

**CAIRNS
ART
GALLERY**

Malu Minar

Art of the Torres Strait

22 May 2011

Artwork labels

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Rosie BARKUS

Ceremonial masks

2010

linocut print on satin fabric

Collection of the artist

Before colonization, Torres Strait Islanders were very skillful at carving in turtle shell, pearl shell, bone and wood. Turtles were important food, and nothing was wasted, including their shells and bones. The thick hard scales of the Hawksbill Turtle were used for making hair combs, jewelry, body ornaments, coconut scrapers, fishing hooks, spoons, inlays in wood carvings, and other things for everyday use. Whole turtle shells were used to make important ceremonial masks and dance accessories, which required a high degree of skill and processes. Throughout the Pacific region, Torres Strait Islanders were the most prolific users and carvers of turtle shell. Most of the surviving turtle shell masks and objects collected in the 1800's are housed in museums and institutions throughout the world.

The ceremonial masks from Mer (my mother's island) are known as the best examples, and are held at the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, UK.

Rosie Barkus, 2010

David BOSUN

Gelam Nguzu Kazi

2001

linocut, printed in black ink from one block with kaidaral handcolouring

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Long ago at Bulbul on the Eastern side of Moa there lived a young boy named Gelam and his mother, Usar. When Gelam grew to an appropriate age his mother made him a bow, arrow and a water container to use to hunt gainao (Torres Strait pigeon). After returning from his hunting trip, Gelam kept all of the fat pigeons and gave all the lean ones to his mother. Each time when Usar cooked her bird she noticed that her fire flames were very small but Gelam's were big from all the fat dripping on to the fire from his bird. Seeing this, Usar made a plan to punish him for the trick he was playing on his mother. The next day when Gelam went out hunting to Gerain (the tribal area of Mua), Usar covered herself in clay and waited behind a tree where he was hunting for the birds. As Gelam got closer, Usar jumped from behind a tree to scare him off. When Gelam saw Usar he dropped his bow and arrow and started running back to Bulbul. Usar took a shorter route back to the camp and washed the clay off herself. As Gelam arrived, Usar who was already sitting near her fire pretending she didn't know what had happened, asked Gelam for the birds. Gelam told her that he had seen a Dogai (ghost), so he had dropped all his birds, bow and his arrow.

Usar continued to punish Gelam until one day when she asked him to clean her hair for head lice. As he was looking for lice he noticed a patch of clay at the back of one of Usar's ears. Gelam said to himself,

“Ah, it was you who was playing these games on me. I'm going to punish you for what you have done to me.”

The next day Gelam pretended to go hunting for birds. Instead he went to cut a tree and carved a dugong out of it. After a few days carving the dugong, he finally finished it. The next day he took the dugong down to the beach

at Gerain and tried it in the water but found it was too light, so he sent the dugong to Mabuaig Island. The next day, he continued on another dugong but found it was too heavy so he sent it off to Badu Island. Then he tried a third time and again he found it off balance, so he sent it off to the mainland. That night while he was sleeping, his father came to him in a dream. In his dream his father showed him a special kind of leaf to find the right tree for his dugong. The next day Gelam went off again and found the tree his father showed him in his dream. He carved a dugong out and tested it in the water. This time it was the right one for him. "*Ena kian ne Gelaman dhangal*" (now this is Gelam's dugong)," he said to himself. He then placed inside it the best fruit and soil from the island and went back home to his mother.

The next day as Usar went fishing on the reef, Gelam went to where he had hidden his dugong. He took his dugong and as he placed it on a rock near the water, he left his nostril print on it. He then jumped in and pushed off the rock and left his footprint behind. Usar, who was walking along the reef edge at Bulbul had a basket full of fish. Gelam swam to her and when she saw the dugong she called out to Gelam to come and catch it. "*Gelam e ngzu kazi ne melagier ulaik e, dhangal senu ngapa kengai a passia walmai emaik e.*" (Gelam my son, where are you? There's a dugong here swimming and spotting near the reef). Gelam again swam towards her and opened the front part of the dugong. Usar saw Gelam in the dugong and he told her that he had found out about her tricks. He told her he was running away. Leaving his mother on the reef edge he then turned away and started swimming towards Naigi, but it was too close to her. This time he swam to Yam, to Yorke and then to Darnley but again from all of these islands he could still see his mother standing there and crying at the edge of the reef. From Darnley, he saw a little island to the east and thought to himself that this must be the right island. After he arrived, he turned around and he couldn't see his mother.

