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When Alick Tipoti dreams, a hidden world of images appears

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WHEN Torres Strait artist Alick Tipoti dreams, a hidden world of images appears. When, in the silent hours of the night, he carves his linocuts and sculptures, ancestral spirits guide his hand.

At once contemporary and traditional, youthful and steeped in the past, instinctual and possessed of analytic rigour, Tipoti is a man suspended between distinct cultures and reflective realms.

The upshot is a new kind of Islander art, modern in its techniques, rich in customary knowledge, replete with veiled, half-submerged themes.

Together with his prominent colleague, Dennis Nona, Tipoti has emerged as the champion of an extraordinary cultural revival in the Torres Strait, that archipelago of tiny islet-nations he refers to, in the traditional language he speaks fluently, as Zenadh-Kes. Indeed, Tipoti is also Zugub, the name he received in honour of the spirit beings of the western Torres Strait, the name he uses for his email and the name that announces the core of his artistic personality.

That personality is strongly expressed in Tipoti's linocuts; monumental in their scale, fine in their detail, they almost always employ a striking filigree technique. Against densely patterned backgrounds he depicts characters from island tradition, enacting their parts in the story cycles handed down the generations.

Many of his best-known works include hand-coloured elements, and the reds, greens and blues stand out with a startling immediacy against the grisaille of the printed ground. Hunting sagas, canoe journeys, seasonal calendars, turtle studies: the prints plunge their viewers into a world of natural phenomena closely observed and punctiliously recorded.

But this natural world of sea and sky is only the surface, beneath which far deeper forces lurk. Consider the large linocut that tells the tale of three brothers, Wadth, Zigin and Kusikus. It is at once a panorama of marine life, a hunting compendium and a creation tale. And the lushly detailed Adhikuyam, fully 5m in length, is not just the depiction of an ancestral cycle but the yearning evocation of a drama-glutted world, a fiercely active paradise.

Tipoti's work has won wide attention overseas - indeed, he is rather better known abroad than at home, in the wake of high-profile exhibitions during the past year in London, Paris and New York - and this success with outside eyes may well be due in great measure to the narrative component in his art. Western gallery-goers can immediately see and read the story, much as they may read contemporary Pacific art. But the appeal stems, also, from the island feel and from the vague sense Tipoti's work instils of realms of form and meaning just out of reach.

Australian audiences, reared on mainland models of indigenous art, are still coming to terms with the natural symbolism of Torres Strait work, its air of interlocking completeness and its formal, hieratic calm, a calm that seems to breathe the air of a purer time. And the re-creation of an ordered, tradition-guided past is very much Tipoti's aim, an aim he fulfils by adapting modern printmaking skills.

How not to see him as a product of two streams of knowledge? He studied under European master printmakers and completed a degree at the Canberra School of Arts, but he also learned deeply from his elders and his "great classroom of knowledge" on the islands is the surrounding expanse of sea. He employs the fine gradations of printing technique to fix his version of the ancient island cosmos: an elaborate domain, awash with fields of force and ancestral presences that teeter on the edge of visibility.

Old and new are constantly mingling in his work. He thinks nothing of using laser-cutting to incise patterns on the surface of skateboards; he fashions, from rusted steel, copies of old ceremonial masks of turtleshell.

There is a detailed program of cultural revival behind this art.

Tipoti is researcher and historian, an explorer of the ethnographic record and the builder of a new tradition on the fragile bridgework of the past. He has taken stories from chiefs and leaders of the Torres Strait; he has studied genealogies and gone through painstakingly preserved vocabularies.

Even in questions of faith, he orients himself firmly towards the realm of traditional religion.

"I'm not a Christian," he explains. "My belief is with my ancestral cultural practice. When I carve, I speak, or

sing, to the spirits and gradually I've learned that I'm never alone, at nighttime, when I'm working.

"I get a sense of spiritual beings close at hand, helping me, guiding me to interpret things the way they should be interpreted."

Culture thus serves not just as the constant subject of the artist's work but as the touchstone for his sense of identity.

Torres Strait culture is rich in rules and prohibitions on what can be shown or told; these in turn shape the structure of the designs Tipoti makes.

