The 2003 Kate Challis RAKA Award

The Kate Challis RAKA Award is one of Australia’s most valuable and prestigious national awards for Indigenous creative artists. It has been instrumental in fostering the careers of writers, filmmakers and visual artists for almost two decades. In 1989, Professor Emeritus Bernard Smith, eminent art historian and one of Australia’s leading public intellectuals, made a bequest to the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne to establish the award in honour of his late wife, Kate Challis, who had a long-standing interest in Indigenous Australian culture.

The scope of the RAKA Award is unique in its recognition of the importance of creative work across a range of different media—creative prose, drama, the visual arts, script-writing and poetry—and its awarding of an annual prize of $10,000 to Indigenous artists in these designated art-forms on a five-year rotation. In 2003, the RAKA Award—now in its third cycle—recognises visual arts. This exhibition comprises works by the thirteen artists short-listed for the RAKA Award.

Although the works were selected on aesthetic merit, a common thread—as expressed in the exhibition title, *Places that name us*—is an ongoing concern about place and identity in contemporary Australia. The exhibition captures some of the ways that Indigenous Australian artists reflect upon the complexities of the histories and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, reminding us that the present is shaped by the tangled effects of our shared, but dramatically different, colonial pasts. The artists in this exhibition question and challenge contemporary political and social certainties, with a powerful result that is both unsettling and inspiring for the future of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia.

Associate Professor Kate Darian-Smith
Director, the Australian Centre
In light of the geographical and aesthetic diversity of contemporary Indigenous art, the Kate Challis RAKA Award succeeds in singling out artists whose work is distinctive both in style and content. Previous winners, Lin Onus (1993) and Brook Andrew (1998), demonstrated some of the great strengths of contemporary Indigenous art in their determination to experiment with new media and to use their art to prompt reflection on challenging issues of history and identity.

While the popular press tends to speak of Indigenous art primarily in market terms, the RAKA Award seeks to present art founded on the artists’ determination to explore the often-complex meetings of different cultures and traditions. The judging panel’s selection of artists Vernon Ah Kee, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Julie Dowling, Dorothy Galaledba, Gordon Hookey, Sylvia Huege de Serville, Roy Kennedy, Ricky Maynard, Ivan Namirrkki, Trevor Nickolls, Janice Peacock, Wingu Tingima and Tommy Watson for exhibition reinforces the significance of the combination of the personal, historical, political and cultural in contemporary Indigenous art.

This year’s award continues what is now a tradition of innovation and provocation. Viewing the exhibition is an opportunity to witness both the diversity and singularity of contemporary art. A multitude of media, coupled with a wide range of personal experience, makes for an expanded field for Indigenous art. In the broadest sense, the connecting thread among the artists is a determination to explore the meeting of different social and cultural structures. Visitors to the exhibition are part of that meeting: we are all invited to accept the challenges of art, history and reconciliation.

Dr Chris McAuliffe
Director, the Ian Potter Museum of Art