



SEGAR PASSI
BAKEI

1960s TO THE PRESENT

CAIRNS
REGIONAL
GALLERY



Segar Passi at work, Mer (Murray Island), 2014
Photograph courtesy of Lee Wilkes

COVER

Mam Edge, 2012
acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2012

SEGAR PASSI BAKEI

1960s TO THE PRESENT

EXHIBITION DATES

11 July - 21 September 2014

Dedicated to the Blair family, in memory of Heather Blair and her significant contribution to the Gallery as an early supporter and volunteer.

CAIRNS REGIONAL GALLERY





Daur, 2014
acrylic on canvas
70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

The *Segar Passi: Bakei* exhibition at Cairns Regional Gallery is the first-ever solo exhibition of a significant senior artist whose world of intricate cultural knowledge first came to light around fifty years ago through the work of respected anthropologist, Margaret Lawrie.

The distinctive painting and drawing skills of Segar Passi, who is entirely self-taught, reflect his rigorous observation of the natural world and island life on Mer in the eastern Torres Strait. Cultural knowledge derived from generations of transmission is shared by Passi through his art, while his constant community service speaks of an Elder generous with his knowledge and wisdom.

The exhibition includes ten works recently commissioned by the Gallery for its permanent collection and a small selection of early watercolours from the State Library of Queensland's Margaret Lawrie Collection, that demonstrate the artist's enduring interest in rendering his people, land and culture for posterity.

Cairns Regional Gallery is very proud to host *Segar Passi: Bakei* and we thank Segar for his generous support of this exhibition. We hope audiences will be enriched by his knowledge, vision and life-long achievement.

Andrea May Churcher,
Director, Cairns Regional Gallery

FOREWORD

Mer (Murray Island), located some two hundred kilometres north-east of Cape York, is the most easterly island in the Torres Strait. Surrounded by crystal-clear waters and abundant sea life, it is a place where migrating birds stop to rest and turtles nest on the shore. Mer is the home of the senior Torres Strait artist Segar Passi (b. 1942).

Segar Passi: Bakei – 1960s to the Present brings together a large selection of Passi's paintings, spanning the period 1968–2014. Although Passi has been making art for over sixty years, *Segar Passi: Bakei* is the first-ever major exhibition of his work – only now is he receiving the recognition he so richly deserves as an artist.

Passi has spent his life painting what he knows and is close to his heart. That is his island home and his culture: the stories, traditions and lifestyle of the Meriam people; Mer's flora and fauna; and the waters of the Torres Strait. Passi describes himself as a self-taught artist: 'I am essentially

self-taught ... From very early in my childhood I possessed a natural ability, and a deep desire, to express myself through my painting'.¹

Passi made his first drawings at primary school. He realised that he had artistic talent when 'in art class my fellow students would pass me their slates and ask me to complete their art class assignments'.² He was five or six at the time and his family was living on Dauar, one of the three islands in the Mer group. The Meriam Mir word *bakei*, which forms part of the name of this exhibition, refers to a wind associated with Dauar, the place where Passi discovered his artistic gift.³

Commercially prepared art materials were not readily available in the Torres Strait Islands in the late 1940s and early 1950s but, back on Mer, Passi proved his determination to paint, as well as his resourcefulness and ingenuity, by crushing different-coloured stones to produce pigments and then mixing these with sea water.⁴ Carrying his colours in clamshells, and equipped with dried pandanus fruit (from which to make brushes), he would go in search of large, flat rocks that he could use as painting surfaces.⁵

Passi was able to give his work more permanence after his mother purchased some watercolours for him on Waiben (Thursday Island).⁶ The young artist would sit and paint for hours, capturing in watercolour the beauty of Mer's birds, fish and flowers. His early subject matter also reflected a fascination with luggers and other boats, and some of his imagery paid tribute to his favourite comic book hero, Superman.

SEGAR PASSI



Fishes of Murray Island number 76 to 80, 1968
 watercolour on paper
 267 x 377cm
 TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands Material
 John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
 Image number TR1791-306v000r001



Fishes of Murray Island number 84 to 88, 1968
 watercolour on paper
 267 x 377cm
 TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands Material
 John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
 Image number TR1791-308v000r001



95.



96.



97.



101.



102.



100.



98.



99.



106.



103.



104.



105.