"*Ina lag nghat ngu mudth aimaik*" (this is the place I will make my home) he said.

Gelam lay down next to the little island facing toward the east but the sugerr gub (north-easterly wind) was too strong and was choking him as it rushed

up into his nostrils so he turned around lying southeast and sneezed out two seeds, forming the islands of Dauar and Waier. A stingray who was chased by sharks on the reef east of Mer, swam and found shelter near Gelam and formed Mer. Usar was left standing at the edge of the reef crying for Gelam until the tide came up and covered her. She turned into a rock, which can still be seen today and she is still crying for Gelam. When the tide is low, fresh water flows from the centre of the rock, which are her crying tears.

David Bosun, 2010

James ESELI

Fighter dance headdress

1996

mixed media

Courtesy of Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre Collection

Based on his experiences in the Torres Strait during the Second World War, Eseli choreographed an aeroplane dance, which featured distinctive headdresses portraying wartime aeroplanes. These headdresses continue to be used by contemporary Badu dance troupes. Eseli also makes other dance masks including the innovative crocodile dance mask.

Knowledge of traditional practices and the experience of change and adaptation of Islander people inform Eseli's contemporary dance regalia. Construction of items for dance performance is specific to Torres Strait Islander arts practice. Like Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders have a history of adapting to and accommodating imposed change. Eseli is no exception: his work reflects ingenuity and innovation in adapting to new resources. Eseli's various aeroplane headdresses document the influences on Torres Strait Island life during and since World War II.

James ESELI

Crocodile dance headdress

1996

mixed media

Courtesy of Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre Collection

The crocodile dance is one of many 'story dances' that reinforce the relationship between Islanders and their environment. It brings the crocodile, portrayed by a male dancer, into contact with villagers, played by women holding staves. Both crocodile and villagers act out their roles with stylized movement. The crocodile is alert, searching for prey, and the villagers display exaggerated caution and remain at a safe distance. A third dimension is introduced by the sanderling, a small bird believed to have an association with crocodiles. They are sometimes seen standing on the reptile's back. It frequents sandbanks and tidal flats. Sanderling effigies are placed in various parts on the dancing arena, seemingly in a spectator's role.

Richard HARRY

Sik [Women's Dance machine]

1996

wood, paint, feathers

Private loan

Sik is a female dance machine that originates from Iama. Although a male *sik* is also used on the island, Harry is a creator of the female version. Originally the machine was made of coconut fronds. This lasted until the 70s when the fronds were replaced with manufactured materials such as tin plate, house paint and planks of timber. Since this time the design and materials used in the construction of the female *sik* have evolved. Harry's interpretation is the most recent.

The female *sik* dance machine represents sea spray (or foam) that is blown off the tops of waves during stormy weather. When used in dance performance context (with accompanying song, *sik-o*) it tells of the time when the sea currents around Iama run eastward and the winds blow from the west, resulting in rough seas. The feathers represent the foaming of the water and the star motif in the middle symbolises the morning star. The strength and beauty of this dance lies in the repetition of dancers moving their *siks* in unison.

Ben HODGES

Frenzy

2010

acrylic on canvas

Collection of the artist

With a combination of contemporary Torres Strait motifs and abstract shapes I have achieved my interpretation of the frantic commotion of a fish feeding frenzy. The circular designs show movement of the water, the current and the marine life that inhabits the ocean, the true nature of the sea.

We find the baitfish in clusters with flurries of other larger fish such as Trevally and Queen Fish rounding up and feeding on the bait shoals. It is only a matter of time before the sharks are drawn into this excitement and when this happens it is a sign for us to move on.

