# Journey to the heart

Once, Nici Cumpston was closer to crime scenes than the art scene. Now she is driving a display of Indigenous culture.

By **ROSEMARY NEILL**

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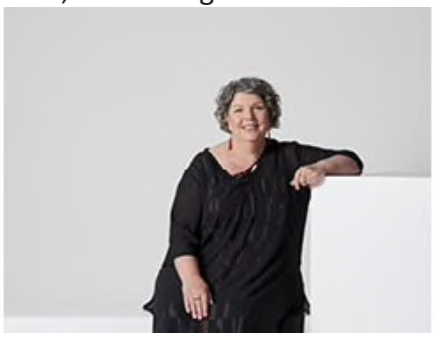
Seven Sisters, by a collective of women from the South Australian Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. Picture: Saul Steed/Tarnanthi.

Nici Cumpston may preside over the nation's biggest showcase of contemporary Indigenous art, but the path she took to this influential role could hardly have been more removed from the visual arts scene. Cumpston is artistic director of Tarnanthi, Adelaide's extravaganza of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture involving an art fair, festival and 1000 artists exhibiting at the Art Gallery of South Australia and 20-plus partner venues.

Tarnanthi (pronounced "tar-nan-di") opens on Friday and a press release claims it is "presenting- art from the world's oldest living culture on an unprecedented scale". Is wrangling such a huge event intimidating?

"It's not daunting," Cumpston replies, sounding impossibly chilled as she speaks down a phone line from the AGSA, where she is curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. "It's exciting and it's challenging, and it evolves as you go."

Of Afghan, Irish, English and Aboriginal heritage, Cumpston is a widely collected landscape photographer and curator, yet she first worked professionally with images in an un-deniably unglamorous setting: the South Australian police department. There, from 1990 to 1996, the fine arts graduate developed film and photographs of often grisly crime and accident scenes, and enlarged crime scene images for court cases.



Nici Cumpston, artistic director of Tarnanthi. Picture: Sven Kovac.

Not surprisingly, dealing with the visual aftermath of murder, assault and violent robberies on a daily basis messed with her head. “You wouldn’t have a lot of information,” she recalls. “You’d have the name of the victim, the name of the location, the name of the crime and then the investigating officers. But you wouldn’t get any background.”

She started mentally filling in missing details: the background to the crimes, perpetrators and victims. “I was dreaming and making up long stories [about the crimes],” she says with an appalled laugh. “It was odd.”

Cumpston looked to colleagues to overcome her strange anxieties. With the more “intense cases, the crime scene investigators would talk me through where they were at with it, and that seemed to settle my subconscious mind”.

Did this immersion in uncensored images reflecting the darker side of society skew her world view? “Yes, I think it did,” she answers frankly. “When I think about the choices I made at that time, they might have been clouded. It also made me realise that we really only hear in the news about 10 per cent of [the crimes and accidents] that go on in society. There’s a lot that goes on that you just don’t know about.”

Fast-forward 20 years or so and Cumpston, who started her working life as a nurse, is comfortably immersed in the Aboriginal art world. The 54-year-old spends about half the year travelling to Indigenous communities and the local art centres that are often calming oases  in towns and settlements roiled by entrenched social and economic problems.

This year, she is curating her second Tarnanthi festival, the first was mounted in 2015 and she will continue as the biennial event’s artistic director until 2021.

Tarnanthi is a Kaurna word meaning “to come forth or appear” and Cumpston says the event “is very much artist-led”. She doesn’t go into communities with prescriptive notions of what is required. Rather, she spends time with the artists and gently teases out their ideas.

She has spent a lot of time in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands near the South Australian-Northern Territory border, and works with these isolated desert communities featured prominently in Tarnanthi.

Ginger Wikilyiri, Bernard Tjalkari & Keith Stevens. Picture: Rhett Hammerton/Tarnanthi.

The ambitious installation *Kulata Tjuta*, meaning many spears, has been developed, in stages, by men from across the APY Lands. This iteration will see 500 spears — painstakingly carved and shaped over hot coals — suspended in the shape of a cloud generated by a nuclear explosion. Below them will sit hand-carved wooden bowls

created by Anangu women.

*Kulata Tjuta* has had two earlier outings, including a 2015 exhibit inside the grounds of South Australia's Government House. This time, the number of spears has doubled.

This striking work critiques the highly controversial atomic tests the British carried out in South Australia in the 1950s and 60s that uprooted and seriously affected the health of indigenous people living in APY communities, among them Tarnanthi artists and their families.

Some of the artists talk for the first time on video about how the fallout or "black mist" from the tests affected them. In the catalogue, artist Frank Young recounts how "so many Anangu fell ill, in Ernabella or in the bush after the [1953] blast at Emu Junction … Anangu were told time and time again that measles and influenza were to blame. Many Anangu had sores on their bodies, and had pain in their chest and lungs. Many more had pain in their eyes, and many of these people lost their eyesight."

Elder Manyitjanu Lennon was a young woman when the blasts were carried out, and recalls trying to help a white official round up a "bush mob" who didn't realise their lands were about to be contaminated by an atomic test.

Lennon says: "I remember very clearly driving around country with a white man, McDougall, who was trying to save Anangu … I remember the desperation in the vehicle as McDougall and the adults raced around telling Anangu to get out of this country … But that bush mob didn't understand and wanted to hide."

A 1980s royal commission, along with studies and books about the tests, have acknowledged how indigenous tribes in the area experienced displacement, radiation sickness or death as a result of the explosions.