SEGAR PASSI 20-2-68

Birds of Murray Island 1968
watercolour on paper
267 x 377cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands Material
John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-310v000r001

When Passi was in his twenties, Margaret Lawrie, a teacher who had become an advocate for the Torres Strait Islands and their culture, discovered his talent.

In the early 1960s, Lawrie had been asked by the Queensland Government to report on the health needs of children in Indigenous communities in Cape York and the Torres Strait. In the course of visits she subsequently made to the Torres Strait, she became fascinated with the culture of the region. When local people invited her to record their stories and genealogies so that they would not be lost to future generations, Lawrie obtained a tape recorder and then used it to record dozens of stories and genealogies from throughout the Strait. Beginning in 1964, Lawrie's project would take nine years to complete.

As it unfolded, the project acquired a visual component: 'At some islands, artists chose to help in the collection of their myths and legends by illustrating them with water-colours or in pencil or ink'.⁷ One of the artists to work with Lawrie was Segar Passi, whom she met on Mer in 1967 or 1968.⁸ She was introduced to Passi by his uncle George Passi, an elder deeply committed to preserving his family's stories.

With Lawrie guiding him in what to paint and draw, Segar Passi, with great enthusiasm, took to the task of depicting Mer's birds and marine life and giving visual form to stories that had been passed down to him. The result was a body of work comprising a large number of watercolours, together with several pencil drawings (including

some finely rendered portraits of children). The watercolours were primarily studies of fish and of birds, characterised by exquisite colouration and finely observed details and encompassing images of more than 135 individual species.

The works produced by Passi for Margaret Lawrie's project now form part of the Margaret Lawrie Collection, which is held in the John Oxley Library at the State Library of Queensland and is on UNESCO's Australian Memory of the World Register. In the early 1970s, many of the paintings and drawings made by the artists who had contributed to Lawrie's project (Passi is the last surviving artist of the group) featured as illustrations in two publications: the landmark *Myths and Legends of Torres Strait* (1970) and the children's book *Tales from Torres Strait* (1972). Years later, circa the late 1980s, Passi illustrated 'Gair Tonar Ad: Adhiw Garwoeydhamayzinga' (A Collection of Stories), another compilation of Torres Strait stories for children.⁹



Gelam and Atwer, 2008
acrylic on canvas
50 x 60cm
Collection: Kenny Bedford



Atwer trying to spear Gelam with her pointed stick, 1972
watercolour on paper, 266 x 367cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands Material
John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-330v000r001



Torres Strait Pigeon in Wongi tree, 2004
acrylic on masonite
49.5 x 51.7cm
Collection: Kenny Bedford



Flying Torres Strait Pigeon, 2008
acrylic on canvas board
35 x 45cm
Collection: Kenny Bedford



Totobem ide sis temark, 2012
acrylic on canvas
70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2012

One of Passi's watercolours for the Lawrie project shows a scene from a narrative that has great significance for the people of Mer: the story of Gelam, creator of dugong. Gelam was a young man from the island of Moa. To escape his mother, Atwer, who had been playing frightening tricks on him, Gelam carved a dugong from the wood of a bloodwood tree and then put to sea in the dugong, travelling from Moa to Mer. Alongside Mer, Gelam lay down, facing south-west; he then dispersed the plants, seeds and soil that he had brought with him from his home island, and he became a hill. The fertility of the soil on Mer is attributed to Gelam. Passi has revisited the Gelam story many times in his paintings, and this exhibition includes, in addition to *Atwer trying to spear Gelam with her pointed stick*, 1972, the artist's 2008 depiction of *Atwer attacking Gelam's dugong*.



Deum tepki, 2011
synthetic polymer paint on paper
70 x 100cm
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best
through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Passi's passion for making art has never dissipated. In 1998, in recognition of the significance of his work, Cairns Regional Gallery included two of his watercolours in the historic exhibition *Ilan Pasin (This Is Our Way): Torres Strait Art*, which toured to art galleries throughout Australia.

Now in his seventies, Passi continues to paint; today he works mainly with acrylics, on paper or canvas.¹⁰ In 2010 he was commissioned by the Queensland Art Gallery to produce ten paintings for the Gallery's *Land, Sea and Sky: Contemporary Art of the Torres Strait Islands* exhibition. The resulting series of works was themed around cloud formations – referencing knowledge traditionally used by Torres Strait Islanders in reading and predicting weather – and was indirectly inspired by an incident in 2006 where three Islander men, whose dinghy had been blown off course by Cyclone Monica, were stranded at sea for twenty-two days.

