George Tjungurrayi from Papunya Tula; a joyous, sprawling pack of colourful camp dogs by the Tjanpi Desert Weavers of Toyota truck fame; intricate barks from eastern and western Arnhem Land, including by former NATSIAA winners Gulumbu Yunupingu and Bunduk Marika; a selection of urban works, including an impressive multi-panel painting by Perth artist Shane Pickett. The exhibition is hung with the same coherence as last year's, the first overseen by the Museum and Art Gallery of NT's new indigenous art curator, Franchesca Cubillo.

But the awards, given to five works from a field of 104, were surprising. NT and northern WA artists usually dominate, but three of the five went to Queenslanders. Three went to figurative art; two to metal sculpture.

The recent formula for the judging panel — one indigenous artist, one (white, male) head of a state art gallery — was changed this year. Fiona Foley, a Queensland artist, and Djon Mundine, an experienced curator, are both indigenous and both outspoken about the politics of race.

Some NATSIAA-watchers expected a bla-



tantly left-wing response to the federal intervention, but they were blind-sided by the judges' intellectual rigour and experience.

Rather than digging in with a nostalgic paeon to traditional iconography or making a statement by elevating the often undergraduate-style bravado of urban artists, the judges sought to confound expectations.

"Both of us were looking for work that wasn't prescriptive, that was unusual," Foley says. "The entries, over the years, can come to seem a little bit oversaturated. We were looking for things that were fresh to the eye and worked on us at an emotional level."

The \$40,000 major prize certainly confounded some. Denis Nona's monumental bronze, *Ubirikubiri* — on sale for \$193,000 now that the awards have been made non-acquisitive — is based on a children's story, originally from Papua New Guinea, about a man who searches for an animal playmate for his daughter after her mother dies, and the girl is consumed by the crocodile she wanted.

The 480kg sculpture of the man's body, strangely morphed with fins and a fish tail and laid out on the back of a crocodile, is a departure for Nona, who has pushed the technical boundaries of printmaking and the artistic boundaries of Torres Strait symbolism. Remarkably, he has been experimenting with metal casting for only a couple of years.

"It's a very strong piece," Foley says. "The physicality of it strikes you immediately as you walk into the room and the technical skill level is very high." Mundine says it is fascinating, almost science fiction-like, with its anthropomorphism: "It's ugly in one way, but that's the power of it."

The award for three-dimensional work, named for the famed Yolngu artist Wandjuk Marika, is usually won by hollow logs from his region. It was won this year by Laurie Nilsen, a Brisbane artist originally from regional Queensland, for *Goolburris on the Bungil Creek*, an installation of three emus made of barbed wire and moulded steel.

It sprang from his memory of coming across 40 emus in one day lying dead or dying after strangling themselves on barbed-wire fences while trying to reach water. Water, of course, is a pressing issue today, and the emu happens to be Nilsen's totem.

The painting by Angelina George, which won the award for that medium, also played with expectations. It is, Mundine says, a powerful example of the search for a visual language by Ngukurr artists, who are neither bark nor dot painters. The room, he says, gesturing around a space filled with glowing earth-coloured canvases, was "full of an incredible array of painting in what we have come to expect of Western Desert artwork".

"Maybe things have become too predictable, or maybe our tastes are a bit jaded, or overwhelmed," he says. "We need to recognise other ways of representation."

George not only depicted the majesty of the rocky escarpments near Darwin but also revealed an intimacy with the landscape. The sunset monochrome of the mountains is offset by trails of fading light in the valleys. Mundine compares it to a painting of Notre Dame

Cathedral in Paris, say, which might also take the eye down the laneways that surround it.

In its 24 years, the NATSIAA has coincided with the rise of several indigenous art movements and has contributed to awareness of them. "It's a very important competition," Mundine says, "not just in the length of it, or the money given to the artists, but in defining, or contributing to the definition of, where Aboriginal art is going."

He sees a shift under way, with the passing of the older generation who painted authoritatively but almost naively from the heart of their tradition, to a younger generation of art school-trained people who are still, by definition, making indigenous art but who have engaged with Western art history and understand the marketplace. He predicts an increase in video art and photography at future awards.

Serendipitously, this year's winners may come, with hindsight, to represent the changes afoot in the wider indigenous world. Nona, Nilsen and the winner of the works on paper award, Alick Tipoti (a Torres Strait Islander who works in Nona's style), are all tertiary-educated. Neither they nor George are supported by CDEP-style welfare.

Nor is Papunya Tula, the movement that started the contemporary Aboriginal art phenomenon in the 1970s and which is still a marker of its strength, subsidised by government. (On Saturday, crowd control was needed for the opening of an exhibition of Papunya Tula paintings at the Harriet Street Gallery in Darwin, and sales were restricted to one canvas a buyer.)

And yet Apolline Kohen, for example, the manager of Maningrida Arts and Culture and chair of the MAGNT, is worried about the abolition of CDEP, though she too represents big names, including John Mawurndjul, an international figure. She says losing CDEP will put out of work six people who value both the flexibility of the system, which allows them to attend to ceremonial business, and the top-up wages paid when they work more than four hours a day.

"It's not that I can't technically afford one or two full-time positions," Kohen says. "The problem is, how are they going cope? I've got six because I need three . . ."

The loss of CDEP and top-up payments, compounded by part payment of the dole in some sort of food vouchers to ensure children are fed, will also dramatically lower the amount of cash circulating.

"Where is the only place to find cash in the community at the moment?" Kohen asks rhetorically. "The arts centre, because we have a policy of paying artists up front. You can imagine what's going to happen . . ."

Apart from the obvious risk of theft, pressure on artists to produce will escalate, especially on older big-name artists who are already often pushed by younger relatives to increase their cash flow. And that will have an effect on the quality of the art produced.

The federal Arts Minister, George Brandis, will not be drawn on the detail of the federal



intervention because it's not his portfolio, nor on the Government's response to the Eggleston report, which he is due to table in parliament next week.

Brandis and Eggleston spent five days visiting communities in northwest Australia last week. At a time when news from the indigenous world is seen as uniformly bad, he says, art is a beacon.

"It's the one thing that is a success in those communities," Brandis says. "Not in all of them, not even in most of them, but it assumes a particular importance where it is."

He describes Aboriginal art in transition from a cottage industry to a commercially viable international business. Artists who until recently only had to worry about their practice

are now caught up in the world of dealers, auction houses and high-powered collectors.

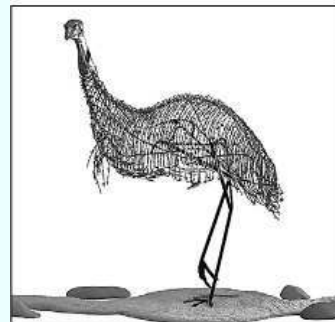
"That is the point of intersection between the art issues and the broader issues," Brandis says. The more the market grows, "the more it will impose the disciplines of business on the arts centres, which have hitherto been run on a voluntaristic model" by people eager to help where they can, he says. The transition will inevitably pose problems.

"It's a good problem to have," he says. "As Peter Costello has said in a different context, there are good problems and bad problems. The problem of growth is a good problem, better to have than the bad problem of lack of growth."



**Majesty:** Angelina George with her depiction of rocky escarpments

**Picture:** Peter Eve



**Confronting:** Winning pieces by Denis Nona, left, and Laurie Nilsen, below left

**'It's a very important competition . . . in contributing to the definition of where Aboriginal art is going'**

Djon Mundine, a judge at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards