

## Bangarra's Stephen Page and artist Destiny Deacon win \$50,000 lifetime achievement awards

*Page and Deacon both won the Red Ochre prizes at the 2022 First Nations Arts awards on Friday night for their life work*



'I feel like I have still got so much to tell creatively' ... Stephen Page, pictured at the Bangarra studios, in Walsh Bay, in 2021.

Kelly Burke  
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Last year, choreographer, dancer and director Stephen Page announced that he was stepping down as artistic director of Bangarra Dance Theatre, after 31 years in the job. On Friday night, Page was named the recipient of a \$50,000 lifetime achievement award, at the Australia Council's First Nations Arts awards – and it could not have come at a more opportune moment.

The descendant of the Nunukul people and the Mununjali clan of the Yugambeh nation in south-east Queensland, Page has created more than two dozen works for Bangarra over the past three decades and won many accolades, including being named an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO). Now, it is time to take a break.

"I'm not saying I'm going to run away and go and hide somewhere, but I'll just have to reconsider things. Bangarra is the only payroll I've ever known," Page told Guardian Australia. "I'm hitting 57, but I feel like I have still got so much to tell creatively."

“I’ve just been reflecting on my time here for over 30 years, and I find [I’m] constantly thinking about the body of work ... myself as an artist and my contribution to our national artistic landscape.”

Page is one of several leading Indigenous Australian artists recognised at the First Nations Arts awards on Friday night, where both he and visual artist Destiny Deacon received the \$50,000 Red Ochre award for lifetime achievement.

Around the same time Page took up the artistic leadership of Bangarra, in the early 1990s, Deacon began exhibiting in public galleries.

“I left a good teaching job and was poverty stricken for decades,” the Kuku and Erub/Mer artist said. “[At the time] there seemed to be lots of non-Indigenous artists then who came from posh backgrounds, or had married well.”

Having faced significant health challenges over the past three years, Deacon said the \$50,000 prize money would take the pressure off, and enable her to relax and enjoy her achievements.



*Artist Destiny Deacon, standing in DESTINY, the retrospective of her work that showed at NGV Australia in 2020 and 2021.*

Also on Friday, singer-songwriter Emma Donovan received the 2022 First Nations Arts and Culture fellowship. Donovan, who has been part of the music world since she was seven, said the fellowship will allow her to “like sit back and think more about what I want to do”. These plans include producing a new solo album featuring songs for children in traditional language.

“I’ve been on the scene for a while – I’m a 40-year-old Aboriginal woman in the music industry, and I’m still working” she said.

“Sometimes I pinch myself, I think I’m pretty lucky. But I think it’s down to just doing the hard work, keeping it consistent. I can say I’ve done that over the years.”

Other winners on Friday included Gumbaynggirr and Turkish actor and playwright Brittanie Shipway, and Wiradjuri poet and artist Jazz Money, who each won the \$20,000 Dreaming award, which aims to support emerging artists under the age of 30 to develop a major body of work.

Wamba Wamba-Scottish playwright and performer Brodie Murray and Yuin soundscape artist Hayden Ryan both won the \$10,000 Emerging career development award, aimed at helping artists under 30 with professional development.

The First Nations Arts awards, which are aired on NITV, are held on 27 May to mark the anniversary of the 1967 referendum and the start of National Reconciliation Week.

The common thread between all the recipients, said Franchesca Cubillo, the Australia Council’s executive director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts, is that “the stories they share are key to Australian cultural life and national identity”.