

ARTIST STATEMENT

I was 11 years old when Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin on Christmas Eve, 1974. That year, my mum, two brothers, and I were on holiday in Perth. My dad, Colin, stayed behind to look after Dizzy, our dog, and Paul, our white cockatoo. On Christmas morning, we heard the news that Darwin had been hit by a cyclone, but we had no idea if my dad was alive. It wasn't until after New Year's Day that we finally heard from him. The first thing I asked was, "How's Dizzy?"

When we arrived home, I stood in the front yard and could see for miles; every house around us had been destroyed. The entire suburb reeked of rotting food, and our house was covered in mould. I cried.

Dad started telling us his experience of the cyclone. He didn't say much, but he described how Dizzy, usually calm, began whimpering uncontrollably, urging him to move to the bathroom. Just minutes after they moved, something struck the front of the house, shattering three glass louvers in the lounge room. Glass tore through the couch where Dad had been sitting. Dizzy saved his life that night.

We were lucky. Dad had tied up our little Toyota Corolla in the carport and safeguarded family photos, Super 8 footage, and birth certificates in a steel filing box. Most families lost everything, including all their mementoes.

Six months later, the biggest shock hit when I returned to school—three-quarters of my friends were gone, displaced by the cyclone. Cyclone Tracy didn't just devastate the land; it tore apart communities, scattering people and reshaping Darwin into something unrecognisable. The frontier town I grew up in was gone, replaced by something shiny and new.

My dad, an Italian-Irishman raised in Mumbai, had been deeply affected by Darwin's isolation before the cyclone. It was a struggle to find good bread or fresh vegetables, let alone Indian spices or ingredients. Over time, he built an impressive garden in our tiny backyard, growing jackfruit, mangoes, bhindi (lady's fingers), custard apples, and even a prized curry leaf tree. Cyclone Tracy destroyed his garden, but it didn't destroy his spirit. He replanted everything. Slowly, more Indians moved to Darwin. Our garden became a source of connection and people would come and ask if they could have some moringa (drumsticks).

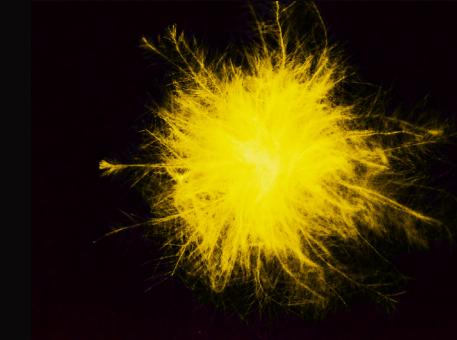
This exhibition is inspired by the letters my dad wrote during that time, letters I only discovered recently—45 years later. They reveal a vulnerability I never saw in him growing up, as he navigated the fear and isolation of Cyclone Tracy. This work is not just about loss but survival, resilience, and the enduring bonds of childhood memories, a family and community.

Andrew Belletty, 2024



NOCTAMBULATION

Cyclone Tracy: echoes of an ecological disaster



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners: the Rembarrnga, Dalabon and Larrakia peoples of the Lands where the works were created.

This project was made possible with the generous support of Creative Australia.

Andrew would like to give special thanks to the following people for their invaluable support: Missi Mel Pesa, Colin Simpson, Steve de Kretser, Rita Macarounas, Sonia Russel, Neville Pantazis, Napoleon Pantazis, Mailin Colman, Eddie Furlan, Nan Furlan, Helen Baker Belletty, Helen Lawrie, Dianne Cumberland, Leo Cleanthous and Helen Cleanthous.

NCCA would like to thank Epint's Stan Whiting, Jessie Wauchope and Neil Ingram for their continuing support with an ever changing schedule. To our caring and tireless staff, Petrit Abazi (Director), Zoë Slee (Assistant Curator), Bill Davies (Installer) and Lukas Bendel (Technologist). We appreciate the work of the NCCA Board, Alastair Sheilds (Chair), Susan Kirkman, April Young, Dr Wendy Garden, Neville Pantazis, Dr Sarah Scott and Helene George and our volunteers that helped with this exhibition Helen Kelly, Aaron Victor and Janet Boromeo.

Andrew Belletty

17 Oct - 16 Nov 2024

The Northern Centre for Contemporary Art is proudly located on Larrakia Country, in Darwin, Northern Territory. We acknowledge the Larrakia people as sovereign custodians of the land on which we work, and extend our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and to all First Nations peoples.



An Interview with the Artist

And Assistant Curator of NCCA, Zoë Slee.

Noctambulation combines personal narrative with a communal experience of nature and natural disaster. How has it been for you trying to balance both these aspects? Art galleries are tricky spaces for audiovisual artists, especially with the three highly personal works I created for *Noctambulation*. The themes are universal, but the works ask the audience to engage on a very personal level, which can be challenging. I am trying to create intimate yet communal experiences in these works, which reflect the very essence of an ecological disaster. An event such as Cyclone Tracy was caused by a minor fluctuation in air pressure that created an intense vortex of air which reconfigured Darwin's people, culture, environment and ideology. The scale of this change is macro, but the echoes in each person are micro, so the difficulty for me was to reflect this through the works.

What have been some of the challenges?

The biggest challenge was creating personal works for public exhibition that revealed the theme of rebirth and renewal, without amplifying specific elements of the disaster itself. I wanted to create three works which could engage a Darwin audience whose memories are potent, and also to make the works engaging for a wide audience.

With the previous question in mind, can you explain your creative process a bit? How did the responsibilities of bioethical listening inform your approach or processes for this project?

