

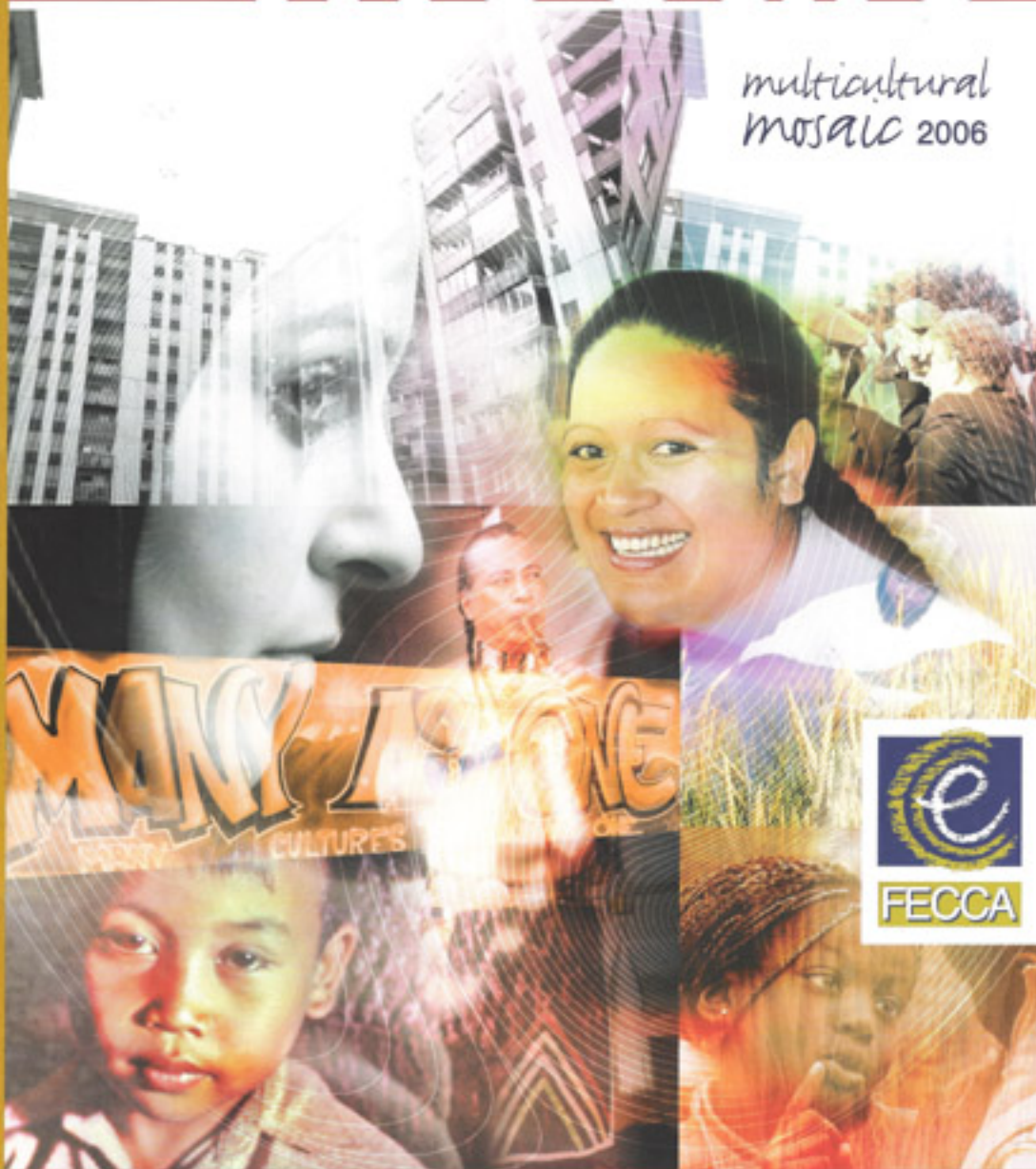
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'The postcolonial edge': emerging cross-cultural visual artists in Darwin

by Lycia Trouton



Community Comment



untitled by Fiona Gavino Material: newsprint www.fionagavino.com
(Photo: Lycia Trouton, Australia)

Cartoonist Michael Leunig wrote the following in the Australia Day 2006 issue of *The Age*:

Diversity may refer not only to ethnicity or religious variety, but to the infinite ways in which Australians may reasonably live or express themselves. Serious clashes of intolerance occur not only between so-called civilisations and cultures but, as we all know, between neighbours and within families and clubs and corporations.

Not only might we hope for tolerance of different tastes and views but for a sensitivity to the natural world and the

integrity of the myriad life forms and landforms on and around this astonishing continent.

...And more than we understand, it is probably, as the Indigenous people have long said, the unique and complex quality of the land that significantly forms the authenticity of the culture and the people. The spirit of the place enters reliably into us over generations...

These words were printed underneath a large colourful image intended to represent Australian multiculturalism. Since I came to Australia only a few years ago, I have always appreciated

Lycia Trouton, DCA (Wollongong), was a lecturer in art history, art theory and advanced studio practice in creative arts at Charles Darwin University from July to November 2005.

Her recent doctorate thesis focused on aspects of public and private sculpture and textiles in memorial art and the art-of-memory, the culmination of an interest in her Northern Irish heritage and in divisive community relations.

Lycia Trouton was born in Belfast. She is an installation artist and freelance writer/art critic with an MFA and BFA (Hons) in sculpture from universities in the USA. She has worked in Canada, the USA, Australia and the UK as a project manager for self-initiated public art/intermedia with culturally diverse communities. Trouton has received numerous grants, awards and exhibits internationally.

