

**CAIRNS
ART
GALLERY**

SEGAR PASSI
Meriba Ged A Gur
(Our Land and Sea)

8 Oct–11 Dec 2022

Artwork labels

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All Segar Passi's paintings have meaning. Details within them are included for a reason and with the purpose of passing on to future generations the history and cultural knowledge of Zenadth Kes (Torres Strait).

Two historically significant events are referenced in a number of Passi's works - Captain Cook's proclamation in 1770 that Australia and the Torres Strait Islands were *terra nullius*, land belonging to no-one, and *The Coming of the Light*, when London missionaries arrived on Erub in 1871, bringing Christianity to the Torres Strait.

While adopting Christianity, many of the traditional customs and practices, such as Malo's law, have continued alongside Christian belief systems. Malo's law defines family clan boundaries of the land and sea, trespass laws, and belief system for cultural, social, and moral order.

Malo tag mauki mauki (Malo keeps his hands to himself; he does not touch what is not his); Teter mauki mauki (He does not permit his feet to carry him towards another's property).

Under the internationally recognised law of *terra nullius*, Torres Strait islands and the entire eastern seaboard of Australia were claimed for the King of England. In one fell swoop Australia's First Nations people were stripped of their land rights, culture and laws which had existed for thousands of years. It was not until 1992 that Mer Elder Eddie Koiki Mabo and the Mer Plaintiff's succeeded in overturning it in the High Court of Australia through irrefutable proof of their land and sea ownership, evidenced by their continued practise of Malo's law.

Passi believes passionately in the rights of the people of Mer to own, care for, live from and on their land and waterways. In his words, 'From our traditional ancestors' time until now, in Meriam Mir, we say '*kara ged a kara gur*' - our land and sea including the reefs, they are ours and no one has the right to take them away from us'.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Mam edge

2012

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchased by Cairns Regional Gallery, 2012

Passi created small watercolour paintings to educate young Meriam students about weather patterns. This knowledge was taught to Passi by his Elders and was used to understand boating conditions and the best times to plant and to fish. Passi also used these paintings to explain important cultural ceremonies, including those for the passing of a loved one. From these small instructive watercolours the artist produced a body of larger paintings relating to weather patterns.

Duane Hamacher's 2022 book, *The First Astronomers: How Indigenous Elders read the stars*, records information provided by Passi about how to read the sun, stars, clouds, and moon and how, in the words of the artist, 'the clouds and weather, the land and sea, the animals and plants... all link to the Sun, Moon and stars. Everything is related. Everything is connected.'

'Red sky at night' translated in Meriam language is

Mam Edge. Mam Edge tells Meriam people that the weather will be clear to go out fishing in the morning.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Totobem ide sis temarki

2012

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchased by Cairns Regional Gallery, 2012

The clouds in this painting appear in the north like a sunray during the south-easterly wind season. They tell us that the wind will soon change direction from the south-east to the north.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Stima kor kor

2012

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchased by Cairns Regional Gallery, 2012

The vibrant blues in this painting, highlight a specific weather pattern that marks an important time in the changing seasons of the islands. The painting shows a particular cloud that appears to the south and looks like the stern of a ship. Passi explains that, in Meriam language, 'we say *stima kor kor*. When we see this cloud pointing towards the west it tells us that the wind will soon be coming from the west. This cloud always appears in the month of December.'

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Koob

2012

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchased by Cairns Regional Gallery, 2012

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Fruit dove (Dibadiba)

2014

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Lowtide

2014

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Luggers

2014

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Model canoe racing

2014

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Dauar

2014

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Dauar Island is one of the three islands in the Murray Islands Group which also include Mer (Murray), and Waier. The island of Dauar holds much significance and sentimental value for Passi, as he went to school there when he was five years old, and it was there that he discovered his artistic talent and began a lifetime of love for painting. Dauar was once inhabited by the Dauareb tribe to which Passi belongs.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Turtles

2014

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Unity and strength

2012

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchased with the assistance of the Cairns Regional Gallery Foundation, 2014

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Woven strong

2012

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchased with the assistance of the Cairns Regional Gallery Foundation, 2014

In this painting we see a Meriam woman seated on a green banana leaf and wearing a pink *Ailan* dress with a *Mautep* (hibiscus) flower in her hair, while weaving a basket made from green coconut leaves. This style of dress takes us back in time. To maintain culture and connect us to the past, this style of dress is often worn today for traditional performances or at cultural events.