My creative process involves observing things as they are, then creating an audiovisual response. When I found the five letters sent to us in Perth by my Dad in Darwin during and after Tracy I decided to create a response. I am very aware that Tracy is an area of great sensitivity for many people, myself included, which is why I stayed clear of the tabloid style emphasis which appears in many memorials, histories, writings and artworks. Instead, I reflected on things I found in my Dad's letters, his sense of optimism, "At last, the sun is shining" and his concern for plants and animals. I also listened carefully to interviews I made with survivors which reinforced the theme of *Noctambulation*. Bioethical listening resonates throughout the works, which means that by listening to each of the works, the audience member becomes a participant. The act of listening demands an action so it is important to include the sounds of nature, of rebirth, and of renewal in the works.

Your father's letters have formed the backbone of this exhibition. Each room in the exhibition is a direct reference to your father's letters of experiencing the cyclone. What is the atmosphere you wanted to create with each room?

In Dizzy seems to know that things are not good, the heart of this golden constellation, an inverted Christmas tree rotates slowly, defying gravity as a golden mirror ball hangs below the tree, as a prized racing bicycle sits on the floor beneath. The entire ensemble pirouettes gracefully, casting a spell of childlike wonder upon all who witness it. Seven speakers line the gallery walls, each whispers its own story—voices recounting events that have lingered in memory for fifty years. These ethereal narratives blend with the gentle tinkling of Brahms' lullaby emanating from the central Christmas tree, its music box rendition adding a touch of sweet melancholy to the atmosphere. This immersive artwork invites viewers to reflect on an event which resists the passage of time, revealing the persistence of memory, and the enduring magic of childhood dreams.

The birds are lucky, they are unharmed, in the back of the gallery involves a haunting soundscape that fills the room as you step into the space. The sound transports the audience to the sacred banks of the Ganges in Varanasi. On the wall are two mirrored bathroom cabinets and an open set of glass louvres. Looking through any of these gives the audience a glimpse of a larger room containing a life-sized video image of myself in a small bathroom. In the flickering candlelight, a figure comes into focus, a man hunched over on the toilet, his trembling hand furiously scribbling on a writing pad. The scene is charged with emotion, as you realise you're witnessing a father's final moments of communication with his loved ones. In the scene, the bathtub, filled with still water, reflects the candlelight, creating a sense of timelessness. This ordinary bathroom has been transformed into a liminal space, suspended between life and death, mirroring the belief that Varanasi is where one can escape the cycle of rebirth. My voice, now aged sixty, reads aloud the words written by my father decades ago.

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Above: *The birds are lucky, they are unharmed*, 2024.

This auditory element bridges the gap between past and present, creating a powerful dialogue between generations. The trembling voice echoes the vulnerability of the figure in the video, adding layers of emotion to the installation.

I'm sure no one in Darwin is asleep, is where the air vibrates with the hypnotic drone of tanpuras. At the heart of this sonic sanctuary, a sheet of corrugated iron hangs suspended, its surface transformed by a lustrous golden foil wrapping. It commands attention with its gleaming metallic form, reflecting a striking white video image. Here, a miniature feather ball appears to dance, its delicate movements animated by an invisible breath. Light plays across the golden surface, casting shimmering reflections that dance along the walls, creating an ever-shifting visual landscape. As you approach, a new layer of sound reveals itself. The iron sheet resonates with a deep, slow chant, this low-frequency composition melds seamlessly with the tanpura drones, enveloping visitors in a tactile sound bath that penetrates to the very core. The installation blends visual and auditory elements, creating a meditative, healing space of entangled audio visual energies. The golden reflections mirror the harmonious tones, while the animated feather echoes the subtle vibrations of the chant.

In addition to the atmosphere, how important is the shared listening experience to this exhibition? I try to create shared listening experiences to make a space for physical engagement and connection between people, place and things, as a tonic for a world which increasingly demands virtual engagement. As an audiovisual artist I feel that it is my duty to create moments which explore the idea of intimate engagement in public space, shared listening through multichannel audio is the ideal medium for this.

Can we discuss the upside down Christmas tree? It's a striking visual but throughout the installation the space became quite beautiful and contemplative. What is your hope for the audience and how they will experience these installations?

The Christmas tree dangling from the ceiling is a metaphor for my whole childhood which was turned upside down by Tracy. The essence of old Darwin had gone forever, most of my childhood friends never returned, the dreams that I grew up with had evaporated overnight. But just as disco emerged in the mid-seventies in response to the turbulent politics of the sixties, I emerged with renewed energy. I hope that the audience will take away a feeling of rebirth and renewal, which is urgently needed in a world where ecological disasters such as Tracy are becoming increasingly common.

Bringing an idea, especially one informed by trauma, can be nerve wracking. How are you feeling now that the exhibition has opened?

I am relieved to be finally bringing these works to the public, and that the premier showing of *Noctambulation* will be in Darwin during the 50th anniversary of Cyclone Tracy. It has been a difficult journey animating these stories through the works. I am filled with renewed energy now that these works have been born!

Finally, what's next for you? Will we be seeing you back in Darwin any time soon? I will be back in Darwin to continue working on *Knock'em Down Sound System*, another project I started in early 2024 with young Darwin artists and musicians. The project aims to activate community spaces and communities through workshops and performances. The project has been a huge success so far which means that I will be back for sure!



Above: *I'm sure no one in Darwin is asleep*, 2024.

Cover: *Blown*, 2024.

Back cover: *Dizzy seems to know that things are not good*, 2024.