

Natsiaa 2020: Ngarralja Tommy May wins major Indigenous art award in 'far from normal' year

The Wangkajunga–Walmajarri artist won the \$50,000 prize for his technically stunning etching on tin, in a ceremony streamed online



'I've been trying all my life to win': Ngarralja Tommy May at his studio.

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In a “far from normal” year, “resilience, generosity and creativity” are the hallmarks of the Telstra-sponsored National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art award (Natsiaa) winners, which were announced online tonight due to Covid restrictions, instead of their usual location on the lush lawns of the Museum and Art gallery of the NT in Darwin, during a glorious dry season sunset.

This year’s overall winner is Wangkajunga–Walmajarri artist Ngarralja Tommy May, who won the major \$50,000 prize for an intricate and technically stunning etching on tin called Wirrkanja, described by the judging panel as “triumphant” with “exquisite beauty and power”.

“I feel proud,” Ngarralja Tommy May said on video link, from his home in Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia. His artistic career spans more than three decades. “I’ve been trying all my life [to win]. All the time second, fourth, last, sometimes nothing. But I got it now, today.

“My time this year, I’m the winner. At last.”

Wirrkanja depicts a clay pan and waterhole on his country on the Canning Stock Route during heavy rains.



'This is my country and my family's country': Ngarralja Tommy May's work Wirrkanja.

"It's the country where I lost my brother, its *jilji* [sand dune] country and flat country. There's a *jila* [waterhole] there . It's not far from Kurtal, over two sand dunes. It's in flood time, the water runs down the *jilji*," he said.

"This is my country and my family's country. This is my job; it's a good job."

Warlpiri artist Adrian Jangala Robertson won the general painting award with *Yalpirakinu*, a work about the desert mountains, ridges and trees that are part of his mother's country.



Yalpirakinu by Adrian Jangala Robertson won the general painting award.

The bark painting award was won by Yolŋu Matha artist Marrnyula Mununggurr for *Mun̄guymirri (In Small Pieces)*, a sacred design for the freshwaters of the Djapu clan at their homeland of Wandawuy in eastern Arnhem Land.

The Wandjuk Marika 3D award was won by Larrakia artist Jenna Lee. For her work *HIStory Vessels*, she carefully reworked the pages and coverboard of the Ladybird history book *The Story of Captain Cook* into a series of exquisite baskets and coolamons.

“My work is about the power of storytelling and the beauty that can come when First Nations people are in control of our own stories and how those stories are told,” Lee said.

“I love the ability to make sure that people like myself feel included in the visual national identity of Australia and I really hope that my art is open and welcoming enough it can shift perspectives and ultimately change opinions.”



*For HIStory vessels, Jenna Lee reconstructed a book of *The Story of Captain Cook* into a series of baskets and coolamons.*

Amata-based Pitjantjatjara painter, Iluwanti Ken won the works on paper award for *Walawulu Ngunyju Kukaku Ananyi (Mother Eagles Going Hunting)*.

Ken said the eagles are like Anangu mothers: they hunt to find food to feed their children and protect their babies from outside dangers.

The Natsiaa judging panel – of Karen Mills, Stephen Williamson and Donna Nadjamerrek – described Ken’s piece as a “dramatic yet sensitive” work which “beautifully demonstrates the freedom and confidence of the artist”.



Iluwanti Ken's Walawulu Ngunytju Kukaku Ananyi (Mother Eagles Going Hunting), which won the works on paper prize.

The emerging artist award was won by Cecilia Umbagai from Mowanjium in Western Australia.

“I’ve been painting all my life, learning from the elders, sitting with them while they worked, listening,” Umbagai said.

And one of the youngest-ever winners, 18-year-old Siena Mayutu Wurmarrri Stubbs won the multimedia award for a short film called *Shinkansen*, which she made while travelling through Japan on a bullet train from Nagoya to Kyoto in the days after her beloved grandmother’s death in 2019.

The judges said her work was “sensitive and authentic and completely captivating ... a thoughtful and thought-provoking work that intrigues and amazes with its perspective and humility”.

In a year described by Telstra CEO Andrew Penn as “far from normal”, the exhibition this time is virtual. It can be viewed at natsiaa.com.au.