The painting is an instructive one. Rather than presenting a communal scene of women and children sharing time together weaving and telling stories, Passi presents a solitary woman, and he directs our attention to the weaving technique she is using to make a particular style of basket. The *Bozepei* (basket) is made for carrying garden crops from the hilltops where they are grown, down to the villages. Through this image Passi explains the importance of basket weaving,

The creation of baskets tells a very important story, especially the weaving. It tells us that we all must weave our way in life in order to gain strength to carry out whatever task is laid upon us. So we, like the basket, will satisfy the needs of others.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

A young Murray Island man in a mask

1990

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Gift of David Everist, 2019

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Feast

2013

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Purchased with the assistance of the Cairns Regional Gallery Foundation, 2014

A recurrent theme in many of Passi's paintings is that of daily *Ailan* (Island) life. In these paintings he includes images of families at work in the gardens, sharing a feast, basket weaving, diving on the reef, model canoe racing, or just children at play.

Feast 2013, celebrates the ritual of *lwer* (food) - how it is prepared and presented, and how brings families together in times of joy, sorrow, celebration, and for cultural events.

Passi sets the scene for the preparation of the food - the family all gathered around; each has a role to play. The man seated in the middle is scraping coconut for the milk that will be used in various dishes, including *Sop sop*, a dish that combines yam, sweet potato and pumpkin wrapped in banana leaves and bush rope. In the background another man is preparing the banana leaf by gently scorching it with fire.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled (Sea and bird creatures)

2017

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Commissioned by Cairns Art Gallery, 2017-18

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Kerkar meb 1

Kerkar meb 2

2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

In *Kerkar meb 1 and 2*, the positioning of the new moon and movement of the waves forecast the strength of winds on the following day.

Kerkar meb 1 shows how, when the water is rough and the new moon is positioned in a particular way, the wind will die down the next day and it will be fine weather. While in *Kerkar meb 2*, the weather is calm and the moon is slanted, which forecasts that the wind will start to rise the next day.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Lidlid

2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Lidlid is the name for the majestic clouds that predict where the wind will be blowing the next day. Appearing in December and January they usually shift direction from west to north-west and back. If they appear in the north-west in the evening, the wind will be blowing in that direction the following day.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Mi kes

2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Mi kes is a cloud that warns of impending sad news. When seen in the north or the south it points to sad news coming from that direction. *Mi kes* is always seen in the evenings, when the sun is about to set.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Dad

2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

The cloud formations in this painting appear at night. They indicate that on the next day it will be favourable conditions to hunt turtles or collect their eggs.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Study for 'Koob'

2010

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Purchased 2011

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Study for 'Deum tepki'

2010

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Purchased 2011

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Study for 'Ap gegur'

2010

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Purchased 2011

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

- a. ***Study for 'Ap gegur'***
- b. ***Study for 'Irmerira baz'***
- c. ***Study for 'Dad'***
- d. ***Study for 'Mi kes'***
- e. ***Study for 'Kerkar meb 1'***
- f. ***Study for 'Lidlid'***
- g. ***Study for 'Deum tepki'***
- h. ***Study for 'Kerkar meb 2'***
- i. ***Study for 'Koob'***

2010

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Purchased 2011

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Passi created the 'studies' as part of a commission for a major exhibition at Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA). The process that Passi used to create the works is explained by Diane Moon, curator, QAGOMA, who visited Passi on Mer to commission the works:

Waiting for a clear direction to evolve, one afternoon I noticed a set of faded, laminated postcard-sized images he'd been using to educate Mer primary school children in lectures on culture, art and history that generally occurred on regular Culture Days. These modest educational images were to be the catalyst for the paintings Segar made for the exhibition that were acquired for the Gallery's Collection. They were also the 'tools' that Segar used to impart cultural knowledge to children on the island. Back home in Brisbane, it was not long before a set of ten postcard-sized images arrived by post at the Gallery. We were delighted with the concept Segar presented and the commission advanced.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Study for 'Irmerira baz'

2010

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Purchased 2011

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Birds of Murray Island number 95 to 106

1968

watercolour on paper

Courtesy of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

Passi began his artistic career by drawing and painting nature. As a child, he had a love of drawing fish, birds and plants. After his mother brought him the watercolour set from Thursday Island as a child, he observed and painted his surroundings practising and perfecting his skills.

In the 1950s, 60s and early 70s, Margaret Lawrie, a teacher with a passion for the history, languages, and cultures of the Torres Strait, visited a number of island communities, including Mer. It was on one of these trips that she met Passi. Struck by the simple beauty and exquisite detail and accuracy of Passi's small watercolour paintings that that he used to impart island knowledge, law and culture to young children. Lawrie guided Passi to create watercolours of Mer's birds and marine life and the result was a body of more than 135 works comprising a large number of exquisitely detailed watercolours, together with several pencil drawings, and portraits of children. These, and other drawings by Islander artists, were reproduced in *Myths and Legends of Torres Strait* (1970), and the children's book *Tales from Torres Strait* (1972). The original paintings are held in the Margaret Lawrie Collection at the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, and are included in UNESCO's *Australian Memory of the World Register*. Passi is the only surviving artist from the group commissioned by Lawrie, and the collection in the State Library is the largest and most important holding of his works.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Birds of Murray Island number 107 to 117

