

UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY: AN ART OF CONSTANT TRANSLATION

What do I assume about artists and the way they work? What do I assume when I look at the product of that work? Even though I act within a world view based on the instantaneous flow of ideas, images and knowledge around the globe, I still assume that works of art are the products of unique, gifted, inspired individuals, expressing their particular experiences, understandings and insights. Yet when the work is derived from a different framework of cultural practices, or as the result of a deliberate collaborative strategy, I am provocatively disoriented. More than one mind, more than one creative sensibility, more than one cultural context, and most of my assumptions of value are destabilised. No longer is the work seen as a 'portal into the subconscious', born of isolation, the ideal of physical and emotional sensation combined. These are stereotypically the key values we are trained to look for in a work of art.

In this essay I have chosen to write about some recent works which sit outside this canon, which through their collaborative processes produce quite different kinds of ideas, images, knowledge and values.

From *New Angel* to *Cakacakavata*

The work of New Zealand artist Robin White has for many years derived its subject matter, forms and sensibilities from the experiences of her life in the Central Pacific nation of Kiribati. Over the last few years she has begun the process of working with other indigenous people, initially through designing and commissioning works to be realised by others in the indigenous media and crafts practices of weaving and embroidery. However the most recent tapa project *Cakacakavata* is of a different order, more comprehensively collaborative, and as a consequence all the more challenging in its possibilities for interpretation.

This collaborative way of working began in 1997 with the embroidered needlework tablecloth made by Florence Masipei and with the *New Angel* series of woven pandanus mats produced with the assistance of Nei Katimira at Teitoiningaina, the Catholic Women's Training Centre. The imagery was derived from a series of drawings made during a residency in Canberra, later developed as watercolours and exhibited together there at Helen Maxwell's gallery in November 1998.

The initiative for finding new methods and materials occurred through a displacement of an altogether different and dramatic kind. After her house and studio in Kiribati burnt down in 1996, Robin found herself with only rudimentary materials to work with — A4 paper, crayons, felt pens, scissors and glue. At this point she began to make drawings for woven pandanus mats, with imagery derived from the work produced in Canberra. She conceived the idea conscious of the colourful and innovative mats produced in Tuvalu, in which they weave the substructure of the mat and then insert the coloured elements. This is a style adopted by the I-Kiribati weavers which they call *Te Wanin* — described by textiles artists in Australia as a warp and weft overlay.

The circumstance and methods of production of the 'placemats' which involved working with weavers and, simultaneously, the production of the embroidered tablecloth made possible with the expertise of her close friend Florence, was for Robin a crucial preliminary experience for the *Cakacakavata* tapa works produced two years later.

The apparently mundane nature of the placemats and tablecloth is deceptive. The Baha'i Faith, of which Robin is a member, instils a deep motivation to produce work which symbolically represents the potential of world peace and the reconciliation of conflict. Thus while the history of art is full of representations of tables and meals

as symbolic subjects (and reference to the Last Supper is no coincidence in Robin White's motivation), in this instance the table as a site of conviviality and social interaction carries powerful affirmative values. The title of the series, *New Angel* (the name of a brand of tinned mackerel) and the other representations of food, drink and tobacco create an equivalent context for daily life on Kiribati. The 'new' of *New Angel* also affirmed for Robin the potential for change and renewal in matters of identity and belief.

The mats are woven from pandanus leaves, a sacred material in the culture of the I-Kiribati. Pandanus is believed to provide a totemic key to their origins and the history of occupation of the islands. Like food and tables, the material itself has both mundane and sacred connotations. With these ideas for a collaboration in mind, Robin first approached an I-Kiribati friend who advised her to make a drawing of what she wanted. For this she devised a diagonal grid, enlarged and photocopied it, and then produced the six gridded drawings, in their full coloured complex version. Robin then worked from the full colour images to a second more monochromatic

version, and finally to a third set, the most simplified version of each of the six images.

The three 'sets' differ insofar as the image appears (if looked at in reverse order of simplification) to be a kind of distillation of the iconic value of the image — stripping the original images (full colour) of their easy equivalence to their origins in commercial art and working back towards their graphically most reduced elements.

