

# Germinating, Growing, Wilting:

a new paradigm for the Art of the North

## STEPHEN NAYLOR

THE TOWNSVILLE-BASED UMBRELLA STUDIOS began as an artist-run-space in 1986, and staked a claim of being the first professional artist organisation north of Brisbane. Since becoming an incorporated body in the early 1990s it has played a significant role in shaping contemporary art in the region and helping understand the ethos of North Queensland. The recent collaborative exhibition *Germinating, Growing, Wilting* by Claudine Marzik and Tijn Meulendijks registers a high watermark in quality contemporary art practice and precision curatorship.

In the entrance to the exhibition space a two-metre-high grass and pin construction morphs and merges with Marzik's two-dimensional gestural painting. The carefully assembled grass screen structure harks back to Anselm Kiefer's hybrid works where the image and nature coalesce in one space. Looking into the raw, unstretched canvas through the grass lattice creates an uneasy feeling in the viewer as physicality of natural fibres veil the artwork, stopping any comprehensive exposure of the drawn and painted surfaces beneath. This collaborative piece sets the tenor for the entire show. 'Significantly', writes Barbara Dover in the exhibition's catalogue, 'they are acute to the poetry and aesthetics of nature: their work is like being in and of nature'.<sup>1</sup>

One of the features of Marzik's practice is her ability to sequence works in clusters; she uses diptych, triptych and multiple series hangs, which assist in unifying this rambling exhibition space, allowing the audience to read the narratives in her highly abstracted Far North Queensland (FNQ) landscapes. Marzik senses the power of the FNQ landscape for its massive energy and fecundity. The pure elements and principles of design, so recognisable in abstract expressionism, have been reinvigorated through her brush and painting tools as she sees the tropical environment with fresh eyes. Marzik emigrated from Switzerland to Australia in 1988, and quickly became absorbed in representing her new home. Her floral design training in Europe facilitated an unpretentious foray into the field of painting. Her self-training in painting borrows much from the work of the 1940s and 50s when abstraction allowed the artist to distil forms into their basic pictorial essence. This technique of paring back unnecessary details gives the audience the opportunity to glean small passages of information and interpret the works through their own experiences and expectations.

In some of Marzik's works we are presented with cluttered views of densely packed rainforest. Initially we see the verticality of the Far North, a metaphor for the thrust and energy of plants striving for glimpses of tropic light. The careful observation by Marzik also leads us to the chaos of the forest, as the rise and fall of flora interrupts the verticality with strong horizontals and occasional diagonals. It is the design comprehension that holds these series together. The grouping of works contributes to the stability of this potentially chaotic landscape; consistency of canvas size, or the subtle variation of a horizon, a shift of hue, dissipation of form, or rhythms created by distinct gestures – all contribute to the cohesiveness of



the exhibition. The atmosphere of the forest also comes through in many of the works – one feels clammy, claustrophobic, enshrouded with vegetation almost seething with warm tropical growth.

As a colourist Marzik generally employs a subdued palette. Blacks, dirty whites, ochres and small splashes of vibrant green, the intense violets and hungry cadmiums hold the compositions together. There is a raw energy in the application of paint revealing luscious surfaces with direct reference to the brush or palette knife. Her highly animated canvases are built up with many layers of paint in a labyrinth format reminiscent of Jackson Pollock (1912-56); however, the surfaces are flattened through a technique of scratching, scraping, sanding, washing and/or burnishing the canvas face to create a deeper reflection on her subject matter. This wound-like expanse of sanded-back impasto changes the experience for the viewer. The works have a generosity in the 'real' which does not always transpose into documentation, especially the edges of these sanded back sections: think panel beating and spray paint duco.

The shifts in the series of works by



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Image: Trevor NICKOLLS, *Warmun mandala* 2002  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Private collection, Perth

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P37: Claudine Marzik, *Work no. 25*, acrylic on canvas. Image courtesy the artist.

P38: 1 + 2/ Installation views of *Germinating, Growing, Wilting* at Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts, Townsville, showing a detail of Tijn Meulendijks's installation-based work, and a view of Meulendijks's installation and Marzik's paintings in dialogue. Images courtesy the artists. Photographs by Michael Marzik.