Ricardo IDAGI

Girigiri Le (Bird of Paradise Man) – Marou Mimi

2008

turtle shell, cowrie shells, mussel shells, raffia grass, wicker cane, saimi saimi seeds

Courtesy the artist and Vivien Anderson Gallery

Within Idagi's work is the voice of his ancestors, recreating culturally significant artefacts has allowed him to reconnect with the history of the Torres Strait. In his words.... "my ancestors made masks and ornaments from turtle-shell flakes and shells. I have revisited the tools and materials of my ancestors to recreate their messages and stories." Idagi's monumental masks and headdresses, fashioned from turtle-shell, cut feathers, multiple shells, fibre and bamboo, may be one and a half metres tall, communicating his passionate conviction, maintaining truth to materials and honoring the culture.

"I am very keen to initiate a creative art force in the region that uses the existing knowledge of the men and women in their areas of expertise as well as instructing the younger generations in the sourcing of materials ... weaving and binding techniques ... I have a vision to revitalise the original methods and integrity behind Torres Strait Islander culture pre-missionary contact."

Idagi's green sea turtle shell masks provide an insight into a traditional practice that has not been carried out for over a century. Many Islanders have been afraid to revive the old ways for fear that something bad would happen. But Idagi thought that the culture within him was dying anyway so why not make the masks? (Robyn Ferrell).

“The artefacts and cultural traditions of the region inform his art. However, Idagi’s work is not a pastiche of pre-missionary practices, or a nostalgic recreation of the past; rather, he seeks to revitalise what was, on many of the islands, denied to Indigenous inhabitants after European arrival. Idagi also continually questions the gaps in the knowledge of his elders and peers, as well as the cultural practices that have become distorted by Christian ideology.”

“In this work, Idagi has combined two types of ceremonial wear—the hard shell masks and the feathered headdresses called dhoeri—in a modern interpretation of once more-prevalent cultural objects. This combination, or interpretation, of the past is what sets Idagi’s work apart from the work of other Torres Strait Islander artists today.”

Tina Baum

Ricardo Idagi, in conversation with Vivien Anderson Gallery, 2008

References: Tina Baum, Curator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art in artonview, issue 58, winter 2009: Robyn Ferrell, Richardo Idagi, Sor Peklam – From the Shell, Vivian Anderson Gallery, 15 Oct - 8 Nov 2008.

Joey LAIFOO

Solar thonar

2007

linocut printed in black from one block on paper with hand colouring

edition 5 of 35

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Solar Thonar (Turtle mating season), which is the Western Island language of Kala Lagaw Ya, refers to the annual turtle-mating season throughout the Torres Straits. One of the most intriguing aspects of this work is its depiction of the lifecycle of the green turtle, from migration to mating to hatchlings, intertwined with human interaction through the gathering of turtle eggs and seasonal turtle hunting.

Glen MACKIE

Amipuru

1999

linocut printed in black from one block on paper

edition 1 of 4

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

One day when Amipuru of Wagedagam was fishing near Paidai and Tipait, he saw a large pelican swimming in the sea between the islands of Widul and Pururai. He thought it would be a good pet for his children so he decided to catch it.

Amipuru broke off mangrove branches and used them as camouflage as he waded towards the pelican. Despite his camouflage, as he reached the pelican it took flight and rose out of the water. Amipuru managed to grab one of the pelican's legs with one hand and he held on tight.

The pelican flew into the air and then across Mabuiag and out over the passage between Mabuiag and Kuiku Pad (Jervis Reef). All this time Amipuru was holding on for dear life waiting for the pelican to fly over soft ground before he let go.

Eventually the pelican flew over a mud flat near Wagedagam, so Amipuru decided to let go, falling like a stone into the mud where he sank up to his neck. Seeing him fall, the people of Wagedagam tried to dig him out but this was useless. The faster they dug the faster the seawater gushed in. "We can't do anything for him", they said, so it was decided that he would be beheaded. Upon doing this his wife and children wept.

