

CAIRNS ART GALLERY

TOMMY PAU

Ilan Oman

ROOM BROCHURE



Ilan Oman has been supported through a Cairns RSL Club
Artist Fellowship Award

Blooming flowers (Red, Blue, Green and Yellow) 2023

vinylcut print with hand-colouring
Collection of the artist

The *Blooming Flowers* series is based on the names of two sisters, Imermer and Kekmermer, who are mentioned in Margaret Lawrie's book titled *Myths and Legends of Torres Strait*. The sisters were given their names because of their characteristics and traits. This process of name-giving based on people's behaviours and characteristics is called *digmir* in Meriam Mer language.

In this series of works, I have based works on the four temperaments as defined by the ancient Greeks. Red (fire) is associated with a choleric temperament, characterised by a strong decisive personality - driven and motivated, while Green (earth) is associated with a phlegmatic temperament, someone who is down to earth - stable, calm and patient.

Blue (water) is associated with a melancholic temperament - indicated by an analytic mind that is pragmatic and observant, and Yellow (air) relates to a sanguine temperament - someone who is enthusiastic, social, active and overly talkative.

The names given to children in the Torres Strait are usually derived from observable temperaments, personal traits, and physical attributes. As an example, Beizam (shark) may be chosen as the name for a strong person, or to identify a place noted for a significant, recorded event. People also appropriate names of famous people. My mum's great, great grandfather gave himself the name Kapen Kuk (Captain Cook) because of his ability to sail. This culture of naming is still practised in Papua New Guinea.

Imermer 2024

vinylcut print
Collection of the artist

Imermer is the sister of Kekmermer. The name Imermer means full of water. The name was given to Imermer as it describes her empathic temperament. She easily cries because she understands, relates to, and shares the feelings of others.

Kekmermer 2024

vinylcut print
Collection of the artist

Kekmermer means full of forwardness. I have used this name to describe her character's assertiveness and strong temperament. In Margret Lawrie's book, *Myth and Legends of Torres Strait*, she tells the story of Imermer and Kekmermer - two sisters who ran away from a deceitful character, Kairi, who lived on the opposite side of the island Erub, in the Torres Strait.

Ama 2023

vinylcut print
Collection of the artist

Ama references the concept of mother in Torres Strait culture. Pregnancy is celebrated by the whole community as it means an increase in the size of the family. The elders of the family usually give names to children when they are born. They look at the child's character and choose a name based on observable traits and behaviours. If a child is strong at birth, he or she will be named after strong things, such as a shark (Beizam).

Ama is also mother to all her sister's children, and she cares for them as if they are her own. Ama shares her breast milk if another woman's breast milk is dry. The eldest sister is called big ama and the last sister is called small ama. Others are called by name with the word ama added, such as Betty ama. Ama is also a nickname for girls named after their grandmothers or mothers.

Every ama teaches young girls and boy's skills that they themselves have acquired and have become very competent at, such as gardening, fishing, storytelling, or teaching history.

Mohara (a survivor of Cyclone Mahina) 2024

vinylcut print
Collection of the artist

Mohara was one of the survivors of Cyclone Mahina. Mahina was one of the most powerful recorded cyclones that struck the eastern coast of Cape York Peninsula in 1899. It formed from two systems that joined over the Cape - one from the Coral Sea and the other from the Arafura Sea, creating the perfect storm. This storm caught the Torres Strait pearling fleet off-guard while they were anchored out from Bathurst Bay. Almost one hundred and fifty boats were either sunk or destroyed and almost 400 Islanders, Asians and European lives were lost, including 100 Aboriginal people who were trying to rescue survivors.

There is a monument to those who died at Cape Melville, and a plaque in the Anglican Church on Waibene. The monument mentions the names of Europeans but has a footnote to the 300 nameless non-Europeans.

Mohara's story of courage and bravery should be public knowledge as she swam in cyclonic conditions for seven hours with two European men clinging to her till they reached shore. Mohara was awarded the Royal Humane Society's Gold Medal, which is the highest medal in this award category for an unselfish life-saving act. This print is my contribution to promoting the recognition of a strong oman's humanity and compassion for people of different nationalities.

Ilwel 2024

vinylcut print
Collection of the artist

Ilwel is the name for the planet Venus - the morning star. This name was given to ilan oman (island women) who rose before dawn to prepare food for those going out hunting, fishing, and gardening, and also gather supplies for the household, such as firewood.

My mum was given this name and she lived up to the character trait of rising early, before everyone else, to prepare food for the family before they went to school and work.

Ilwel is also oman of Meb (the Moon). When the Moon and Venus are in alignment, it is said that Ilwel and Meb come together, and when they move from their orbit, it is said that Meb and Ilwel depart till their next reunion.

Under the Mat 2023

vinylcut print
Collection of the artist

This term and practice is one of confidentiality. When something is put under the mat, it is not to be mentioned or talked about - it is taboo. One such subject is island adoption. Once a child is given to someone under this practice, any discussion about it is put under the mat.

Mothers Union 2023

vinylcut print
Collection of the artist

All ilan oman of the Anglican Church faith were members of the Mothers' Union. Every member of the Union underwent academic and theological training because it was their task to teach spiritual and civic education. I witnessed my ama, who was Head Mother, organise events for up to a thousand women from all islands in the Torres Strait. She commanded respect and possessed a strong presence at public meetings. Mothers' Union was a powerful social and religious movement in the Torres Strait.

I ilan oman 2023

vinylcut print
Collection of the artist

This print aims to encourage young girls to be proud of their heritage and identity as Torres Strait Islander oman.

Oman Nor Krai 2024

vinylcut print

Collection of the artist

Oman Nor Krai is derived from Bob Marley's song - *No Women No Cry*. The song was a revelation for me, because once I understood the lyrics and the meaning of the song, I could see that trait in ilan oman.

Reflecting on this title, I remember realising that it was practised by my mum, particularly in her attitude to life. I remember that she never complained but was confident in her skills to survive - to provide food for the family. Wherever we stayed, she would plant food crops, as this was ingrained in our agrarian tradition and culture. Her gardening skills were exceptional, and we always had food from the garden when we did not have money to buy it from the local shops.

Two Sisters 2024

vinylcut print

Collection of the artist

Two Sisters is from a body of work called *Ad Wer* (*Sacred Stars* stories). The two sisters are called Adud Wer (Bad Star) and Munie (Birth Canal). Adud Wer was responsible for bringing insects and diseases so she let islanders know of the approaching season so that they could prepare their garden crops from loss. For example, islanders wrap bananas with leaves so insects and diseases won't ruin the crop. Munie brings signs of a good harvest.

This print is of the two sisters touching life. Munie gives a spark of hope to existence and Adud Wer brings disaster to existence.

Maret Oman 2024

vinylcut print

Collection of the artist

Maret oman (married women) in Torres Strait culture have status above single women. Their behaviour shifts to a higher degree of responsibility and behaviour. Maret oman were traditionally scarred with marks that identified them as being married. In contemporary Torres Strait culture, maret oman are to dress in moderation, not like someone who is single. They must not generally mingle with single girls, but nonetheless they are obliged to educate them about life and their position within the community.

Maret oman are elevated to a higher status in the community and are given greater respect as they possess a high standard of moral and ethical behaviour. This dignified position is upheld, as this is what a stable ilan society is based on.

Zeuber Irkep (Eyes of the Sea) 2024

vinylcut print

Collection of the artist

Zeuber is when the waves from a water tube look like an eye. An eye of the sea is the oman who watches out for the sea. The circle in her forehead represents all the sea creatures she cares for. This name is also given to girls with pretty eyes.