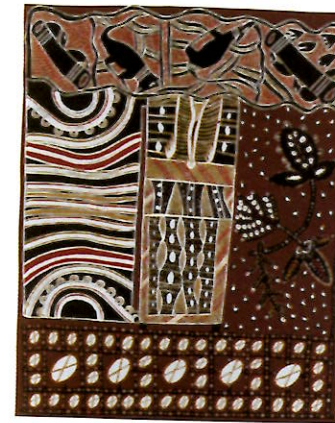


The Meeting of Waters



An exhibition of prints and works by artists
from the Australasian Print Project

A collaboration involving artists from Indonesia, the
Philippines, Arnhem Land and Darwin

*Coordinators: Jan Hogan and Basil Hall. Printmaking Workshop, NTU
Artists: Ardiyanto Pranata, Yuan Mor'O Ocampo, Peter Adsett, Dhopiya Yunupingu,
Djalu Gurruwiwi*



Djalu Gurruwiwi, Dhopiya Yunupingu, Yuan Mor'O Ocampo, Ardiyanto Pranata,
Peter Adsett, *'Gapu, Tubig, Air, Water'*, screenprint, 89 x 70 cm, 1997.
Printer: Basil Hall.

On the Possibility of Collaboration ...

What am I looking at? How did this happen? What reading is possible?

Is it possible to anticipate the outcome of a collaborative project? On one level, this project reflects a widespread curiosity to see whether the rhetoric of cross-cultural collaboration can be translated into interesting and worthwhile art through artists' experience of new circumstances, in this case, a new medium. In hindsight, the outcomes of this project have shown that the NTU Print Workshop presented the right dynamic, the right mix of factors to make a significant exchange possible, and enabled the participants (artists and printers alike) to explore unfamiliar territory in significant ways.

How an artist's identity might manifest itself from the different cultural backgrounds of Indonesia, the Philippines, and that of indigenous and settler Australians, how traditions and histories might be focused by the circumstances the project presented to these artists, how these artists would go about working together, and what the outcome might be all became apparent, as the evidence of the work reveals.

Paradoxically, in different ways each artist is subject to a similar cultural condition, that of affirming their own culturally specific traditions in interaction with what might be called "westernity", the hegemonic modernity which in the late twentieth century seems to touch every sphere of human activity. It's arguable that this is itself a cultural tradition, within which individuals oscillate in uneasy tension between centres and peripheries, seeking to affirm their particular identity as artists within the diasporic effects of declining European empires and new international networks.

For this project the artists were selected on the basis of their receptiveness to the opportunity for cross-cultural experience and influences. Within their own established form of artistic practice (painting, installation, batik), each had achieved a sufficient authority to benefit from the experience of a new set of processes made available through the expertise of the staff of the NTU Print Workshop.

In one sense, it's no surprise that this project should arise as an initiative of a printmaking centre: the medium of printmaking itself is epitomised

by the collaborative process through its long tradition of creative interaction between artists, printers and technicians. In addition, the technology itself involves the translation of imagery from medium to medium, and is therefore compatible with the processes of cultural translation which have taken place over the course of this event.

Printmaking however, is not neutral cultural territory—it reflects a particular attitude towards the technology of reproduction, and the status of the art object, whereby the aura of unique and individual works is substituted a fetishization of the printed mark and the alchemical processes through which it is reproduced. Indeed it may represent a particular First World kind of response to artists' needs to counter the ubiquitous multiplication of the transnational visual culture which surrounds us, and the alienating opacity of the new technologies employed to generate the images which rule our lives.

With this project however, a number of factors combined to produce a non-hierarchical set of relationships between the artists, and an openness to exchange. Despite their different backgrounds, authority and experience within their previous practice, each was a relative novice to the media at their disposal. This led to a mutual interest in each others' learning processes, where exchange at the level of technique opened the way to exchange at the level of meaning, through the translation of the processes, habits and conventions each participant brought with them into the unfamiliar visual media of screenprinting, lithography and intaglio.

In the sophisticated cosmopolitan art world in which three of the participants (and the three printers) practice, factors such as these are taken for granted, silently assimilated, or cautiously probed through questions and comments to test each participant's frame of reference and tolerance for enquiry. By contrast, the Yolngu artists Djalu and Dhopiya proceeded from a completely different set of assumptions, where the equivalent of such knowledge is gained not through interrogation, but through revelation. Djalu explained:

"... how meaning comes in. That meaning comes closer, see, little bit closer, when I go and get in, for thought. Because I got thought, but different fraction, like a compass, or something like that, see? When I

experience, I can see, learning that way, because different religion, different different background, different languages, different thinking."