Today, the hole can still be seen on Mabuiag just offshore. The removal of the mud by the people from Wagedagam to save Amipuru is said to have formed the lagoon, Wazegna Dan.

Robert MAST

Totemic cycle

1997

linocut printed in black from one block on paper with kaidaral hand colouring

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

This linocut is representative of the Torres Strait Islander totemic cycle, which stems from a belief system based on religion and myth. Torres Strait Islanders are each issued a totem from the day they are born, which has been passed down through the family and is linked to a clans spiritual belief. Totems are believed to have created the world and provide protection in return for ritual knowledge, it is for this reason that Islanders are forbidden to eat their own totem as it may cause a natural disaster or personal tragedy.

Billy MISSI

Links

2006

linocut printed in black from one block on paper

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

This image is an expression of trade, language and inter-marriage between Naigai Dagam Daudai (Papua New Guinea), Zai Dagam Daudai (Australia) and the Torres Strait Islands.

Trade once flowed throughout the Torres Strait region like a crawling snake leaving its tracks in time and its influence on the islands as we see them today. Our people traded many things between the islands for many reasons, most were to the western province of PNG, as they had bigger trees growing along their rivers to build dugout canoes and a larger land mass with many resources. Traders also came from as far as Cape York Peninsula's East and West coasts. This meant that they had to connect and socialise with the Islanders to gain assistance in navigating through our treacherous waters, speak the language and to help them understand when they'd reach their destination on the PNG coast and vice versa for the Papuans heading to the mainland of Australia. During these connections many skills, processes and knowledge about survival were shared and adopted into our societal ways of living.

Most of the traders were accepted by families through additional kinship, which is why some families on the islands have bloodlines to both Aboriginals and Papuans. This is also why we have a special 'treaty' in place between the Torres Strait and the Western Province of Papua New Guinea.

Since the early 1900's when pearl shells were discovered in this region, people from other ethnic groups (South Sea Islanders, Malaysians, Japanese) have been attracted to the region to work and trade in this industry. This is how the Torres Strait became a multicultural society.

In this artwork, the five vertical wave patterned lines represent the cluster groups affected in the region. The five horizontal patterned lines represent lines of kinship between islands. The two intricate areas on the top and bottom represent Papua New Guinea and Australia. Characters depict what was traded e.g. shells for chest pendants, parts of ceremonies that were adopted etc. The wavy line running horizontally represents the turbulent current that flows through the Straits from the Coral Sea to the Timor and Arafura Seas.

All this is what makes our culture significant, living in the middle of two land-masses and the waterways that link the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean. All the aspects of those movements of so long ago have impacted on our lives and as a result, we are all 'linked' in many ways.

Billy MISSI

Warpiw Naradh

2009

linocut printed in black from one block on paper

Courtesy of Editions Tremblay

Warpiw Naradh is the term used to identify the sharp patterns commonly found on artefacts such as masks, drums and other material culture that is used throughout Zenadh Kes (Torres Strait). It is also used in Papua New Guinea's coastal villages in the Western province when engaging with Islanders during trade practices and visits.

It comes from the language group of Kala Lagaw Ya, which is Western Torres Strait dialect. Coral, shells and other marine inhabitants in and around our beautiful surrounding reefs inspire most of the patterns. These patterns symbolise and signify us as the seafaring people of this region's waterway between the two landmasses – Papua New Guinea to the North and Australia to the South. This image expresses the oral history that has been told and handed down from generation to generation.

We were also taught that the annual changing of the moon had deep cultural significance on activities such as harvesting crops, hunting and gathering or performing ceremonies as a part of our ontological beliefs.

Victor MOTLOP

Seven blind brothers I

2001

linocut print in black from one block on paper

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Seven blind brothers II

2001

linocut print in black from one block on paper with kaidaral hand colouring

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

This legend comes from Moa Island. There are nine main characters in this story. The characters are seven blind brothers, their father's skull and the Dogai (witch).

