



Abstract, swirling canvas: Hobson's *Burn Grass Season* (2002)

Tales of the far north

Rare Aboriginal works make a spirited exhibition, writes **Louise Martin-Chew**

*I look forward to the day... when...
Queensland will be proud of her
Aboriginals.*

W. E. Roth, 1897
(from the *Story Place* catalogue)

ROTH would rest happy with the exhibition of the art and cultural heritage of Cape York that opened yesterday at the Queensland Art Gallery. This is a significant celebration of the historical and contemporary art of the cape, in a groundbreaking partnership between the gallery and the communities.

This exhibition is a large-scale exercise, similar in size to the QAG's trademark Asia-Pacific triennales. The display dominates the gallery, and has been selected from thousands of objects. It comprises 335 works by 80 artists. It includes large quantities of material previously seen only within a museum context — barks, shields, baskets, weavings, ceramics — but also paintings, sculpture and a series of commissions including, notably, two installations of law poles by senior Aurukun artists. Such Aurukun objects have never before been acquired for a public collection. They are ceremonial funeral objects used for burials, but in these cases the artists agreed to make them in recognition of the importance to the Cape York communities of the Story Place project. They have pride of place at the gallery entrance, flanked by work from Lockhart River painters and rarely seen Aurukun shields.

Queensland's indigenous art has long been the poor relation in terms of its national exposure, with the recent exception of the Lockhart River Art Gang, now among Australia's top performing contemporary Aboriginal artists.

Although Western Desert, Kimberley and other indigenous works set auction records, Queensland lags behind. The work has been difficult to get and little promoted, due to the absence of a network of art centres and advisers. This situation is changing but the work is still not widely known outside a small group of specialists.

Story Place: Indigenous Art of Cape York and the Rainforest

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
July 25 to November 9; tours north
Queensland until 2004

For these generally beleaguered communities, art and culture is a way forward out of the mire of alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence and young deaths.

The work from these isolated communities — Lockhart River, for example, is 800km north of Cairns in an area impassable for months during the wet season — has distinct qualities. Much art production in Cape York remains tentative and the process of developing this exhibition, with the approval of the various communities' elders, has been instrumental in developing, assisting and, hopefully in the long term, consolidating fragile cultural links.

Story Place was named after the process through which stories of individual and cultural significance are passed down the generations and explored in oral traditions, dance and art. The work is divided, as the communities divide themselves, into East Cape, West Cape and the Rainforest, although the display does not observe those distinctions, instead being designed around aesthetics.

In keeping with the exhibition's dominance of the gallery's floor spaces, the water mall is a dramatic site for Arthur Pambejan Jr's sculptures, his commissioned work *Bonefish Story Place* and his *Flying Fox Story Place*, 2002-03. Pambejan lives in Aurukun and was present when ceremonial carvings of these same two stories were made and collected by anthropologist Frederick McCarthy in 1962. Now in the collection of the National Museum of Australia, they were also captured in a film made in 1962 by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies called *Dances at Aurukun*, which can be seen in the screening room.

These traditional works, describing Pambejan's stories, provide a strong contrast to the more contemporary work hung nearby —

Vernon Ah Kee's confronting, graphic explorations of Aboriginal history and Samantha Hobson's abstract, swirling canvases with titles that point to domestic violence and deaths in custody. This work has cogency and currency in an exhibition that is otherwise focused on celebrating regional cultures.

Other rarely seen items include historic Aurukun sculpture (traditionally discarded after ceremonies) that capture the essence of wallaby, shark and plover. The bicornial baskets (with their often dramatic horns extending from either side of the base) are unique to the Queensland rainforest, and historic and contemporary rainforest shields describe graphically the individual innovation that occurs within longstanding tradition.

The contemporary temperature is elevated by the sardonic work of Danie Mellor whose multicoloured german shepherds colonise rainforest dingoes in the same way communities were colonised in previous centuries. There are also paintings by the well-known Rosella Namok and Fiona Omeeny, and dramatic sculptural crocodiles (a significant presence in the cape) by Craig Koomeeta.

Other surprises include an extensive series of landscapes in watercolour from the late 1950s by Joe Rootsey ("the second Namatjira"), an exploration of the importance of the tourism market in the Hopevale bark paintings from the '60s and stunning pottery from Yarrabah's Cornelius Richards.

Themes range widely across a broad spectrum of time and media but the innovation visible in the development of traditions across generations puts paid to any sense of static techniques, and explorations of different concepts of past, present and future in Aboriginal communities are intriguing.

This exhibition, according to assistant director Lynne Seear, "has already had a tangible impact on art-making in the communities". It is a fascinating insight into a large, isolated area. The direct institutional interest in the art practices of a region is unusual but positive, with indigenous traineeships and partnerships a valuable by-product.