Although the three were found alive, Passi believes that the whole incident could have been avoided through the teaching of cultural knowledge relating to the reading of cloud patterns. As an elder in his community, he teaches art and cultural lore to students at Mer's primary school, and for some years he has been using small 'cloud paintings' as a means of communicating knowledge about clouds to the children. He wants to instil in the younger generation of Islanders the cultural tradition of turning to the sky and reading the clouds prior to any trip to sea, in order to ensure a safe return and, for fishermen, a successful catch.



Lidlid, 2011
synthetic polymer paint on paper
70 x 100cm
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best
through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery



Stima kor kor, 2012
acrylic on canvas
70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2012

In 2012, Passi made four paintings for Cairns Regional Gallery, and all are included in this exhibition. The main compositional elements in these works – remarkable for their bold immediacy and the intensity of their saturated colours – are cloud formations familiar to the people of Mer. The sunset clouds in *Mam edge* announce clear weather and optimum fishing conditions; *Totobem ide sis temark* and *Stima kor kor* show clouds that signal changes in wind conditions; and the storm cloud in *Koob* warns of monsoonal rains.

The most recent works in the exhibition show aspects of everyday life on Mer. The subjects of these pictures, in which clouds, the beach and the sea remain key compositional elements, range from the passing of cultural knowledge from older Islanders to the young, as in *Our culture is important*, 2013, to activities such as food preparation, traditional basket weaving, and play (in *Children and turtle*, 2013, a young man gently rides a sleepy turtle on the beach as three of his friends look on).

To date, very little has been written about Segar Passi's art, although the recent publication *The Torres Strait Islands*, produced to accompany a series of exhibitions and cultural events held in Brisbane in 2011 (including the *Land, Sea and Sky* exhibition), contains two essays that reflect on aspects of Passi's work. Diane Moon discusses the paintings commissioned from the artist in 2010 by the Queensland Art Gallery, and Tom Mosby focuses on the watercolours and drawings

that Passi and his fellow Torres Strait Islander artists contributed to Margaret Lawrie's research project.¹²

Mosby addresses the important question of whether or not the artworks in the Margaret Lawrie Collection should be regarded as examples of 'naive realism', and his conclusion is that they should not. While the artists who were involved with Lawrie's project, Passi included, were self-taught, and being self-taught is a defining characteristic of the 'naive' artist, Mosby argues that the term naive realism 'fails to capture the natural ability exhibited by artists such as Segar Passi ... Although there is an incredible richness and depth in each of the 64 watercolours, the fish and bird studies by Passi are exemplary works that, arguably, test the "naive realism" characterisation of the works of his contemporaries'.¹³

Mosby's argument can readily be applied to Passi's later works. Many of the artist's recent paintings have features that could be considered typical of naive art: bright colours, simplified forms and occasional departures from 'naturalistic' perspective and scale. Yet, because these pictures also attest to Passi's skill as a draughtsman, to describe them as 'naive' is again problematic.¹⁴



Our culture is important, 2012
acrylic on canvas
70 x 100cm
Private Collection



Feast, 2013
acrylic on canvas
60.5 x 76cm
Collection: the artist



Unity and Strength, 2012
acrylic on canvas
50.5 x 76cm
Collection: the artist



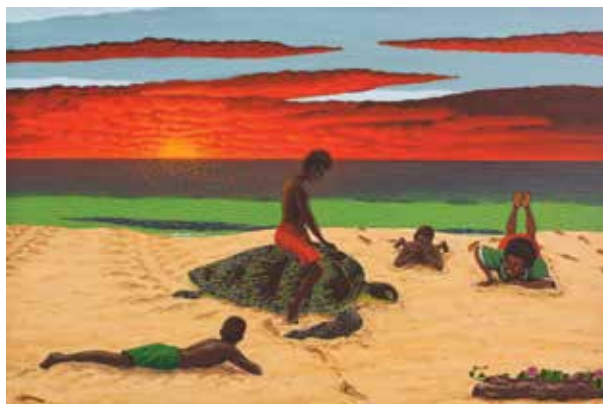
Woven strong, 2012
acrylic on canvas
50.8 x 76cm
Collection: the artist