Seven blind brothers lived with their father. When their father died they kept his skull according to Island custom. Just above the hillside lived the Dogai (witch). Every day the blind brothers set out on their canoe to spear fish on the reef. They all had 'warkai' (feathers) on their heads. The feathers on their heads helped them catch fish. Every time these magic feathers vibrated on their heads it indicated a fish approaching and signaled for them to throw their spears. On their way home, the Dogai played her tricks on the seven brothers by placing floating logs in front of the canoe and quickly stealing their larger fish, leaving only the smaller fish behind. This happened all the time. One particular night the eldest brother had a dream. In his dream a vision of his father came to him and said, "Go to Baban Kupi, you'll see a turtle nest there, dig out the eggs and cook them on hot coals. When the eggs are cooked, place them on leaves and finally smash the eggs on your eyes so you can see, because the Dogai is stealing fish from your canoe".

The next day the eldest brother told his brothers that their father had come to him in a dream and had told them to go to Baban Kupi and follow his demands. So they all set off to Baban Kupi, dug up the turtle eggs and cooked

them. When the eggs were cooked, one after another they smashed the eggs on their eyes. The blind brothers were shocked and amazed that they could see and were no longer blind. After that they set out to the reef. That day they speared more fish than any of the previous trips. On the way back the eldest brother told his brothers to pretend to be blind when the Dogai approached them. As they were about to arrive home the Dogai intercepted them to steal their fish again. Suddenly they all opened their eyes and said,

“You’re the one who always steals our fish and now we will kill you.”

The Dogai replied,

“Good Job!! I stole your fish the whole time you were blind.”

The blind brothers ignored the Dogai and speared her to death. Today you can see at the Bapu area of Moa the form of rocks representing the nine main characters of this story.

Jenny MYE

Woven basket I

1998

plastic strapping tape

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Woven basket II

1998

plastic strapping tape

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Basketry and plaiting were probably more important to Torres Strait Islanders in a practical sense than any other artwork. Textile objects were indispensable to many daily activities, as well as to rituals and ceremonies. Baskets were made to hold fish and crustaceans, fruit and nuts, severed heads, store produce for trade, for placing food in the ground oven, and to carry personal items during daily activities. Preparation of weaving materials, and weaving itself, was designated as women's work. Woven basket 1 and 2 are perfect examples of contemporary Island basketry produced throughout the Torres Strait today. Woven from plastic strapping tape, (which is often used as a substitute for coconut or pandanus fronds) these examples show the influence of South Sea Island textiles and the ability of Torres Strait Islanders to adapt to new materials.

Dennis NONA

Kisai Mari Patan

2009

etching printed from one plate on paper

edition 45

Courtesy of the Australian Art Print Network

Kisai means moon, Mari means spirits, Patan means eat. The title of the print translates as 'spirits eating the moon'.

It is a customary belief in the Torres Strait that the cause of a moon eclipse is a result of spirits eating the moon. When a moon eclipse occurs, the villagers beat drums and make other noises and sing Maril Woneo Kisai Purtai Maig Woneo Kisai, entreating the spirits to stop eating the moon away. Three villagers beating drums are depicted in the image of the moon. The Islander people were very knowledgeable about the influence the moon had on the weather and tidal movements and also about the constellations, which they used extensively as navigational aids.

Dennis NONA

Lagan Wakkimthimin - Spirit of the Catch

2008

laser cut skateboards

Australia Art Print Network loan

Dennis NONA

Baidam Aw Kuik

2009

cast bronze, pearl shell and fibre

Courtesy of Australian Art Print Network

Skulls were the main trading currency used by Torres Strait Islander people with their Papua New Guinean neighbours. These trading skulls were acquired in battle and through raiding parties to other islands and the Australian mainland. Not all skulls were traded, some being used in ceremonies and rituals.

The artist's depiction of the Baidam, or 'shark' constellation in the seven inlaid pearl shell stars, identifies the skull as one that was used for trading. This constellation was the main one used for navigation on the trading routes between the Islands and Papua New Guinea. The Baidam constellation is so called because the seven stars form the outline of a shark, which is delineated, by the nose, dorsal fin, tips of the tail and body. The two figures seen in the canoe are observing Baidam on their journey north.

