

16/12/2003

Aboriginal lines and dots

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EXPECT more of the lines-and-dots mythical cultural map typical of Australian Aboriginal art, but with a little difference, at the Kiripuranji exhibition.

This exhibition of Tiwi art, by artists from the Bathurst and Melville islands, some 100km north of Darwin, is a celebration of cheerful abstractions with seemingly scant reference to the Palaneri (Dreamtime/Creation) stories.

They are like an Aboriginal William Morris design or a more cluttered and less pop-sy Ken Done.

Said curator Jackie Dunn of Art Bank, from where most of the travelling works are derived: "The Tiwi works are more abstract, rather than a kind of narrative, and this could be partly due perhaps to the islands' proximity to Timur Leste, where there is Portuguese influence.

"But this strong sense of geometry is also derived from traditional sources like jilimara (body painting) and pukumani (mourning) poles."

Unlike, say, communities like the Papunya, Yuendumu, Utopia, Koori and Yirrkala, the Tiwis seem more insular, dislocated from the main land mass by the Dundas Straits and even between the islands, by the Apsley Straits. Hence, the exclusiveness of the name of the people themselves, Tiwi, which means "we people".

The waters around them are infested with sharks, crocodiles, stingrays and manta rays.

Even among the Tiwis, they have different sub-ethnic groups according to skin names or totems called yiminga (four major ones).

While imbibing more West-centric artistic traditions, the Tiwis perform two main ceremonial rituals - of the Pukumani and the Kulama/Kuriama (yam, which like the puffer fish, needs expert preparation to neutralise the intrinsic poison before ingestion).

The Pukumani has its roots in the story of Purrukuparli, son of its "Mother Earth" figure Murtankala. His wife Bima had an affair with his younger brother Tapara, and while making love, they left Purrukuparli too long under the sun and he died.

The furious cuckolded Purrukuparli sought Bima, who fled and transformed into a curlew bird, and wounded Tapara, who changed into the Moon Man.

Ironically, the one who dictated the funerary rituals was the Bird Man, Tokampini, Bima's father.

The yam ritual is about death, renewal and prosperity.

Besides works on canvas, paper and textiles, there are also ceremonial spears (arawinikiri) and bark baskets (tunga) but none on the totems (tutini) or ceramics, for which Tiwi Design, one of the three major component artistic groups, is known for.

The Tiwis also produce ceremonial armbands (parajini, from mangrove roots or fronds of the pandanus palm) or large feathered head wreaths (tapa lingini).

Tiwi Design began at Nguuu on Bathurst Island by Giovanni Tipungwuti and Bede Tungatalum in 1969 as a woodblock-based group before evolving into screenprint and then ceramics, with Eddie Puruntatamerri and John Boscoe Tipiloura in 1972. The more youthful "contemporary" works are found with Tiwi Design residents like Harold Porkilari, Vivian Kerinauia and Osmond Kantilla, whose average age is 40. Of the other two, the Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association at Milikapiti on Melville Island uses natural ochres on a black background, and ironwood (eucalpt chlorosachys) for their carvings.

Some of its artists like Pedro Wonaeamirri, 29, have taken to using a wooden comb called kayimwagakimi for a more uniformed design.

The third group is the Munupi, based in Pirlangimpi on Melville Island. The oldest artist featured is Paddy Freddy Puruntatameri, 78, of Jilamara.

Kiripuranji (which means, clever with our hands), was officiated by Malaysia AIDS Council chairman Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir, and is on at the Australian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur, until Dec 22.

Entries are invited from Malaysian artists with international experience and preferably five years after art college for the Australian Visual Art Residency next year, scheduled from end-June to end-September.

The successful applicant will be based at the Gunnery Studios in Sydney. The closing date is Jan 5.

(For details, log on to www.australia.org.my)

The programme, supported by the New South Wales Ministry of Arts in Australia, started this year with Yee I-Lann who, after her residency from February to April, held a solo exhibition entitled "Horizons", at Valentine Willie Fine Arts in Kuala Lumpur last month.

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