This reflects a crucial cultural difference, around which a great deal of the deeper interaction took place between the participants. Not only were the participants and instructors all acutely aware of the position of cultural priority through which an Aboriginal artist may assume an intimate relation to place and land (as instanced when Aboriginal travellers search out and recognise the authority of those who own the land through which they pass), but there developed a sense in which the potential for a truly collaborative work began to be recognised as a latent possibility as the project proceeded.

Beyond the polite deference which arose through the recognition of priority, authority and local knowledge, the participants also became aware that the connections which developed in the context of the quiet intensity of the studio were necessarily being directed towards a quite different level of relationship by the Aboriginal artists. For the Yolngu, the world does not make sense until its significant elements are properly placed within an appropriate kinship system, through which the individual may find their proper mode of interaction, and the appropriate responsibility and conduct of their affairs.

Thus, quietly, as the circumstance arose, each person discovered how they had been placed within a kinship system which allowed them particular kinds of relationship and activity, and opened the way to a kind of cultural exchange (and thus the potential for more meaningful interaction) which was outside the experience of most of the participants.

When, in the last few days of the project, the opportunity presented itself for a collaborative work, it needed little encouragement from the printers, for the artists to organise themselves to produce the screenprint 'Gapu, Tubig, Air, Water'. By concentrating on this particular print, I do not wish to overlook the other bodies of work and the individual achievements each artist made during the course of the project, but I do want to draw attention to the distinctive characteristics of this extraordinary work, and the processes behind its production.

In determining the structure of the print the Indonesian artist Ardiyanto drew on his intimate knowledge of his own indigenous culture of fabric

art to devise a non-hierarchical framework, within which each of the five artists could devise their own contribution to the overall image. Perhaps unwittingly, but perhaps also as a spontaneous outcome of the synchronicity at play in this event, this pictorial structure has two significant consequences, which give a profoundly symbolic dimension to the work.

Despite Ardiyanto's intention, the structure of 'Gapu, Tubig, Air, Water' serves to highlight the central image by the senior Yolngu artist Djalul, and in the process of developing the images which frame it, the other artists have implicitly paid homage to his authority and the Aboriginal participation in the project. Secondly, this particular structure and mode of combination of imagery evokes deep associations between the pictorial conventions of North East Arnhem Land and the ancient cultural connections between the Yolngu and visitors from the Indonesian archipelago over many centuries of harmonious cultural exchange. Contemporary bark paintings from this region still echo this structure, allowing different people and different groups to combine in the production of similarly complex visual imagery to mark significant cultural events. The great Yirrkala church panels, which stand as the originating icons of the struggle for Aboriginal Land Rights, now in the Buku Larnggay Mulka Museum, evoke the same conventional framework as this print.

In the choice of medium, and the sequential process used to produce this image, the artists also deferred to the colours, sequence and screenprint process with which the Yolngu artists were most at ease. By the time the artists had combined to work on this print, each was aware of their adopted kin relationship, and responded accordingly. Mor'O consulted his ngarndi (mother) Dhopiya on the form, colours and structure of his section, according to the totemic references to quail and crocodile eggs, to which he could refer through his kinship association. (That silkworm eggs were the subject of his previous work seemed, in the circumstances, but a natural progression.)

As Djalul's classificatory father, Ardiyanto chose to paint his section in a manner which stressed his own traditional cultural roots in batik, and by inference the wider cultural ties within the region. Peter Adsett's section refers to his discussion with Djalul about djalul, the coloured

surface of the riyala, the stream which flows between the two waterholes where he lives at Humpty Doo, together with references to the waterlily leaves Djalul had seen there. Dhopiya completed the cycle by painting her own Yirritja moiety motif of larrakitj, the hollow log coffin with djirrikij, the quail (who lay their mapu, eggs, inside), and wan'kurra, the bandicoot, who is looking for ngatha, or food. Djalul's central image is a part of the story of Bol'ngu, the thunderman, who sends down djambuwal, the waterspout, which creates the freshwater waterhole in the ocean. Other elements of this image are reflections of the print 'Mururruma' and his earlier paintings of the subject (eg. Bol'ngu, the Thunderman, 1990, in the National Gallery of Victoria).