The nose and eye sockets of the skulls were filled with bees wax. Pearl shell, in the diamond shape shown in the sculpture, was inserted into the wax in the eye sockets. Fiber and other adornments were attached to the skull to enhance its appearance and desirability as a trading item.

Dennis NONA

Sesserae

2005

linocut printed in black ink from one block with kaidaral hand colouring

Courtesy of Editions Tremblay

The Wakaid clan of Badu tells the legend of the Willy Wagtail bird. Sesserae, a young man of Tulu went fishing every morning at low tide. He would often fish on other people's traditional fishing grounds. Where boundary rocks were set by different family clans. Punishment was often given to him in the form of breaking all his spears. One day he began fishing in a particular lagoon and noticed the sea grass had been eaten in large quantities. He thought a very large fish must have eaten it or even perhaps a whale. In the evening he plucked some takarr matua leaves from a bush, and in the ritual way, rubbed them on the skulls of his ama-du (mother) and his baba-du (father). Sesserae lay down beside them and prayed to them for a dream, that he might discover what animal was visiting the lagoon. As he drifted to sleep, he began to hear the delicate scratching noise, like fingernails clicking, inside the skulls. In the dream he asked his parents,

“What is eating the sea grass in the lagoon?”

In the dream, his request was answered,

“Tomorrow at dawn, when you hear the surrka (bush turkey), go up to the small mountain where there is a tableland. You will see a mutluk bird flying around a tree. This is where you will find a wap (harpoon) made from baidam tul wood, an amu (rope) made from cane fibres and six strong poles.”

In the dream Sesserae was shown how to lash together a nath (fishing platform) from the poles and to erect it where the sea grass was being eaten. “In the afternoon, when the tide comes in, don't make a noise until you see the fish and then spear it.”

Sesserae awoke at dawn by the surrka bird as foretold in the dream. He travelled to where his parents had told him and got the wap, amu and poles

and headed for the lagoon, careful not to be seen by anyone else. He built the nath on the lagoon and waited patiently until high tide when he saw a large fish move into the lagoon. Spearing it, the big fish turned out to be a dugong, which no one had ever seen before. Delighted by his marvelous catch, he secretly skinned, butchered and cooked it in different traditional ways, roasting the great chunks of meat in a traditional Kupmari ground oven, baking it over hot embers and drying the rest on poles. Careful not to attract attention, the next week he killed many more dugong and cooked them up. But the neighbouring tribes people became curious about Sessere's nath and the wonderful sweet smell of the large quantity of cooking meat. This was soon brought to the attention of the elders and sorcerers of village Zaum. They sat together and drew up plans to discover what Sesserae was up to.

The sorcerers decided to hide a man inside a constructed dog and to report back. They made the dog out of ewig (bamboo cane) for the bones, coconut fibres for the hair and pigs ribs for the teeth. To test whether their creation was convincing, they sent the dog onto the beach to test it before a flock of seagulls. Without the dog even giving chase, the seagulls squabbled loudly and flew away in fright. The sorcerers were convinced their creation would fool Sesserae and quickly made two more. The three dogs were sent to Sesserae.

They followed him from behind, straggling, and looking hungry. Sesserae fed them some small pieces of smoked dugong meat. Sesserae had only enemies and in need of companionship, he adopted the dogs as his friends. Later, however, the dogs sneaked away to the Zaum sorcerers and told them of his plentiful supply of dugong meat and described the necessary means to catch them. Sesserae was pleased with his new friends and made contact with his ancestral spirits to tell them. His parents warned Sesserae that the dogs were not real dogs and that he was in danger. They told him to kill one with an arrow and that it would reveal that there was really a person inside. The dogs returned again and Sesserae fed them but this time he killed one and found that his parents were telling the truth. The other dogs returned to Zaum and reported what had happened. Warriors were summoned to attack Sesserae. The Zaum warrior Manalbau blew the bu (trumpet conch), gathering his warriors together to attack Sesserae.