Leunig's biting sense of humour and his ability to encourage us to reflect upon ourselves and the human condition. I chose his words to introduce my article because of his broad vision of diversity, and how he connects this, so straightforwardly, to 'place', the natural world, and what the 'First Nations' (a Canadian term for indigenous societies) have given to their colonists and subsequent generations.

This article developed as a response to my experience teaching art in Darwin for six months last year. As an émigré



above: *Ha na ca ra ka* by Jengis J Isdianto
Material: acrylic, coconut shells, mirrors
(Photo: Lydia Trouton)

below: *Amesh* by Adrienne Kneebone
solo exhibition at the Woods Street Gallery www.fibrefunk.com
(Photo: Adrienne Kneebone)



above: *People in Nowhere*
an installation by Aly De Groot.
Material: natural fibres, bush dyes
(Photo: Aly De Groot)

below right: *Terra Alienus*
an installation by Rozzi George.
Material: knitted yarn
(Photo: Lydia Trouton)



right: *Divinity* by Angelina Ross
Material: appliqué, embroidery, mixed media
(Photo: Lydia Trouton)



from Belfast, Northern Ireland, I am preoccupied with sustainable community(ies)-of-care and, as a practising artist, I am concerned with the serious contribution contemporary intercultural art makes toward understanding one another and learning to accept and embrace difference.

In 2006, while we all cope with fears stemming from the global war on terror, and welcome displaced (and sometimes traumatised) newcomers into our already diverse communities in various parts of Australia, the arts can

assuage and console. Darwin artists are examples of how the intercultural arts can flourish and create community. The academic grapevine has recently coined intercultural Darwin as 'the postcolonial edge'.

Northern Territory (NT) colonial settlement occurred later and was more gradual than in the other Australian colonies, so various Aboriginal languages and cultures maintain a certain vigour and central power in the region. The NT parliament boasts a number of female Indigenous members.

Galleries and artist-run spaces such as Nomad, Darwin Visual Arts Association (DVAA), and 24hr Art, foster regional artists in Darwin. During the annual arts festival, held in mid-July, the Telstra Indigenous Art Awards are ceremoniously presented with great celebration. The visual artists described in this article are evidence of Darwin's distinguished position in cross-cultural community building. Artists, Jengis J Isdianto, Rozzi George, Angelina Ross, Fiona Gavino, Aly de Groot and Adrienne Kneebone, belong to a larger group of emerging artist-researcher



long-term residents of 'remote' Darwin. Together, they form an important part of a sustainable community, creating new meanings and a more meaningful quality of life in the area. Despite the current political climate of economic rationalism, these artists are determined to maintain their identity, to continue making art, and to develop a national exhibition practice. Their ability to remain resilient is testament to their dogged determination and, possibly, because they see themselves as outside mainstream Australian culture due to their geographical remoteness. Whatever the reason, the contribution of these artists to civic life and sustainable community is certifiable.

Fiona Gavino (b. Australia) is a sculptor and weaver working with fibres and textile art forms that reflect postcolonial issues and care of the earth. She has learned traditional colour and fibre preparation. A Djembarrupingu elder from Echo Island mentored and adopted Gavino and taught her traditional techniques.

Adrienne Kneebone (b. Australia) is a weaver highly influenced by architectonic forms and architectural ideas. She develops artwork concerning the influence of mobile-phone technology and upcoming wearable/seamless technology in clothing fashion. Her interest is in links that maintain national and international

communication systems, and the juxtaposition of the 'grassroots weaver' with the 'corporate worker'.

Jenglis J Isdianto (b. Indonesia) paints using imagery relating to his cultural background, including sounds in his native language, colours, and the sacred position of the coconut, which is used as an offering. His sculptural installations are colourless, featuring wood and organic materials, and have been influenced by artists such as Martin Puryear from the USA.

Angeline Ross (b. Sabah) and **Rozzi George** (b. Australia) have been influenced by Australia's petit-point embroiderer/installation artist, Narelle Jubelin. Both artists use needlework to express narrative ideas about political emancipation of the oppressed or dispossessed and their personal connection to land or place. They also explore feminist philosophical positions about communities-of-care.

Aly de Groot (b. Australia) responds to nuclear-waste disposal issues in the Northern Territory. She has been mentored in traditional basket-weaving techniques (in pandanus and the less traditional banana fibre) and prepares her own natural dyes. Her artwork expresses, in her own words, 'the fragile relationship of dependency that all humans have with their natural environment'. She is particularly sensitive to 'cultural appropriation'

issues. Her university research is contributing to this debate.

My experience in the academy and the community in Darwin is of a Top End with a rich Indigenous art scene increasingly enhanced by emerging, sensitive, politically-informed visual artists. The mainstream perception of Darwin as a city where tourists stop for 'crocs and rocks', where alcohol consumption by 'bushmen' is at a national peak and hippies group to flee on a trek to Bali or India, is outdated and very limited. Artist-craftspersons are working on images and ideas about identity, place and dispossession of the land. Many of them are migrant European-Australian and Southeast Asian-Australian artists who together form a broad-based intercultural arts scene. Contemporary university-educated artists working today, also are informed by feminist and postcolonial theories, and often have a quiet concern for the natural environment and current Indigenous political issues. The artists identified in this article represent only a few of the talented, passionate, independently spirited visionaries who are learning from, and collaborating with, their Indigenous sisters and brothers ■