

# The West Australian

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## **Activist roots inform Telstra win; Artist Harold Joseph Thomas tells Simons Collins the time had come for a deeply political work**

*The West Australian*  
6 August 2016

In 1971, Harold Joseph Thomas was a self-confessed "black activist" living in Adelaide when he designed the iconic Aboriginal flag.

Forty-five years later, the 69-year-old painter from Humpty Doo, 40km south of Darwin, has won Australia's top indigenous art award, the \$50,000 grand prize at the 33rd National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards.

A descendant of the Luritja and Wombai people of Central Australia and member of the Stolen Generation, Thomas won for his deeply personal yet politically charged *Tribal Abduction*.

The Renaissance art-inspired work depicts white police hauling away an indigenous mother and child, with other figures portrayed against the red earth of Thomas' country.

*Tribal Abduction*, which triumphed in a field of 244 entries and 75 finalists spanning traditional painting, sculpture and video installations, is particularly timely given the ongoing furore over the treatment of children in detention in the NT.

At the Museum and Art Gallery Northern Territory, Thomas said that the forced removal of children from their mothers "destroyed them culturally and emotionally".

"It's a painting I wanted to do that I left too long," he added. "This subject has always been close to me and close to the families of my people."

Taken from his family at seven, Thomas was sent to an Anglican institution for Aboriginal boys and later fostered by a priest and his family. In 1966, he won a scholarship to study at the South Australian School of Art and the following year held his first exhibition of watercolour paintings.

Thomas was the art school's first indigenous graduate and, in 1970, the first indigenous person employed by a State museum. He was a finalist in the inaugural NATSIAA in 1984.

Thomas plans to use the prize money to replenish his art supplies before embarking on a bigger painting than *Tribal Abduction*, which is more than 2m wide.

Previously better known for watercolour landscapes, the artist started preliminary sketches two years ago. Before winning the top prize at the awards announced last night, Thomas feared the work was "too political, too in-your-face" for the NATSIAAs. "But I kept persevering ... You can be afraid when you challenge yourself to do subjects you're not used to doing."

Thomas remains fiercely proud of the red, black and gold Aboriginal flag, but would not want it to replace the Union Jack on the Australian flag.

"It's doing its job," he said. "It's part of the Australian consciousness and it's as Aboriginal as bark painting and sand painting."

Brisbane-based artist and judge Vernon Ah Kee said Tribal Abduction was "a blazing commentary on the ongoing manifestations of colonial brutality" and chose itself to win the prestigious art award. "The potency of the subject matter coupled with Thomas' practiced hand and classical composition make the work a compelling choice this year," he said.

Ah Kee was joined on the three-strong judging panel by Museum Victoria senior curator Kimberley Moulton and Darwin artist and philanthropist Don Whyte.

Subiaco-born Nicole Monks won the Wandjuk Marika Memorial 3-D Award for her performance *We Are All Animals*. Now based in Sydney, Monks said the piece, displayed in video format at the awards, was inspired by her ancestral Wajarri country inland from Geraldton.

South Australia's Betty Kuntiwa Pumani won the Telstra General Painting Award for the second consecutive year with *Antara*, a painting depicting women hunting for witchetty grubs.

Robert Pau, who grew up on Thursday Island and Cairns, won the Telstra Work on Paper Award for *Battle of Bikar*, while NT artist John Mawurndjul took out the Telstra Bark Painting Award for the third time with his *Dilebang*, which portrays a secret sacred site using earth pigments on bark.

The five category winners each received \$5000. The NATSIAAs were announced last night at the MAGNT with performances from Arnhem Land rockers East Journey, popular singer Shellie Morris and dancerdidgeridoo player Djakapurra Munyarryun.

The finalists' works will be on display until October 30. Simon Collins was in Darwin as a guest of Telstra.