Suspecting that this would be too much for any one woman to carry out, Robin visited a group of women involved in an I-Kiribati women's organisation based in Bikenbau, near to where Robin lived, and discussed with them the possibility of weaving the mats from the gridded drawings. She showed the I-Kiribati women one of these 'set 2' images (*Instant sunshine*) and, to Robin's surprise, the women pronounced it 'unfinished' and 'incomplete' — which Robin later realised was a consequence of its asymmetry, given that all traditional Kiribati mat patterns are symmetrical. She took this to be a signal of their insecurity about the project and decided to approach the Teitoiningaina ('The Day Star'), the Catholic Women's Training Centre in the



Robin White *New Angel* 1998 woven pandanus

village of Teoraereke. With all the sets of drawings complete, she went to see Nei Aroita and Nei Katimira at the Centre. Nei Katimira was already known to Robin as a very accomplished weaver. She was in charge of the handicrafts program run by the Centre, which had three organised groups of women at any one time undertaking training in catering, sewing, and handicrafts. These women already had the advantage of an infrastructure capable of carrying out the project Robin proposed. Katimira was enthusiastic and said they could do it, immediately seeing its possibilities for the women at the Centre. So the gridded plans were laminated and left with Katimira and the work began under her direction.¹

The process for the production of the tablecloth *Food for thought* was less complex, through Robin's existing friendship with Florence Masepei, a highly accomplished embroiderer. Embroidery is a form of women's craft with its roots in missionary training. Embroidery is now used by many women for the elaborate decoration of *lava-lava*, a rectangular cloth worn like a kilt or skirt, characteristically depicting floral emblems and the wearer's name. Florence worked from Robin's watercolours and her interpretations of the motifs reveal a much greater degree of freedom in her capacity to interpret the original imagery.

As might be expected from the nature of the commissioning process, in both the *New Angel* mats and *Food for thought*, the imagery derives from Robin White's previous work in both style and content. Curiously, even the isometric micro-structure of the images strikes a continuity with her earlier prints, paintings and drawings, both through her consistent conjunctions of image and text, of image and landscape, and through the sense of graphic devices which suggest spatial compression. This, with the deliberately questioning relation between text, translations and motifs derived from popular commercial culture, are all characteristics of her work over an extended period of time. The spatially compressed simplification of the imagery, the deadpan irony of trademarks which resonate with echoes of the ready-made, and the ready-made's capacity to suggest a disjunction between cultural and economic contexts gives these works

their incisiveness — at once quietly reflective and pointedly analytical. This suggests that the artist has chosen images and conjunctions which, through her own artistic heritage, evoke the particularity of her own time and place and her ambiguous status as insider and outsider at the same time.

The nature of this collaboration differs greatly from the *Cakacakavata* project. *Cakacakavata* (called *masi* in Fiji) means 'working together'. In this case it has a profoundly symbolic value for the two artists and, through its subject matter, the references to food are similarly loaded.

The tapa of the *Cakacakavata* project were made with Leba Toki from the village of Nasau Moce Island, in the Lau Group in Fiji. Leba describes the collaborative process in relation to the importance of consultation — which they both derive from their common Baha'i beliefs. They speak about a higher motivation for working together: to demonstrate the possibility of collaboration as a symbolic process embodying hope and optimism for a peaceful and harmonious world. As the project developed, both came to recognise the complexities of their differences, and the way in which the work inhabits a space between the conventions of the different worlds they inhabit.

Robin was motivated by the traditional tapa she used to see hanging in the transit lounge at Nadi airport on her many visits to and from Kiribati. She made drawings of the details and she tells how they 'worked on me over a very long time'. In particular, she was stimulated by the contrast with Samoan and Tongan equivalents. Through her Baha'i connections she had visited Leba and knew that she used to make small tapa: 'this is my job, every day, in the village'. For Leba also, tapa is a sign of the outside world, in that it derives from Tonga — the influence of which is strong in the Lau group.² In suggesting they work together, both accepted the symbolic dimension of the act of working 'across the threshold' as being 'about people figuring out how to live together', embodying the wider implications related to the universalist beliefs of Baha'i.

