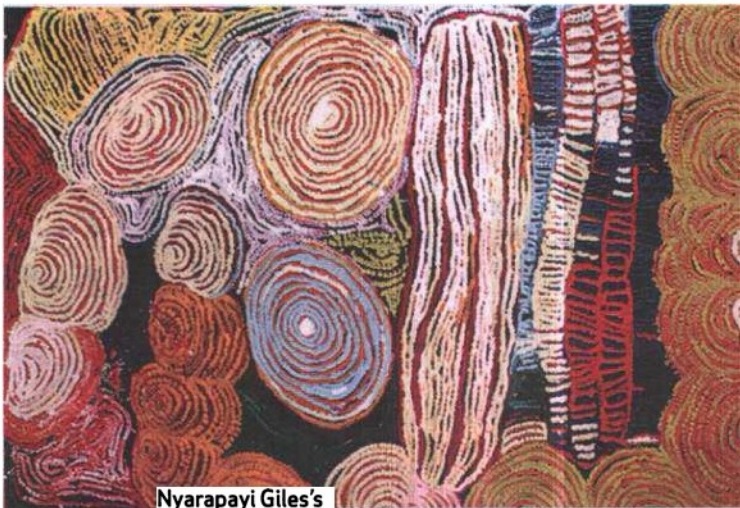


# Hothouse of desert fare

The Shalom Gamarada fund-raising indigenous art exhibition has developed into a fully fledged art fair, following the lead of fairs from Cairns to Darwin.



Nyarapayi Giles's work, left, in the Shalom Gamarada exhibition. She is from Tjukurla Community, NT. Art consultant Jenny Hillman, below left. Photo Edwina Pickles

The rise and success of these fairs is symptomatic of an industry in flux.



## Susan McCulloch

It started as an exercise in harnessing art to fund medical students, now the Shalom Gamarada art exhibition, which opens in Sydney this weekend, has morphed from a modest curated exhibition into a fully fledged art fair, the last stop in a season of fairs from Cairns to Darwin.

And this year, for the first time, the show will feature an innovative \$15,000 prize, sponsored by Xstrata Coal, to benefit an Aboriginal art centre. Named after the University of NSW's residential Shalom College, the exhibition started in 2005, the brain child of co-founders Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver and art consultant Jenny Hillman, to raise money for a scholarship program for Aboriginal medical students. It has so far funded 22 indigenous medical students.

"We have representation from 25 arts centres from around Australia with more than 100 works on exhibition and as many unstretched works," says Hillman.

The new prize rewards the work of an art centre instead of an individual artist, as is more usual (Xstrata Coal previously sponsored a prize for emerging indigenous artists) as an incentive for arts centres to put forward their very best work.

A large selection comes from the Yulparija artists of Bidjandanga, south of Broome. Also featured are more than 20 works from arts centres in the APY (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara) lands, the recent stars of the indigenous art market. Top end representation includes barks from Yirrkala, Maningrida and other Arnhem Land communities. Arts centres receive 60 per cent of the proceeds and Shalom Gamarada the standard gallery commission of 40 per cent. The top amount raised in one of their previous exhibitions,

in which works were donated outright, was \$900,000.

"If we raise half of that this year we will be thrilled," says Hillman. "Enabling arts centres to benefit directly from sales of their work makes it a win for both sides."

The Shalom Gamarada art fair is the fourth large indigenous art fair to have been held in Australia in the last month. It follows the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, Cairns Indigenous Art Fair and Alice Springs' Desert Mob.

Darwin's three-day art fair, held to coincide with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Art Awards, was established in 2008 as a tiny event but now shows work from about 20 centres. This year's attendance rose 500 to 5500.

While sales are yet to be finalised, they are expected to be somewhere around last year's take of \$700,000.

The Cairns fair, now in its third year, shows the work of largely far north Queensland art centres and is subsidised by the Queensland government to the tune of \$1 million a year. This year it attracted 13,000 visitors and about \$580,000 in sales (down from \$700,000 last year).

Alice Springs Desert Mob, which celebrates its 21st year this year, is both a selling exhibition of 294 works selected by the desert communities of the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia to represent what they consider the best of their year's output, and a marketplace selling several thousand works at \$500 and under.

Desert Mob exhibition sales on opening weekend were \$354,850 (with more expected before the exhibition finishes in October), up on last year's take of \$250,000.

In a climate where many galleries are struggling for survival, the rise and success of these fairs is

symptomatic of an industry in flux but showing real signs of life despite a downturn. In general, high-quality works are still consistently sought after and a swag of lower-end works also seems to find a market. It is the middle ground – works of quality that are not necessarily the flavour of the moment – that is suffering and where much good buying can be had.

Quality varies widely, the least impressive this year was at Cairns, where, with a few notable exceptions – largely prints by Torres Strait Islanders, imaginative weavings, Girringun's "fire stick" sculptures and the occasional painting – the general offerings were depressingly poor.

The reality is that the quality of works of this nascent art movement does not warrant an annual event of such magnitude.

The Queensland government has just announced the allocation of a further \$2.5 million funding for the Cairns fair next year and 2013, along with a commitment to \$13.2 million funding 2011-2014 for indigenous art programs. The hope is that this goes to some sound infrastructure development for both art centres and representative galleries to enable Queensland to develop a sustainable art movement. This in turn may yield work of the far higher quality and range seen in Darwin, Shalom Gamarada and, especially, Alice Springs Desert Mob.

All of these events represent the work of art movements that have grown without the prop of heavy government subsidy and therefore evolved more organically and more realistically over the decades.

**Shalom Gamarada Indigenous Art Fair 2011, 111 Queen Street, Woollahra, September 17-25, 11-7pm. Free public forums Sunday 18, Saturday 24, 3pm.**