Once more, Sesserae, trusting his parents' advice, consulted them as what to do in this difficult situation. He was told to collect white and black clay and to apply it in stripes on his chest. By doing this it would turn him into a willy wagtail. He was told to jump on the warriors' heads and fly away just before being struck by the warrior's club. As predicted, the warriors charged Sesserae, but not before he could paint himself with the clay and chanting and dancing was able to avoid capture by turning into a fast and agile bird. Sesserae landed on each warrior's head and taking the advice of his parents, leaped into the air just before an exacting blow could kill him, until the last of the Zaum warriors decided to get help from Upai. Warriors arrived from Upai, but now Sesserae began to feel very tired and he consulted his parents again.

This time, they told him to do the same routine and fly from one warrior's head to the next until each was killed - but if he should tire, to seek shelter inside the conch shell. Sesserae was attacked by the Upai warriors and just as his parents predicted, he became tired from the fight and retreated to the conch shell. Instead of the shell protecting him, a warrior smashed his hiding place and Sesserae sought refuge in the bush, never to take human form again. Sesserae continues to elude the people of Badu and remains a flighty, cheeky bird that prefers his selfish ways, not sharing with the other islanders.

Brian ROBINSON

Tagai – guardian of the heavens

2007

linocut printed in black from one block on paper

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

The mythology of Tagai, guardian of the heavens, is a central motif for all Torres Strait Islanders. In this print the constellation of Tagai is seen as a figure standing in a canoe with outstretched arms. In his left hand, the Southern Cross, he holds a fishing spear and in his right, a piece of fruit. Traditionally Tagai appeared during the season prior to the monsoon. This was a time of preparation for the wet season, through planting seeds, hunting and gathering materials and trading with nearby islands before the annual rains arrived.

Ceferino SABATINO

Granite church [Hammond Island]

1994

linocut print in black from one block on paper

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

St Joseph's Church on Hammond Island can be seen from the sea upon entering the island port. Father Dixon, a missionary from Palm Island who became the parish priest of Thursday and Hammond Islands from 1951 to 1954, proposed the building of the church. The building of the church commenced in 1959 and was constructed from crushed blue granite rock. The building was completed in December of the same year.

Obery SAMBO

Nam A Beizam Le Op Nog - Headdress

2010

fibreglass, cowrie shells, raffia, lawyer cane

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

This Krar (mask) depicts the spirit of a deceased person, taking form of a beizam (shark) and nam (turtle). Both of these sea creatures are totems of my people, the Merriam Mir language group.

Masks similar to this one have been worn during Malo Bomai (Island God) ceremonies on Mer (Murray Island).

Le op nog stands for a deceased persons face that can be seen through this type of mask.

Obery Sambo

Allson Edrick TABUAI

Warrior dhibal

1999

lawyer cane, commercial bird feathers, cotton twine, paint

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Three types of headdress are found in the Torres Strait region, Dhoeri or Dari, Samu and Dhibal..

This warrior Dhibal is used in warrior victory dances from battles between the marauding Daubai (Papua New Guinea) warriors. These dances, performed upon arrival back to the villages of Saibai, depict fast zigzagging motions with quick shaking of the head. This particular headdress has red tufts of feathers to represent bloodshed during battle and the taking of heads when victory is won.

Wene-wenel Gaugau Mawa

1998

lawyer cane, commercial bird feathers, cotton twine, paint

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Tribal warfare ceased long ago, however it is still a powerful influence in island cultures within dance and performance. The Saibai people, perhaps more than other groups in the Torres Strait, have perpetuated memories of former conflict in dramatic and visually spectacular ways.

Unlike the dhibal, this mask has no identifiable link with a traditional artefact of the Torres Strait and is entirely contemporary in its design and construction. The term Wene-wenel Gaugau Mawa is from the top Western language of Kala Kawaw Ya, which translates to 'very powerful witch doctor mask.' When worn during a performance, this mask transforms the wearer into the witch doctor or sorcerer called Maidelaig, giving them special powers to heal the wounded and bring life back to warriors killed in battle.