Cakacakavata is the outcome of a month's work by Robin and Leba in Robin's house and studio

in Masterton, New Zealand. The themes and titles of the three-part work, *Tea, Milk, Sugar*, (all produce with Fijian associations), while sharing the same mundane associations ('a cuppa tea') as the *New Angel* series which preceded it, were embraced by Leba in recognition of their deeper symbolism (illus. pp.100,101).

In the collaborative process, Robin's influence is clear in the overall structure of the images — derived from flattened out packaging — and the inclusion of minor imagery both related to the *New Angel* series and other icons of Fijian origin, along with other autobiographical sources. Thus we see the inclusion of the kava bowl *tanoa*, fan *ici*, club *viru*, ceramic bowls *saqmoli*, and the Hindu hand gesture, alongside the teapot, cups, spoons, barcode, cow, Matisse's cut-out birds (Robin remembering Matisse in Tahiti in the 30s), and the *moko* from the portrait of Robin's great-grandmother Mere Te Wia painted by Joseph Merrett in 1850 in the Auckland Museum.

For Robin the themes of packaging and popular cultural icons evoke signs of modernity whereas the material qualities and patterning of the tapa relate directly to Leba's traditional experience. Some innovations are very Fijian — such as the inclusion of centipedes which wander around the edge of *Milk* (humorously referring to the consequences of gossip), and yet for Leba the innovation implicit in this kind of image is 'very new to me'.

The autobiographical dimension of these works is something that is also challenged by the process of working collaboratively. Such elements exist in a particular kind of balance, each questioning its origins in the other artist's identity. The viewer is led to ask: who speaks through which element, through which episode of the process, through which material, process or sign?

In *Sugar*, the image of the Chelsea Sugar factory is one such motif. Albert Tikitu, Robin's father, used to work in the factory when her family lived in Birkenhead on the north shore of Auckland city in the early 1950s — she remembers seeing it on walks along the cliff top — and here again she finds its iconic representation beckoning to her from the packaging she discovers in Fiji.

The packages are much modified in their final form, although still recognisably specific to their origins. These modifications and variations are the record of many decisions, made between the two artists, which occurred at the micro-iconic level. For instance, in *Tea* the original insignia of the lion holding a sword is transformed into a lion holding a Fijian war club. At another scale the viewer becomes aware that whole sections of the original image have been modified, moved around and sometimes replaced by passages of traditional patterning. Thus at one level the work can be understood as a record of its own creation, the implicit narrative between the two artists as their modes of creativity interacted one with the other.

Many traditional aspects of the structure of the tapa are still present and are subject to Leba's initiative and authority. Thus the outside rows of stencils are called *waqani*, the next inner row is *codo*, the next *draudrau ni damu* 'crab pattern', and so on. But the imagery of the cup, the sugar cane and the lion are in the space usually occupied by flowers called *vutu*, and the other icons are called *tutuki* (the lava bowl *tanoa*, fan *ici*, club *viru*, ceramic bowls *saqmoli*, or Matisse's birds). Sometimes these *tutuki* escape the structure and float 'in the night-time area' in the black sections outside the frame created by the structure of the package. Some of the internal devices — like the double black lines around forms — are derived from traditional designs, and sometimes elements such as the cruciform in the *Milk* tapa, began as elaborations of a simple graphic form, which through alternating decisions, in a dialogue between tradition and innovation, arrived at its final resolution.³

In its traditional usage, tapa is used for many other purposes: clothing, blankets or, most significantly, rites of passage for birth, death, marriage, and birthdays. For high ranking persons, very long tapas are still produced as ceremonial gifts, sometimes personalised with the individual's name.⁴ In discussions about her role, Leba speaks with enthusiasm about future works, tapa of different proportions which correspond to the shape of costumes made for weddings or other events like birthdays and funerals.