Marzik echo the micro seasons of the tropics. The exhibition title *Germinating, Growing, Wilting* captures the closeness to the natural. The two-dimensional paintings and drawings are augmented by the work of a fellow FNQ artist who also developed his skills from Masters training in flora art in the Netherlands. Tijn Meulendijks has been exhibiting his installations of ephemeral natural materials since 2003 and is part of the contemporary arts collective in Cairns. In this show his work provides the fragility and delicate passages of the tropical experience. Too often the art of North Queensland has been reduced to simplistic evocations of frangipanis, palms and exotica. The Matisse-an or Gauguin-esque rhetoric of a European lens or Ray Crooke's 'sad shadows in our landscape'<sup>2</sup> references the polarities of an artform in tropical Australia. Meulendijks's work re-assesses the need for cliché, delving into the 'affect' of nature in the tropics. The characteristic greens, viridian and phathlo are omitted with preference for the straw, umber, charcoal and ochre hues. The installations utilise the ground species of grasses, tussocks, weeds, small succulents and vines.

A wall is amassed with a botanical homage to hundreds of specimens, carefully attached to the surface with delicately torn fragments of masking tape. The wall evokes a roll-call of lesser know tropical species; revealing their most intimate details from the root system to stems, stalks, leaves, flowers and seeds of all kinds. The wilting of these plants clarifies the cyclical nature of the tropics; we detect the shifts from the clear skies of May through to August and then the brooding haze of the imminent wet season. Meulendijks brings the audience into his comprehension of tropical space, a knowing that is indexed and intuited from living in the tropical North.

Meulendijks continues this exploration in a series of vitrine and floor-based works. The contrast between nature's soft, downy, delicate leaves and flowers and her aggressive spikes, barbs, prickles and razor-like edges emphasises the conundrum within the botanical experience. The use of writhing vines, entangled in spiral thrusts, realises forms resembling mini tornados which create dramatic works that flesh out the physical spaces within the exhibition.

The split-level gallery space has caused problems for

some artists in previous exhibitions but Meulendijks utilises this low-walled transitional space to full advantage by installing a series of white plinths along its axis. The plinths, bestowed with organic matter, reference the botanic laboratory and the alchemist's bench. This taxonomic installation adorned with specimens, casts, clay forms, jars, living plants and wads of bark and fibre has a Beuys-ian aesthetic or some Duchamp-ian purpose; we are not sure of the intention but recognise the care and scientific precision afforded to the work. Clearly the piece is not decorative yet it carries a quest to discover some unresolved issue. Perhaps this could be interpreted as the engine room of the tropical experience.

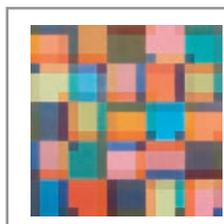
The Australian landscape has been represented for more than 40,000 years. More recently the European lens has attempted to characterise the quintessential nature of the bush and forest. North Queensland is a mere shadow in the discourse of the 'Australian landscape', with minor references to its exotica, lushness and its escape destination quality. The terms 'Torrid Zone' or 'Tropical Paradise' reflect widespread misunderstanding of this unique part of Australia, and it is through the work of thoughtful artists, like Marzik and Meulendijks, that we begin to redress the schematic comprehension we have for this burgeoning space in the Australian psyche. 🌸

*Germinating, Growing, Wilting* by Claudine Marzik and Tijn Meulendijks was presented at Umbrella Studios, Townsville 27 August to 3 October 2010.

1. Barbara Dover, *Germinating, Growing, Wilting*, catalogue essay, Umbrella Studios, Townsville, 2010.

2. John Olsen, *Drawn from life*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Potts Point, Sydney, 1997, p. 122. Here Olsen is quoted from 1975, talking about the challenge for Australian landscape painters to depict Tropical Queensland, and the contribution of Ray Crooke in this regard: 'I thought that Ray Crooke had wonderful potential as an artist, in those early pictures of his. He understood, as no other Australian artist has done, how sad the shadows are in our landscape.'

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## ABSTRACTION 9

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Image Left to Right: Mark Galea, *From Paradise*; Janet Dawson, *Sun Trace 2*; Robert Klippel, *Opus 929*