Although Passi's visual style has changed quite dramatically over the years, it has always been distinctive. The watercolours that Passi contributed to Margaret Lawrie's project are unlike any of the other watercolours in the Margaret Lawrie Collection, and his recent paintings are unlike those of any other present-day Torres Strait artist. Highly regarded as contemporary artworks, Passi's paintings can be seen to represent a generational link between the carved and incised sculptures of pre-contact Torres Strait Islander artists and the works being made today by Torres Strait artists who have trained at Cairns TAFE and other institutions, and are part of what Mosby calls a 'distinctive contemporary mark-making tradition'.¹⁵

A proud Islander and an active member of his community, Passi has held nearly every conceivable role on Mer – he has been a council clerk, a minute taker for the court, a police sergeant and a teacher.¹⁶ A devout Christian, he has undertaken religious studies. And he has been a trochus shell diver and a fisherman. He is also a custodian of Mer's culture and history and is keenly aware of his island's historical significance as the home of Eddie Mabo (a close relative of the artist's, by marriage). It was Mabo who, in an epic legal struggle, succeeded in having *terra nullius* – the legal fiction that Australia was uninhabited prior to European settlement – overturned by the High Court of Australia. In 2012, Passi won the Gab Titui Indigenous Art Award with *Native title: Our land and sea rights*, a work inspired by the Mabo case and by Torres Strait Islanders' continuing battle for exclusive sea rights.

Segar Passi is an artist whose practice reflects a deep engagement with the history, cultural traditions and flora and fauna of the Torres Strait Islands, while also identifying him as a significant contemporary Australian painter with a unique and important voice. The works in this exhibition reveal not only a truly original artistic vision but also the beauty that is Mer, and the richness and vitality of the living culture of Passi's island home.

Janette Laver
Exhibition curator



Children and turtle, 2013
acrylic on canvas
51 x 75.5cm
Private collection



Turtles, 2014
acrylic on canvas
70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014



Model canoe racing, 2014
acrylic on canvas
70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

- 1 Segar Passi, in *Segar Passi*, video, State Library of Queensland, Brisbane, 2009, viewed 27 May 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/10462/deriv/194417>.
- 2 Passi, in *Segar Passi*, video.
- 3 Segar Passi, interview with the author, Mer, 6 & 7 November 2013.
- 4 Passi, in *Segar Passi*, video.
- 5 Passi, interview.
- 6 Passi, in Segar Passi, video.
- 7 Margaret Lawrie, introduction, in Margaret Lawrie (comp. & trans.), *Myths and Legends of Torres Strait*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1970, p. xxi.
- 8 See Edith Lawrie, in *Meriba Gidhal: Torres Strait Island Treasures of the Margaret Lawrie Collection* (exh. brochure), State Library of Queensland, Brisbane, 2009, unpag.
- 9 Published informally, 'Gair Tonar Ad' contains a collection of stories compiled by Travis Teske.
- 10 Locating paintings by Passi from the period 1970–2000 has proved difficult. Very few of these works remain on Mer today, as most were acquired by visitors to (or temporary residents of) the island and are now held in private collections around Australia; unfortunately, records of contact details for the majority of purchasers of the works have not survived.
- 11 Diane Moon, 'Zenadh-Kes: People of the Land, Sea and Sky', in *The Torres Strait Islands*, Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2011, pp. 33–5, 37.
- 12 Tom Mosby, 'Myths and Legends: The Margaret Lawrie Works on Paper Collection', in *The Torres Strait Islands*, pp. 138–95.
- 13 *ibid.*, pp. 140–4. Mosby's view is a reassessment of the view he expressed in 1998 when, referring to the watercolours in the Margaret Lawrie Collection, he wrote: 'These early two-dimensional works ... showed, for the first time, Islanders working within a Western art tradition. These works remain one of the largest collections of early Torres Strait art to reflect a distinct naïve realism' ('Torres Strait Islander Art and Artists', in *Ilan Pasin (This Is Our Way): Torres Strait Art* (exh. cat.), Cairns Regional Gallery, Cairns, Qld, 1998, p. 96).
- 14 Mosby makes the point that the term *naïve* can be seen to be inappropriate when used to describe Indigenous art:
Some negative associations advocate a move away from the word 'naïve'; for example, its association with the term 'primitive' and with underdeveloped consciousness and arrested development is reflected in what is seen conventionally as defective anatomy and a lack of perspective on subject matter. More generally, the term is considered politically incorrect, especially when used in the Indigenous context, as it misrepresents the degree of sophistication inherent in conceptual and spatial thinking. ('Myths and Legends', p. 140)
- 15 Mosby, 'Myths and Legends', p. 144.
- 16 Passi, interview