Yet Cumpston says "this hasn't been spoken about publicly by most of the people [who are exhibiting at Tarnanthi] before. That's what this exhibition is unearthing — that the artists' experiences are very personal and their voices haven't been heard.

Forty-five APY Lands artists have worked on two monumental paintings — one created by men, one by women — for Tarnanthi. The works are 3m by 5m each, making them "the largest paintings I've ever seen artists from these areas work on", Cumpston says. This project marks the first time these painters, who usually work in family groups, "have collaborated across communities. This is really an act of solidarity."

Twenty-four female artists are working on their interpretation of the Seven Sisters story, a creation fable about female siblings pursued by a priapic male being. It is a story that spans three deserts and three states, and it is also the focus of the just-opened National Museum of Australia show *Songlines* in Canberra.

When we speak, Cumpston has just returned from Erub (Darnley Island) in the Torres Strait, one of the country's most remote communities. "Oh wow," says the Adelaide-born and bred curator. "It's not until you're up in those little airplanes [that] you think: 'There's a lot of islands- and I'm a long way from Cairns.' It's four hours to get back to Cairns, let alone all the way to Adelaide."

The Erub artists work with ghost nets — fishing nets that have been abandoned at sea and are an environmental hazard — as they continue to trap and kill marine life. Working their magic, the Torres Strait Islander artists have reinvented these nets as vivid, sculptural corals and sea creatures for Tarnanthi.

Vincent Namatjira, Trump and Obama, 2017. Picture: Tarnanthi.

Art pioneer Albert Namatjira's great-grandson, Vincent Namatjira, is also represented. "He has a really great sense of humour," Cumpston says of Vincent's quirky, observational portraits of Gina Rinehart, Donald Trump and Barack Obama.
"Through humour, he can bring these leaders down to our level; it gives him a chance to engage with them on his terms."
Many of the festival's works involve a hybrid of indigenous and pop cultures. Artists from Mornington Island, another far-flung community off the coast of far north Queensland, have collaborated with fashion designer and curator Grace Lillian Lee to devise bags inspired by their island home. Earlier versions of the bags were paraded on the catwalk at Melbourne Fashion Week last year.
*Fempre$$* is an Indigenous, female-centred, hip-hop show that places women on the decks and dance floor, while *Bush Mechanics: The Exhibition* is adapted from the ABC TV series and will highlight the novel innovations Aboriginal bush mechanics resort to, to keep their cars running on challenging outback roads.

The Bush Mechanics inside an EJ Holden. Picture: NFSA/Tarnanthi.

You won't see Cumpston's works at the festival; she seems alarmed at the suggestion, saying it would be a conflict of interest. Her landscapes, which have a spare beauty and exude an overwhelming sense of stillness, are held by the National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, South Australian Museum and Canberra's Parliament House collection, among others.
In 2005, she was commissioned to create a large-scale work for the foyer of the Commonwealth Law Courts in Adelaide, to adorn an 8m-long wall. "It was a very long wall — a very long wall,'' she jokes. Interestingly enough, the law courts are built on the site of the old state police department building, where she had developed crime scene images.

“They said they wanted something uplifting and my mind went straight to the backwaters of the [Murray] river.”
She tried to capture the feel of walking along the riverbank by flipping her horizontal images into a vertical position.
“That body of work was really about providing a chance for people to have an experience of being outside when they’re inside [the court building] and feeling quite traumatised … A lot of people have told me they have gone into that court and seen that work and it took them somewhere else.”
Cumpston started out as a photography lecturer at Tauondi Aboriginal Community College in Port Adelaide and curated an annual exhibition at Tandanya, the country’s oldest Aboriginal-owned multi-arts centre, “without ever really realising what I was doing”. She also taught at the University of South Australia and, in 2008, became the first Aboriginal curator at the AGSA in 132 years. “That didn’t take long,” I quip, and she dissolves in a fit of giggles.
She curated the *Desert Country* exhibition — the first to track the 40-year history of the Aboriginal desert painting movement — for AGSA in 2011, which toured nationally. And she co-curated 2013’s *Heartland*, which showcased contemporary work by SA artists, again for the state’s premier gallery.
The following year, her photographs were exhibited at the Kluge-Ruhe museum in Virginia — the only American museum devoted to Australian Indigenous art — while on a residency there. She says Kluge-Ruhe will partner with Tarnanthi in 2019 on a groundbreaking exhibition of bark paintings.
“They are commissioning new work from northeast Arnhem Land, celebrating 70 years of the bark painting tradition,” she says. Those works will tour the US after they are unveiled at AGSA in 2019.
I ask Cumpston about the entrenched social and economic problems — child neglect, substance abuse, chronic unemployment — that blight many of the communities she visits. She replies that while she is “not blind” to the fact “that terrible things happen” in the communities: “I’m focused on the works of art that are being created. People talk about problems, big problems [in remote communities], but seriously, people are living their lives as best they can under all sorts of different law that’s not really their way of living.
“They have been placed under government laws and people are constantly telling them what their problems are and what their issues are without really listening to their suggestions of how things could improve.
That’s why the works of art they’re creating are so important, because we’re able to hear firsthand from them what’s important and what they’re doing to move forward.”
She is “well aware” of the health and social problems some artists and their families face “every day”.
But she argues that the time these artists spend working at their local art centres is invariably beneficial.
“Their art centre is like the centre for them; it’s a nurturing place, it’s a really positive place. The art centre is like their world.”
***Tarnanthi*** *opens on Friday at the Art Gallery of South Australia and other Adelaide venues.*