

# NORTH BY EAST WEST

## RE-IGNITING A CULTURAL CONNECTION THROUGH PEARL SHELL

CO-CURATED BY, AND PRESENTED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH CAIRNS INDIGENOUS ART FAIR  
SUPPORTED BY THE AUSTRALIA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS

6 JULY - 19 AUGUST 2018

Sensitivity Notice: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are warned that the following pages contain images of deceased persons.



### OVERVIEW

Northern Australia's pearling industry has a rich and emotive history steeped in stories of adventure, slavery, cyclones, hardship and mortality.

Thousands of nautical miles may separate the coastal communities of Far North Queensland's Torres Strait Islands and Lombadina on the West Kimberley Coast of Western Australia, but *North by East West* is an exhibition that explores the significant role First Nation Peoples' played in the pearling industry, while highlighting the surprisingly close artistic practices of Kimberley Coast (Bard)

and Torres Strait Islander artists. More importantly, *North by East West* uncovers the power of cultural resilience while suggesting the connection between East and West that had its provenance long before the pearling luggers set sail one hundred and fifty years ago.

Pearl shell carving and etching is a communal medium influenced by the natural world that is intrinsic to everyday life. To examine the practice shared by the two distinct cultural groups, a continuum of knowledge transmission emerges that has no reference to the effects of colonisation. Artists maintain connection to their ancestors by drawing on inspiration from designs passed down to them by fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and great grandfathers.

Pearl shell remains highly regarded and continues to be applied to ceremonial attire, for groin shields or chest plates, as it has been for thousands of years. Traditionally, designs represent clan totems, convey cultural knowledge, and sometimes hold spiritual power. To the untrained eye they may appear ornamental, holding no more than an aesthetic value, but to Bard and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the shells can hold a collective purpose, to identify clan and impart knowledge for successful hunting and butchering.

In stark contrast, and possibly a default to the effects of colonisation, pearl shells were carved and etched by seafarers aboard pearling luggers to pass the time. Incorporating picture postcard themes, these were given to family, or sold to tourists while in port. These etchings nevertheless remain a part of the pearl shell art form, and are a part of the history that is shared by the Kimberley Coast and Torres Strait regions.

*North by East West* explores pearl shell carving traditions of the Torres Strait and the Kimberley Coast of Western Australia through the artistic



collaboration of four artists, Garry Sibosado and Darrell Sibosado (Western Australia), Samuel Savage and Joel Sam (Torres Strait). The cultural exchange and collaboration resulted in an affirmation of familiarity on both sides of the continent, from East to West and West to East. Our cultural bond is derived from the sea, like a shared umbilical cord, spreading communal cultural practices that influence ceremony, diet and cuisine - resulting in longevity of First Peoples' and sustainability of Country. Our similarities became more apparent when the artists were physically placed in each other's Country, as cultural enlightenment, respect and unity prevailed. Additionally, the exchange resulted in the sharing of common lived experiences and spirituality that underpin our connection to Country and a collective approach to life.

The curatorial process and methodology of exchange and collaboration between artists in the East and West also revealed, or perhaps just reinforced what we as Sovereign Peoples' need to remind ourselves, that an imported culture that attempts to dominate our world has no place in determining our connection. *North by East West* continues a journey, where physical distance is irrelevant, because our cultures are resolute and are the intangible guides of our being.

Janina Harding  
Artistic Director, Cairns Indigenous Art Fair

### ARTISTS

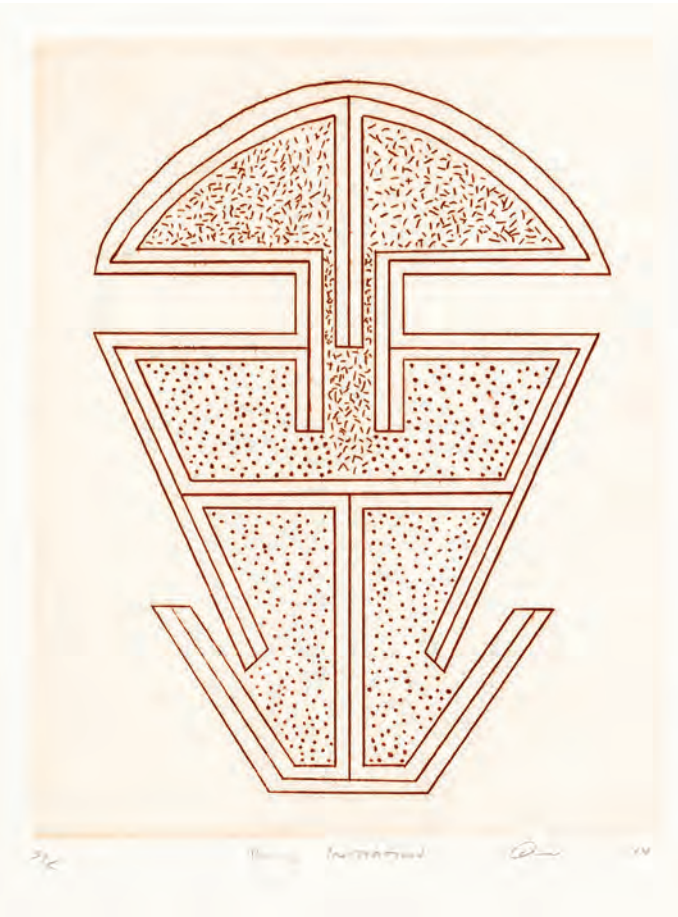
Pearl shell, as a canvas for culture, continues to be redefined through contemporary art practices that include printmaking, sculpture, dance and performance.

