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Harold Thomas wins \$50,000 Indigenous art award with stolen generations painting

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The anguish and despair is writ clear on their faces: the child being snatched by white authorities; the mother biting on the captor's finger in a bid to free her baby; the male relative grappling on to her and her other child as their family is torn apart.

Depicting the horrific impact at the time and in generations since of the stolen generations, the painting by Harold Joseph Thomas (Bundoo), in the style of a 19th century European master such as Delacroix or Caravaggio, packs an enormously powerful emotional punch.



Harold Joseph Thomas (Bundoo) with his work Tribal abduction. Photo: Glenn Campbell

Tribal abduction immediately stood out to the judges of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards when they first saw a photograph of the work by the artist, who is best known as the creator of the "little picture" he made in 1971 that has since been adopted as the Aboriginal flag.

But this piece fairly "leapt off the wall", says Vernon Ah Kee, a NATSIAAs judge and prominent Indigenous artist from Queensland, when he first saw it hanging in the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

And now it has received Australia's most prestigious award for Aboriginal art, the \$50,000 overall prize, at the awards ceremony in Darwin on Friday night.

The subject of his work has huge resonance for Thomas, a descendant of the Luritja and Wambai peoples of Central Australia, and has shaped generations of his own family: his parents were taken from their parents as children, as were he and his 15 siblings when they were young.

The hurt that has caused, and continues to cause, is obvious in his voice and expression as he speaks, on what happens to be National Torres Strait and Islander Children's Day, ahead of Friday's announcement.

"This reflects the historical story of the destruction of Aboriginal people," says Thomas.

"It's a general perception of the catchphrase 'taken from your mother's breast'," he says of the inspiration for the work.

"The most hurtful part of a child's life is to be torn from your mother's breast, no matter where you are in the world, [it] is the most tragic thing for a child ...

"Both my parents were removed and so was I. My mother had 16 children. We never had that family ... I just have snippets of memories of my mother. My father, he died when he was about 92 so there was a relationship there but it was never ever close.

"You never ever move on from that."

Now a great-grandfather in his late 60s, Thomas is passionate about improving the care of children, and sees echoes of the past in recent controversies such as the mistreatment of boys in the Northern Territory's Don Dale youth detention centre.

"It's not just in the criminal sense, it's how you look after children. You treat children better than you treat adults. And we've never seen adults treated in that way anywhere in Australia."

Betty Kuntiwa Pumani from north west South Australia won the painting prize for the second consecutive year; John Mawurndjul, from Mumeka, near Maningrida in the Northern Territory, received the bark painting award; Robert (Tommy) Pau, from Thursday Island and Cairns, was named the winner of the Work on Paper Award; Ishmael Marika, a Yolgnu man from East Arnhem land, won the Youth Award; and Sydney's Nicole Monks received the Wandjuk Marika Memorial 3D Award for the first piece of performance art in the award's 33 years.