1968

watercolour on paper

Courtesy of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Birds of Murray Island number 118 to 125

1968

watercolour on paper

Courtesy of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Birds of Murray Island number 126 to 135

1968

watercolour on paper

Courtesy of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Torres Strait Pigeon eating the Fruit of the Wild Plum

1968

watercolour on paper

Courtesy of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

number 137 Bird and Fishes of Murray Island

1968

watercolour on paper

Courtesy of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Segar Passi digital story

2009

single channel video, sound, 4.03 mins

Courtesy of the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Actions Speaks Louder Than Words

2016

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of Gab Titui Cultural Centre

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Dopem and the Mosquitoes

2017

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of Gab Titui Cultural Centre

According to the legend, some girls from Zomered village on Mer loved to go out fishing and would prepare their food and place it in the *Amei* (earth oven). However, when they returned their food would be gone. This happened a few times so the girls decided one of them would stay behind, in the form of a *Noreb ti* (sunbird), to catch the thief. She saw the man, Dopem, creep to the *Amei* and steal the food, and the next day all the girls didn't go fishing so that they could catch Dopem, kill him, and throw him into the sea. After his body kept washing ashore, they took him and buried him in higher ground which turned to stone. The girls went home to Zomered and changed into mosquitoes and went to live in a shady, damp place called Lag Kop.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Red Eye Pearling Lugger Fleet

2018

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of Gab Titui Cultural Centre

Due to the limited employment opportunities back in the 1950s and 60s, most young men had to sign onto lugger boats. Passi himself used to dive for trochus shell, and in his early twenties he was a crew member of the lugger, Adriana. He recalls how hard life was back then because the luggers were not motorised, and they would have to spend the whole day diving.

In the painting Passi deliberately positions the viewer on the deck of the lugger, looking out to other vessels in the fleet that are anchored in calm waters with their tenders attached. It is early in the morning, and they are preparing to set sail. All the details are meticulously recorded, including the type of clouds in the sky and the gentle sea swell. By positioning the viewer within the scene, Passi brings the scene to life, thereby imparting important knowledge of sea and weather patterns that are all part of life on the islands.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Mer

2019

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2020

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Torres Strait pigeon in Wongi tree

2004

synthetic polymer paint on masonite

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

The Torres Strait Pigeon or *Deumer* is an important symbol for Torres Strait Islanders, not only as a representation of a bird endemic to the Torres Strait, but also as a symbol of Christianity and a reference to the dove from the biblical Noah's Ark.

These paintings of the Torres Strait Pigeon hold particular importance because the *Deumer* is sitting in a Wongai tree. Wongai is a wild fruit plum that grows in the Torres Strait and, according to legend, once you eat a Wongai you will always return to the Torres Strait.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Flying Torres Strait pigeon

2008

synthetic polymer paint on canvas board

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2016

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Gelam and Atwer

2008

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

Gelam and Atwer is the story about Atwer who is about to spear her son Gelam who has taken on the form of a dugong. Gelam reveals himself to his mother and, because she scared him too many times, he leaves her and the island of Moa and travels to different islands. Atwer was grief stricken and stood on the reef and watched her son disappear, crying continually, not moving until the high tide enveloped her. Gelam finally settled at Mer. Lying down beside the island and facing south-east he spat out two seeds which became the islands of Dauar and Waier. He also threw out soil and seeds he had brought from Moa, and which made Mer a rich and great island. This done, he changed into a hill which can be seen on the island, and which is called Gelam.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2006

synthetic polymer paint on canvas board

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2006

synthetic polymer paint on canvas board

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2006

synthetic polymer paint on canvas board

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2016

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2015

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2015

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Kenny Bedford

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Our land and sea rights

2012

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, New South Wales

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2016

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, New South Wales

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Kobir (silent people)

2014

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, New South Wales

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Self portrait

2008

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection of the artist

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Totobem

2015

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Irmerira baz

2015

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

United we stand, divided we fall

2007

synthetic polymer paint on paper

Private Collection, Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2016

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Gurlegiz – maluw mabaygal

2015

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Queensland

In this painting we see young men diving on the reef for trochus shells. Each boat has a few divers on board to help fill the catch. Passi recalls that, in the past, there were not many opportunities for Islanders to earn a living and there was only limited Government support. So, while girls remained at home to look after their parents and grandparents, many young men would gain employment on lugger boats, diving for pearl, trochus shells, and beche-de-mer.

In this painting Passi has placed himself wearing a diving mask in the left of the painting Passi presents a solitary woman, and he directs our attention to the weaving technique she is using to make a particular style of basket. based on his memories of diving as a young man.

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Underwater

2014

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Children and turtle

2013

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Queensland

Segar PASSI

Meriam Mir, Dauareb people
Born Dauar, Torres Strait, Queensland, 1942

Untitled

2004

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private Collection, Queensland