Lombadina, in the Dampier Peninsula of Western Australia, is renowned for its pristine white beaches and red earthy cliffs that meet the turquoise sea. This is where Bard brothers Garry and Darrell Sibosado continue the traditions of the *riji* that is specific to this region – a geometric, maze-like pattern that is etched onto the inner surface of the pearl shell and infilled with ground red ochre. The pattern designs that have been inherited by





the brothers are abstract and minimal yet refer to specific animals and cultural ceremonies and hold significant cultural information. Influenced by their natural environment and ceremonies particular to the Bard, the *riji* has been practised since time immemorial by the people of the West Kimberly region. Traditionally worn on the groin and laced with a belt made from natural human hair that



is tied around the waist, the *riji* is a symbol of knowledge, power and maturity that connects the old and the new.

Garry Sibosado works with pearl shell using the traditional shape of the teardrop, and contemporary tools to cut and grind the shell to a lustre. Using a jeweller’s precision drill, the artist precisely etches the rhythmic lines of the pattern which is then infilled with ground red ochre to reveal ancient symbols of wildlife, such as the whale, dolphin, tern and stingray. The symbols can also portray cultural practices such as fish trapping, and ceremonies that include warriors’ and boys’ initiations.

Darrell Sibosado transfers *riji* knowledge through printmaking and creating intricate sculptural installations. He creates symbolic patterns through the process of etching lines onto a metal plate to which chemicals are then applied. The lines are then infilled with ink and, using a printing press, the design is transferred onto paper.

In the Torres Strait *dibi dibi*, or pearl shell necklaces, are an iconic cultural symbol of identity. In the past *dibi dibi* were worn together with the headdress and battle regalia for war against intruders from Papua New Guinea and other nearby islands. As Joel Sam explains:

The *dibi dibi* was used as a power source, for protection in war. By wearing the *dibi dibi*, it shielded the warrior from harm, deflected oncoming spears and arrows and gave them spiritual powers during travel.

In more recent times, the *dibi dibi* is worn during cultural ceremonies and as a form of contemporary jewellery.

Joel Sam, who now lives in Bamaga in the Cape York Peninsula, is a descendant of the people of Saibai Island in the north western region of the Torres Strait. Joel Sam’s *dibi dibi* incorporates the ancient motifs and style of the Saibai Island region with traditional and new contemporary materials. The *dibi dibi* that the artist creates consists of a



braided raffia or twine neck-loop that is attached to the top of the pearl shell pendant. This is often then embellished with additional strands of raffia, twine, emu and cassowary feathers. The pearl shell pendants are of different shapes relating to specific wildlife and sometimes incorporate other elements such as pearl shell symbols of the Torres Strait Island headdress (*dhoeri* or *dhari*), shells, boar tusks and recycled shark and dugong bones. The shape of a pendant and choice of elements signify the special purpose for which it is being worn.

Samuel Savage lives in Cairns and is a descendant of the people of Erub (Darnley Island) in the eastern Torres Strait. *Dibi dibi* from this region are distinctive for their incised radiating and repetitive patterns that are created using geometric and abstract shapes. Samuel Savage incorporates and interprets the intricate designs and patterns associated with these *dibi dibi* to create contemporary works on paper. For this exhibition he has created prints that combine *dibi dibi* patterns with historical references to the pearl shell industry.

What is exceptional about *North by East West* is the way that the artists have shared their stories, culture, and histories to create innovative and exciting new works of art, bringing the past into the present and taking it into the future.

Teho Ropeyarn  
Assistant Curator, Cairns Art Gallery

The Cairns Art Gallery would like to thank the following organsiations and individuals for assisting with the exhibition:

- Lombadina Aboriginal Corporation
- Gab Titui Cultural Centre
- Torres Strait Heritage Museum
- Blackbird International Limited -
- Pearl Lugger Heritage Fleet
- TS Connect
- Rosie Ware Designs
- Torres Strait Islander Media Association
- Annie Wacando
- Caroline Sibosado
- Les Wyee

**IMAGE PAGE 1**  
Natives of the Murray Islands Torres Straits  
Image: Courtesy The Popular Science Monthly

**IMAGE 2-3 (L-R)**

**Garry SIBOSADO**  
*Garril (Tern)*  
Etched mother of pearl, ochre  
17.5 x 13.5 cm  
Courtesy of the Artist  
Photograph: Michael Marzik

**Joel SAM**  
*Dibi dibi* 2018  
mother of pearl, twine, raffia, shells, shark bone, emu feathers  
Courtesy of the Artist

**Darrell SIBOSADO**  
*Boys Initiation*  
Etching and aquatint  
Courtesy of the Artist, Cicada Press and Lombadina Arts and Crafts  
Photograph: Michael Marzik

**Samuel SAVAGE Snr**  
*Hair Piece 1* 2017  
pearl shell  
Courtesy of the Artist



**CAIRNS  
INDIGENOUS  
ART FAIR**  
AUSTRALIA'S PREMIER INDIGENOUS ART FAIR  
13 - 15 July 2018  
ciaf.com.au

Co-curated by, and presented in partnership with Cairns Indigenous Art Fair.  
Supported by the Australia Council for the Arts



Australian Government



Australia  
Council  
for the Arts



Queensland  
Government

This project is supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland's Backing Indigenous Arts initiative, which aims to build a stronger, more sustainable and ethical Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts industry in the State



**CAIRNS  
ART  
GALLERY**

Cnr Abbott & Shields St, Cairns  
07 4046 4800  
www.cairnsartgallery.com.au  
Cairns.Art.Gallery  
@cairnsartgallery  
@cairnsgallery

**FUNDING  
PARTNER**



**GALLERY  
SPONSORS**



John Villiers  
Trust



Hilton



THE WINE TRADITION



mantra-  
Bendigo Bank