

TARNANTHI LAUNCH: NARROWING THE SPACE BETWEEN US

For the launch of TARNANTHI: Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art, Wiradjuri man, award-winning journalist and author Stan Grant delivered a moving speech about art's unique ability to create meaning that transcends time and place. Here's what he had to say ...

It's a real pleasure for me to be here this evening to be involved with this opening, and we've had a wonderful welcome already. In my father's language, Wiradjuri, we have a word, *yindyamarra*, which means respect and I pay my respects to the people of this land, and my respects to the artists who are here tonight, whose work you are going to see. I want to speak to you just briefly about art, not as something that we see on the wall, but as something that really lives inside of us, something that tells a story of who we are, something that is a living thing and an act of great generosity.

What you're going to see when you walk through these doors tonight is the generosity of spirit of a people who are allowing you into their world, and in doing that allowing you to become a part of their world, to bridge that divide between all of us who call this place home. I experienced this recently myself, just a couple of weeks ago. I spent a few days at Lake Mungo in southwestern New South Wales. It's the traditional land of the Paakantji people, the Ngyiampaa people, the Mutthi Mutthi people, but my great-grandfather, a Wiradjuri man, had traditional kinship ties to that land and I was back there for ceremonies that I was involved in. It is an extraordinary place for those of you who haven't been there. It's often said that you can lose yourself in a place, and at Mungo I lost my very sense of

now, a sense of time. Out there, time falls in on itself. You realise how inane it is to think of time as some progression, some linear concept that begins and presumably ends. We imagine time, don't we, as the engine, if not the master, of history, but that doesn't capture the transcendence of a place like Mungo. Here, the past and the present merge into one. I could stand on earth where others have stood for thousands, tens of thousands, of years. I could reach down and touch artefacts and implements that remain scattered on the ground. I could cook my food on ancient fires. I could sleep under the same stars that have shone on this earth for eternity. At Mungo, the oldest human remains on our continent were found. Mungo man has been dated at more than 40,000 years old. It is among the oldest evidence on earth of ceremonial burial. When he died, Mungo man was placed on the ground, arms folded across his chest, and his body was smeared with ochre. This was life as art. This was a life that mattered. It was a living story, and a story preserved to speak to those, us here today, in a far-off future. This is the essence of art; this is the beauty of art.

I felt that same transcendence in another sacred place far from my home. I felt that as I looked at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, in the Vatican. Here was Michelangelo's tribute to God. I looked at the outstretched



Stan Grant
photo: Nat Rogers

arms of Adam, reaching for the fingers of God, and that space between them, and in that space I saw myself. Here were all of us, living in the space between, reaching for each other, but destined always to remain just that far apart. We fill that space as humans with love and hate, joy and despair, and suspicion, ambition, loss and regret – it is in that space that we write our history, trying to explain what it is that put us here, and what it is that keeps us apart. As humans we have always sought to leave our mark, to tell our story, to speak to those in time to come, who will live in that space between us. From a drawing on a cave wall, to an ancient burial, to Michelangelo's story of us on a Vatican ceiling, art draws us ever closer. And this is what all who have been involved in TARNANTHI are bringing to us. It is an opportunity to explore that space between us. It is an extraordinary feat, and for those of you who will look upon it, you'll be in awe of what's been collected here. And I congratulate everyone who has been part of putting that together.

TARNANTHI is about giving agency to artists, and it speaks to the deafening silence in Australian history. It speaks to that space between us as Australians. The artists that you'll see call on us to listen. It is in the word *kulila*, found in several desert languages – the word is literally inscribed on works of art in TARNANTHI. Art gives voice to

politics. Many of the artists here have fought for their land and for recognition, for their rights as human beings. This is art as evidence, evidence of a culture as old as human time on this land, evidence of resilience, evidence of survival. The story of modern Australia began with the idea of *terra nullius*, of emptiness, of invisibility. What you're going to see tonight punctures that idea of emptiness and invisibility. It speaks of a continuity that is tens of thousands of years old on this continent. The author Phillip Toyne, writing in the publication *Tjala Arts*, explained that art was the Anangu's way of giving meaning to place. The meaning is written on our landscape. It is at Lake Mungo and it is at countless other places. It is a living thing. In these places we find hope, the only hope that we have, all of us. This story is the story of this land, from the first footstep to the most recent arrival. It doesn't see skin colour, it doesn't see religion, or gender; it is a story of us, all of us. We all enter into this heritage, we are bound to it. As Michelangelo's work spoke to me, a man from a far-off land in a foreign place, so this art speaks to all of us, all who have come to this land. Allow TARNANTHI to speak to you, to continue that so very human quest to narrow the space between us. Thank you.

Stan Grant