



Their own view

By KIERAN FINNANE

Two very different insights into ways of looking at the world are revealed in two exhibitions – one the Desert Mob showing of Yarrenyty Arltere artists, the other the Mount Liebig Photography Project 2004, showing at Peta Appleyard Gallery.

Yarrenyty Arltere artists work out of the Larapinta Valley town camp learning centre. They've become particularly known in recent years for their soft sculptures – of animals, dolls, kadaitcha men – but this year have made their mark afresh with four striking etchings. All four are about 'relationship to country' – a phrase that is no doubt overused but referring to a central theme and driver of Aboriginal art.



What is different about these etchings is their graphic representation of ways of thinking about this.

In Shirley Namatjira's Kadaitcha Man Walking Through Country (**at right**) one figure is upright, the other upside down – a simple strategy to suggest the exceptional powers of the Kadaitcha Man, as well as his movement. A wonderful deep blue shows that it is night time. Country, interestingly including fences, is barely discernible except within the outline of the figure. It is as if lit up when he passes – you can run but you can't hide from the Kadaitcha Man.

The Country is Me by Blanche Ebatarinja uses the large scale of the figure in country to assert their reciprocity. Bigger than trees and hills, the figure represents no ordinary mortal, rather it is cultural identity.

Little Ghost, also by Blanche Ebatarinja, has a figure at a similar scale, although with a more amorphous shape and less centrally placed, suggesting its haunting quality. And as you would expect with a ghost, it is transparent – country is visible through it and not contained by it, continuing to the edge of the frame.

Telisa Splinter's figure in Remembering My Father's Country is at a more human scale and it is clothed – now we are in the realm of an ordinary mortal. Country is there, in a few deft lines, both within and around the figure and the act of remembering is given a graphic presence – a feathery protrusion from the figure's head.

Separately and together the etchings take the viewer by the hand and express in the simplest but most poignant of terms the way the artists think and feel themselves in the world.

Following the outstanding entry from Yarrenyty Arltere artists in this year's Wearable Arts Awards, a collaboration with a visiting artist, the etchings are another vindication of the learning centre's commitment to expose their artists to stimulus from others. Master printer Maddy Goodwolf from Tasmania worked with them in two periods and printed the final editions (the editions of five for each etching were sold within 10 minutes following the opening of Desert Mob on Sunday).

The visit of an outsider, photographer Simon Davidson, was also behind the Mount Liebig Photography Project. At the time, 2004, the small community 250 kms north-west of Alice Springs, was afflicted by petrol sniffing and the project was conceived as a diversion program. Davidson instructed 19 young residents in the basics of lighting and composition and provided them with 35mm disposable cameras to tell the story of their lives.

If the Yarrenyty Arltere etchings are about matters of mind and spirit, here the young artists have their eyes wide open on what is going on around them.

Roads and cars are central in several of the photographs, with one of the most striking being Amos Wheeler Tjapangardi's view from behind the dashboard of trucks hauling heavy loads, appearing to overtake the photographer's car on a narrow dirt road. This could be a moment in a film, full of thundering engines, dust and movement, a great example of the way that a photograph can capture in an instant the dynamism of an event of much longer duration.

There are also of course several portraits amongst the 23 images on show, including many variants of the subjects, from toddlers to adults, raising their index and middle fingers in the V-sign.

No V-signs though from two brutally candid images, again the work of Amos Wheeler, showing young people sniffing petrol.

In one the sniffer, alone, wrapped in a blanket, looks directly but blankly at the photographer. The contrast with the shining open gaze of the child in Dianne Reid Nakamarra's Untitled 15, or the warm complicity in the gaze of the teenager sitting in a derelict car in Nathan Rowe Tjakamarra's Untitled 06, could not be greater.

In the other, a group of young people – children, scarcely in puberty – are sniffing. Some of them, at least, do not seem quite as lost to the petrol as the sole sniffer – they're trying it out, watching one another. But one has clearly felt the hit, head tipped back, eyes closed. If the task was to tell a story, Amos Wheeler has clinched it in this chilling photograph.

Happily we learn from the exhibition notes that sniffing no longer occurs at Mount Liebig.

Another photograph, Untitled 16 by Patrick Collins Tjapaltjarri, will unsettle many viewers (**top of the page**).

High-leaping flames from a campfire light the scene. Two smiling men hold up the products of their hunt – one a partially plucked bird, its long legs dangling, the other a pink-skinned joey, taken no doubt from the pouch of the slain 'roo at his feet.

The photograph lays bare, without judgment, the full violence of the hunt – the carcasses are not the neatly trussed parcels of a butcher's shop window, they are devastated flesh and bone.

This stands in contrast to the frank high spirits of the men – the hunt has been successful, the meat will fill bellies, this is simply how it goes.

This photograph was exhibited in the 2005 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards, but otherwise the Peta Appleyard show is the first gallery outing for these images.

The exhibition has reportedly excited the young artists, now all five years older, and they're hoping to get a similar project underway again.