

Big-picture approach to prize

VISUAL ART

Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth. Until
November 15. Admission free. Inquiries:
(08) 9492 6600.

ART prize exhibitions are inherently haphazard. Where curated exhibitions provide a structured engagement with a group of works that in combination tell a cogent story, a prize is a mixed bag that often fails to provide a satisfying encounter.

It may be enough just to see who the judges have selected, then assess whether you agree. But that is quickly determined and most visitors will soon wander off to find something with more substance and rigour.

The Art Gallery of Western Australia has attempted to overcome this problem by allowing artists who enter the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards the opportunity to show multiple works.

Instead of a fractured and segmented group of works from a large number of artists, the more comprehensive representation of each artist's practice offers a more intense and rewarding experience. It also greatly assists in assessing whether the judges have made the right decision.

However, since the main prize has been awarded to a single huge work that snakes and twists over the gallery's main wall, it seems unlikely that the comprehensive approach will work in the future.

Next time any sensible artist will opt for a big production number and submit only one work of huge dimensions to improve their chances of taking the \$50,000 prize.

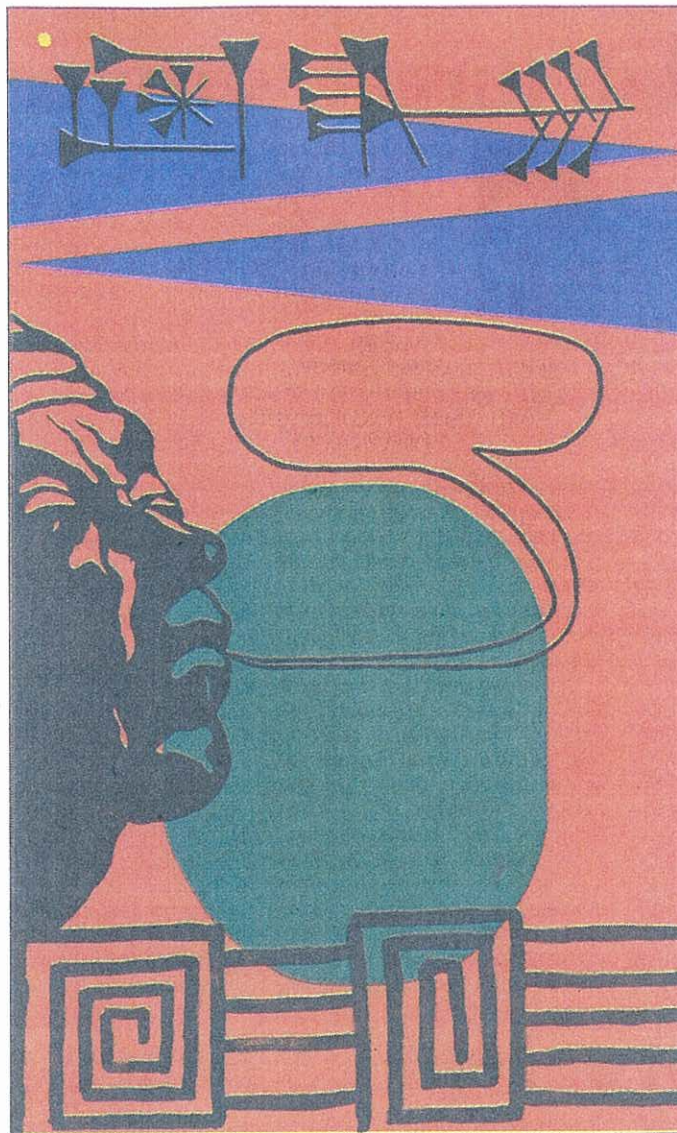
The winning work, Lorraine Connelly-Northey's *Waradgerie Winnowers* (2009), is certainly spectacular. It is full of visual interest and ambitious, but it is also able to assert its credentials to take out the prize in a way that vibrant works by Wakartu Cory Surprise or Daniel Walbidi cannot.

Their scale and position in the overall hang reduces their effect and most likely their chance of success.

Connelly-Northey responds to the traditional weaving practice of her people with a lively and thoughtful reinterpretation of the utilitarian forms of coolamons, baskets and fish traps, in her case made from found materials such as barbed wire, corrugated iron and fencing remnants. This reshaping of the detritus of European civilisation into traditional forms epitomises the resilience and strength of Aboriginal culture.

Unlike other national prizes and awards, the finalists are selected from nominations sent in by curators, art centre managers and gallery owners across the country.

This strategy is designed to introduce new



The Australian
4/8/09

Speaking out: Brian McKinnon's political banner painting *Making a Stand* (2008), part of the Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia

artists and provide a fresh insight into the activity across the sector each year.

From the 217 nominations, 15 artists and one group were selected for this year's exhibition and the process has generated a diverse group of works.

For the viewer it requires a constant change of intellectual position and aesthetic engagement to move between, for example, the extraordinary traditional feathered masks and headdresses of Ricardo Idagi and Brian McKinnon's political banner paintings, made in strident colours and with acerbic texts.

Equally disorienting is the shift from Nici Cumpston's bleakly beautiful altered photographs of Nookamba Lake, to Dennis Nona's densely patterned bronze sculptures and prints. However, the need to constantly

refocus and realign with the aspirations and experience of these artists reinforces the vibrancy, responsiveness and diversity of indigenous artists, as they explore their relationship with contemporary Australia.

Tony Albert makes this point with great precision in his series of eight photographic self-portraits documenting his passage through various environments in Brisbane and the Gold Coast, a jawun woven basket hanging from his forehead.

In each new space he must be a different person and his jawun is filled with the necessary accoutrements for these roles; but through it all he retains his cultural identity and it is this pervasive reality that sustains and invigorates him.

Ted Snell

The Australian
7/8/09

Correction

A REVIEW by Ted Snell of the West Australian Indigenous Art Awards, published in *The Australian* yesterday ("Big-picture approach to prize", page 10), incorrectly stated the winner. The winner was Ricardo Idagi, not Lorraine Connelly-Northey.