NOTES

Birds of Murray Island, 1968

watercolour on paper, 267 x 377cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands
Material, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-310v000r001

Fishes of Murray Island number 11 to 18, 1968

watercolour on paper, 266 x 367cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands
Material, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-295v000r001

Fishes of Murray Island number 26 to 29, 1968

watercolour on paper, 266 x 367cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands
Material, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-297v000r001

Fishes of Murray Island number 30 to 36, 1968

watercolour on paper, 266 x 367cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands
Material, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-298v000r001

Fishes of Murray Island number 76 to 80, 1968

watercolour on paper, 267 x 377cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands
Material, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-306v000r001

Fishes of Murray Island number 81 to 83, 1968

watercolour on paper, 266 x 367cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands
Material, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-307v000r001

Fishes of Murray Island number 84 to 88, 1968

watercolour on paper, 267 x 377cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands
Material, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-308v000r001

Atwer trying to spear Gelam with her pointed stick, 1972

watercolour on paper, 266 x 367cm
TR 1791, Margaret Lawrie Collection of Torres Strait Islands
Material, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland
Image number TR1791-330v000r001

Torres Strait Pigeon in Wongi tree, 2004

acrylic on masonite, 49.5 x 51.7cm
Collection: Kenny Bedford

Flying Torres Strait Pigeon, 2008

acrylic on canvas board, 35 x 45cm
Collection: Kenny Bedford

Gelam and Atwer, 2008

acrylic on canvas, 50 x 60cm
Collection: Kenny Bedford

Self portrait, 2008

acrylic on canvas, 51 x 40.5
Collection: the artist

Kerkar meb 1, 2010

synthetic polymer paint on paper, 70 x 100cm
Acc. 2011.352.003
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Irmerira baz, 2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper, 70 x 100cm
Acc. 2011.049.007
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

LIST OF WORKS

Kerkar meb 2, 2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper, 70 x 100cm
Acc. 2011.352.004
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Mi kes, 2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper, 70 x 100cm
Acc. 2011.049.009
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Dad, 2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper, 70 x 100cm
Acc. 2011.049.010
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Ap gegur, 2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper, 70 x 100cm
Acc. 2011.049.006
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Deum tepki, 2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper, 70 x 100cm
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Lidlid, 2011

synthetic polymer paint on paper, 70 x 100cm
Purchased 2011 with funds from Anne Best through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
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Mam Edge, 2012

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2012

Totobem ide sis temark, 2012

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2012

Stima kor kor, 2012

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2012

Koob, 2012

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2012

Our land and sea rights, 2012

acrylic on canvas, 60.5 x 121.5cm
Collection: Mary Mills

Our culture is important, 2012

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Private Collection

Unity and Strength, 2012

acrylic on canvas, 50.5 x 76cm
Collection: the artist

Woven strong, 2012

acrylic on canvas, 50.8 x 76cm
Collection: the artist

Children and turtle, 2013

acrylic on canvas, 51 x 76.5cm
Private collection

Feast, 2013

acrylic on canvas, 60.5 x 76cm
Collection: the artist

Dauar, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection.
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Turtles, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Model canoe racing, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Fruit-Dove (Dibadiba), 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Luggers, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Low tide, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Cairns Regional Gallery Collection
Gift of the Blair family in memory of Heather Blair, 2014

Fishing, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Collection: the artist

Symbol of peace, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Collection: the artist

Kobir (silent people), 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Collection: the artist

Underwater, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100cm
Collection: the artist

A story from the Almond leaf, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 121.5 x 607
Collection: the artist

Seuriseuri, 2014

acrylic on canvas, 75.5 x 610
Collection: the artist

Exhibition dates

11 July – 21 September 2014

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Mary Mills
Tom Mosby



SEGAR PASSI, 2014
Photograph courtesy of Lee Wilkes