Ceril THAIDAY

Mardi Mimi – Eastern Island leader during WWII

1988

etching printed in brown from one plate

edition 1 of 8

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

In December 1941 war was declared between Australia and Japan. Most residents in the Torres Strait were relocated to the mainland and housed in internment camps. The rest of the able bodied men of eligible age, roughly 830 from the outer islands, volunteered to serve in the defense force within some capacity. During this time Thursday Island became the major military headquarters for the Torres Strait, providing a base for mainland Australian and United States forces. In 1942, the Japanese bombed neighboring Horn Island, which housed an airbase used by allies to attack parts of New Guinea.

The defense of Torres Strait and Dutch New Guinea, in which Islanders of the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion (TSLIB) played a significant part, was vitally important in ensuring that northern Australia was not invaded. The TSLIB is the only Indigenous Battalion ever to be formed in our nation's military history.

This work is a tribute to Marou Mimi (1886 – 1968), a Torres Strait nationalist who grew up on Darnley Island. He served as a councilor for the Murray Island Government council for seventeen years. Throughout his years in Government he was committed to achieving full citizenship for the Islanders thus supporting the establishment of the TSLIB to demonstrate that his people deserved greater respect from 'whites.'

Patrick THAIDAY

Comet

19893

wood, paint, tin, twine

Private loan

As their name suggests, dance machines are used in a dance performance context at celebrations such as inter-island cultural festivals, church festivals, weddings, tombstone ceremonies and other important events in the Islander cultural year. Dance machines as cultural objects cannot be separated from this dance performance context, and dance in contemporary Torres Strait society is an important component of cultural life.

Dance machines may be divided into several different classes. The most important distinction is that between male and female types. During the course of the comet dance, the machine is manipulated by the two handles below and represents a comet, which appears only once every seven centuries.

Ken THAIDAY (Snr.)

Clapper (Male dance machine)

2010

wood, paint, feather, fishing line

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Beizam with bait fish

1996

mixed media

Courtesy of Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre

The shark is the most dangerous and feared creature in the ocean. It represents law and order and is something you must be aware of when fishing. The importance of the shark in the seas around the Torres Strait means the use of this type of mask in ceremonial dance is paramount. While this is an example of a contemporary interpretation of traditional masks, it is necessary and appropriate for the maintenance and transmission of the traditional culture to the youth of today.

Alick TIPOTI

Soll

2000

linocut printed in black from one block on paper with hand colouring

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Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Soll is the name of a warrior from Badu. He was well renowned for avenging his father's death against the Madthalaig witch doctors possessing black magic powers.

In this print I have shown Soll being initiated by his elders. This sort of traditional ceremony was practiced before and after battles.

Alick Tipoti

Kowbu Maril - Canoe War Spirits [Skate deck]

2008

laser cut skateboards

Courtesy of Australia Art Print Network

In the Maluiligal language of Zenadh Kes, Kowbu Maril played a very important role in warfare. Warriors in a canoe would call upon their spiritual ancestors for guidance throughout their journey. Each person in the canoe would have their own spiritual figure to protect him. In this print the spiritual figures are hidden above the warriors in the canoe. The rest of the spiritual movements can only be explained in Kala Lagaw Ya (the language of the Western Torres Strait). The laser cut image on the skateboard is a reproduction of the artist's original linocut.

Alick Tipoti

Alick TIPOTI

Wadith, Zigin ar Kusikus

2005

linocut printed in black ink from one block

Collection of Theo Tremblay

Matatia WARRIOR

Mabiag Gathia Ulaik Wapika Haka

2003

linocut printed in black from one block on paper

Cairns Regional Gallery Collection

Andrew WILLAMS

On the lugger

1997

silk-screen print on paper

Courtesy of the artist

This print is taken from a photograph of my grandfather's lugger. It shows how fresh meat was kept and maintained over long trips on the pearling luggers. They would catch a turtle and flip it onto its shell (carapace), keeping it alive until it was needed for food.