



Ailan Currents: artwork from the Torres Strait

RAE O'CONNELL
curator



A catalogue definitely extends the life and the effect of a show. This one that we produced for *Ailan Currents* has helped so much with ongoing promotion, not only of these artists and works but of Torres Strait artwork generally. Not a lot of people have seen artwork from the Torres Strait or know anything about it. It's got a whole different style and voice to Aboriginal art. KickArts is a visual arts organisation based in Cairns and we're all about promoting art and these artists.

Our *Ailan Currents* exhibition came about because we were seeing all these wonderful paper works being printed in the crate storeroom of our building. It was a pretty amazing thing watching them come out. We had Theo Tremblay's printing press in there (Theo's a master printer) and they just kept producing these really significant works from these contemporary artists and we just knew that the collection had to be showcased. This was actually before Dennis Nona and Alick Tipoti went on to win the 2007 Telstra Art Awards. At this stage, we were just watching these pieces emerging from a storeroom and we all felt the fever to support the young artists.

The energy around Torres Strait artists has been building here for about the last ten years, ever since the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Art Department was first initiated at the TAFE in Cairns. There was a purpose-built building and Ann Eglitis was encouraging the artists to go back and look at their cultural history and storytelling. Each artist has really developed his or her own style. When they were at TAFE it was hard to tell them apart but now, when you see different works you can tell who they've been carved by. For example, Dennis and Alick tell very traditional stories about warriors and the things that happen between different islands and groups. Billy Missi tells traditional and contemporary stories and Brian Robinson has a much more contemporary interpretation. I know Billy is very conscious of how he tells his stories. They're from his own mouth really. For example a new piece we're showing now is all about kinship across the Torres Strait and how they manage inter-marrying and things like that. And it's told in the most beautiful way.

The Torres Strait artists are using lino and printmaking techniques and the guys' work with all the patterning from the original carvings is just so masculine. Every image you see will be about the place and it will have a story behind it. It's real story telling passed down through the generations. Traditional or contemporary, the artists are telling their stories of what it's like living in the Torres Strait.

There are different ways that we support the artists but showcasing their work in a professional gallery is always

useful, particularly here in the tropics because it's really difficult to show works on paper unless you have good air-conditioning. They just react instantly to the humidity. We always wanted to produce a catalogue but we don't have buckets of funding so we did it ourselves in-house and we were so happy that people would be able to appreciate the intricacies of the carvings with our fold-out pages. You can't see or understand the detail so much with A4 and the decision to go with the fold-out has been really significant.

We've sent out 1,000 copies across Australia and internationally and each week we're sending more and more out. Schools and art departments can buy them at a reduced price. And it's being requested by different departments of universities who are wanting it for their own library. It's being seen as an important publication and resource about Torres Strait art.

At the moment we have limited resources so we have to be clever with how we market what we're doing and how we raise awareness of our artists. A catalogue can obviously travel easier than four or five metre prints and it provides an opportunity to open up markets. We're hoping that people will see the catalogue and then want to have the exhibition or they might want to invite the artists to participate in another activity.

We're currently lobbying for a new print studio and there we'll have a dedicated business development officer who will be looking for opportunities to promote the work nationally and internationally. And there's the website where you can look at the work and buy online, which is the way we do sell quite a few prints at the moment.

All of this is aimed towards spreading recognition and building our market. We're trying to generate ways that we can become more independent from government funding because funding isn't increasing. It isn't allowing us to do what we want to do. You don't want to depend on funding to keep going and growing – it can stop at any time. I see the catalogue and the new printmaking facility that we're currently lobbying for as a way to free us from the tyranny of funding dependence.

One step at a time.



Mawan Sagul (Mawan Ceremony)
Billy Missi
PHOTO: DAVID CAMPBELL