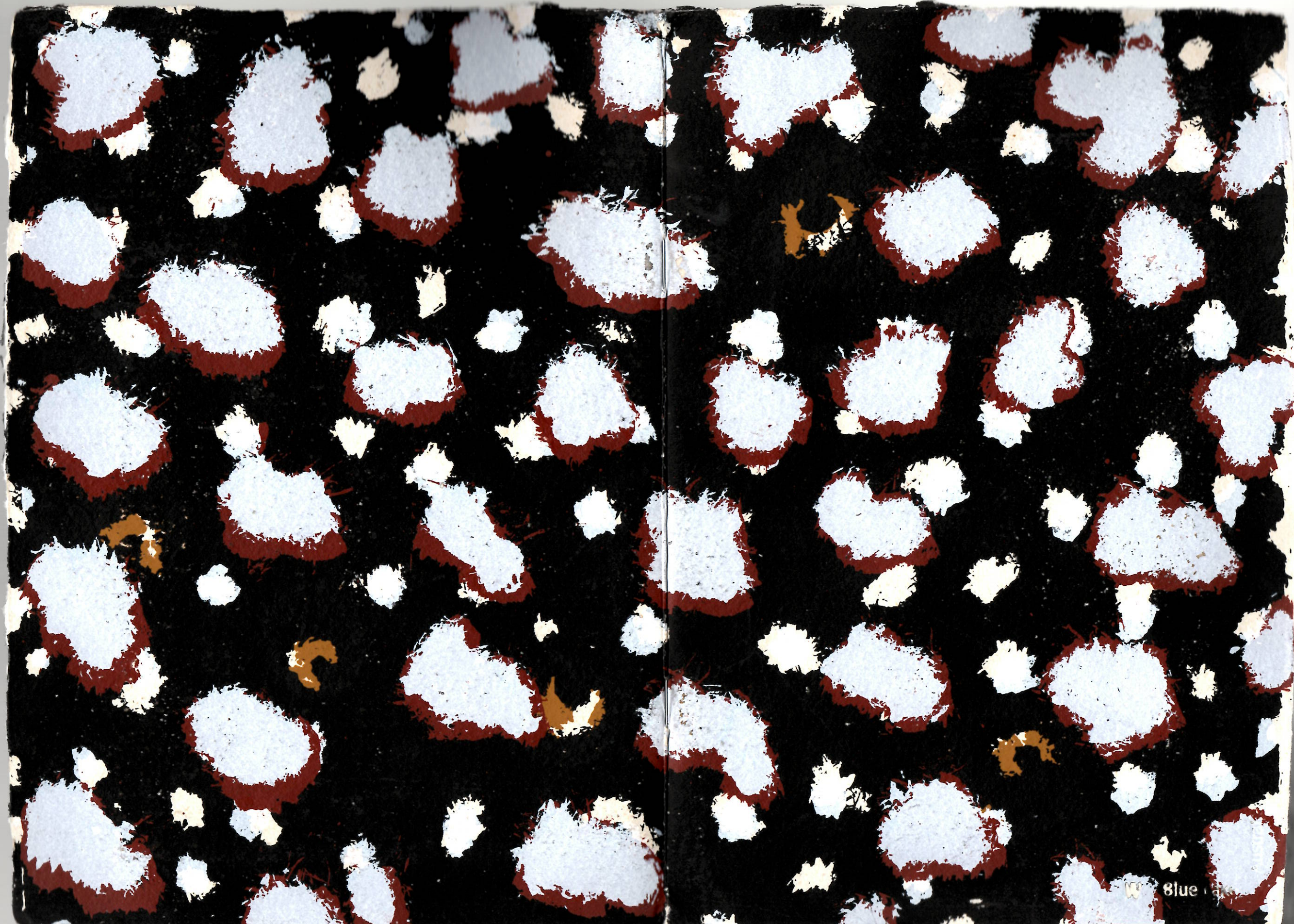
The central focus of the image, the waterhole 'at a sacred place near Rarragala' fittingly directs our attention back to the theme of water which was chosen by the artists at the start of this project. In this context it signifies both focus and vanishing point, and for Djalul, the site of greatest authority and ancestral power, a reflection of his right to be an artist.

What am I looking at? How did this happen? What reading is possible?

In choosing to write about the image which is the least conventional to Western eyes, I have deliberately focused on that aspect of the project which looks beyond my expectations, and forces me to reassess the effects of cross-cultural experience. From our different vantage points, we may find we can read the image as an index, an inventory, or a kinship diagram—or as a map, a record of an historical intersection, a narrative of the event—or as a form of homage to the indigenous presence in the project. In each or all of these instances, I find I am forced to re-think a whole range of assumptions and conventional ways of seeing, and if this reflects in some small way the extraordinary future potential of such events, count me in.

Nigel Lendon

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W. Blue