"I've always taken into account advice from my elders," he says. "Advice that I can only show, through art, the general, surface knowledge of our culture: knowledge about the natural world. I might carve something about a dugong laying her eggs but, as part of our protocols, there are certain further things, things that we don't share."

In this way, his prints depict a natural kingdom of intense detail, but the detail is only a fragment of the greater whole.

Tipoti's calendar of the seasons, *Gabau Aimai Mabaigal* (Wind Makers), one of his most majestic and beautifully realised creations, shows the four prevailing winds, each calibrated with the movements of marine life on the sea floor. But this rich map is no more than a simplified, stripped-back, public version of the hidden calendar traditional knowledge-holders can describe.

Why this intense resurgence of old belief-systems now? In Tipoti's view, many Islanders from younger generations have come to feel their world is under threat and are anxious to preserve as much as they can of what remains.

"That's certainly what decides for me whether I should go to visit my aunties and listen to them telling their stories or just sit back and listen to the TV. The culture comes first, the choice is clear."

His life's pattern reflects this stand. Tipoti is just 34, but already he plays a prominent part in Torres Strait land and sea management debates. He lives on Horn Island with his young family, he holds land on Badu in the west of the strait and his ancestral roots are on nearby Mabuig. He spends almost all his time on the islands and this focus is itself enough to mark him out as a traditionalist, for only 8000 of the total Islander population of 50,000 live on their home archipelago and, on Tipoti's estimate, no more than one-fifth of them are fluent language speakers.

But the young artists and culture brokers of the strait have found an unusual, indeed a paradoxical, ally in their commitment to preserving the past.

As is well known, a detailed record of Torres Strait Island societies was compiled in the late 1890s by the Cambridge expedition to the region, led by ethnographer Alfred Cort Haddon. Its procedures form the subject of a recent, revisionist book by Torres Strait academic Martin Nakata.

Tipoti has immersed himself in the expedition's six volumes of reports and it is in great part through this act of prolonged study that he has come to his detailed knowledge of Islander culture as it stood a century ago.

"I wanted to capture what our forefathers did," he says. "To find a contemporary way to capture their designs."

But since those intricate designs were carved on objects used in daily life, many of the most outstanding examples of that tradition were not preserved in the strait. Only outsiders had collected them.

Hence the importance of Haddon. "We were really lucky to have him come through, the Western anthropologist, and take the time to document what our ancestors made."

Tipoti travelled to Cambridge in 2000 to view the artefacts the expedition had gathered up; he even met Haddon's descendants. A strange connection began to form: a Western collection, and an island student, excavating his own past.

"That's the pattern, the triangle of how it was preserved and passed down. There's oral tradition and the written records of a foreigner, and that all has come down to me and helped me in my task of documenting culture."

The Haddon objects also inspire much in today's island art: their carved patterns and the narratives they tell have found new life. Old themes are emerging reimagined, bearing new layers of implication. In fact, one of Tipoti's most striking works is a close relation of the most famous Torres Strait mask in Western art history: the mask from Mabuig, collected by Pablo Picasso just before his cubist breakthrough came. By chance that object returned to Queensland last year for the travelling show in Brisbane of the Picasso Collection. Tipoti saw it there. He was already at work on his own version of a similar Mabuig piece from the same epoch, held in the New York

Metropolitan Museum. His version of the mask is at once a close copy and, thanks to its steel structure, a nostalgic, subtle act of redefining imagination.

For Brisbane critic Simon Wright, author of a recent catalogue on island art, this work "suggests the tantalising prospect of an orthodoxy in reversal, so that the new shows how interesting the old is". Indeed, the mask becomes the voice that speaks and reveals what is contemporary in art, and what endures, and how time passes, inhabits forms and changes them in its flow.

Such are the dimensions in Tipoti's work. It is an art of place, an art alive with sea and the pulse of tide. Above all, though, it is a reclamation of home, the work of a traveller through cultures and time who knows well the source of all his strength and hope.

"When we move away from home for a long time we feel sick," Tipoti says.

"I don't know if it's the sea, or family, or the dugongs and the turtles on the shore or out at sea, but when we've been away for more than two months, we just have to catch the nextplane home."

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