Gapu, tubig, air, water

The first Australasian Print Project was held in June 1997 at the Northern Territory University (NTU) in Darwin. The artists participating were Djalu Gurruwiwi and his wife Dhopia Yunupingu from north-east Arnhem Land, Ardiyanto Pranata (Indonesia), Yuan Mor'O Ocampo (the Philippines) and Peter Adsett (Northern Territory).⁵ In the choice of artists their hosts consulted advisors with knowledge of artists in the region. They wanted to show how cross-cultural collaboration could be translated into interesting and distinctive art through the artists' commitment to a collaborative process and their experience of new media.⁶ Thus the artists were specifically invited 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 the new set of processes made available through the expertise of the staff of the NTU Print Workshop.

While the facilities of the Workshop and skills of the printers enabled each of the artists to explore unfamiliar territories in significantly new ways, one aspect was immediately significant. Out of their diverse backgrounds, it was their *lack* of expertise with the new media of printmaking which stimulated much interaction around the choice of a common thematic for their work. The chosen theme was the significance of water.

The different cultural backgrounds of Indonesia, the Philippines and that of indigenous and settler Australia were initially subsumed by the artists' relative unfamiliarity with the new media at their disposal. This resulted in a kind of technological displacement which enabled new kinds of experiences and insights into their work. Thus the basis of their differences, their traditions and histories was focused by the theme of the project and the ways in which these artists went about working together, as they responded to the creative uncertainties of the situation presented to them.

For an artist, a new medium is provocative. For these artists it was also an invitation to engage

productively with each other's traditions and to accept the challenge to their conventional ways of working. Apart from the levelling effect of dealing with new media, in different ways each artist was also subject to a cultural condition of displacement which, while affirming their own cultural specificity, produced a cross-cultural engagement of an unfamiliar kind.

Collaboration and interaction across cultures might be understood as a response to an idealism motivated by desire for some kind of universal equivalence between creative practices. This has happened so often that it now seems that acting outside one's traditional sphere has itself become a shared cultural tradition, a characteristic of late 19th-century modernity. Individuals act outwardly, oscillating in the stimulating tension between centres and peripheries, home and away, seeking to affirm their particular identity as artists while at the same time reaching outwards towards new international contexts.

In one sense, it is no surprise that this project should arise as an initiative of a printmaking centre: the practice of printmaking itself epitomises the collaborative process through its long tradition of creative interaction between artists, printers and technicians. While the print is often an end in itself, print technology also enables the translation of imagery from one medium to another, and is therefore compatible with the processes of cultural translation which take place through such events.

With this project, such factors combined to produce a non-hierarchical set of relationships between the artists and an openness to exchange. Despite different backgrounds and varying authority and experience within their previous practice, each was a relative novice at the media at their disposal. This led to a mutual interest in each other's 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. This was facilitated through the discussions which lead the artists to adopt the common theme of water as the guiding topic of their individual works.

In the sophisticated cosmopolitan art world in which three of the participants (and the three printers) practise, other artists' frames of reference tend to be taken for granted, silently assimilated, and cautiously probed through questions and comments. By contrast, the Yolngu artists Djalu and Dhopia proceeded from a completely different set of assumptions, where the equivalent of such knowledge is gained not through interrogation, but through revelation. As 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. The non-indigenous artists and printers were all acutely aware of the position of cultural priority which existed for the indigenous artists. For the non-indigenous artists, there was an acknowledgement that an indigenous artist may assume an intimate relation to place and land, as when travellers search out and recognise the authority of those who own the land through which they pass. As a consequence of this deference to the Yolngu artists (even though the workshop took place on Larrakia land) the potential for a collaborative collective work began to be recognised as a latent possibility as the project proceeded.

The non-indigenous participants also became aware that the informal connections which developed in the context of the quiet intensity of the studio were by necessity being directed towards a quite different level of relationship by the indigenous artists. For the Yolngu, the world does not make sense until its significant elements are properly placed within an appropriate kinship system. So for the Yolngu it was necessary for each of the participants to be located in kinship terms, through which each may find their proper mode of interaction with the other, and recognise appropriate responsibilities in the conduct of their affairs.

Thus early in the project each person discovered how they had been placed within a kinship system which allowed them particular kinds of relationship and activity. This 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. In the last few days of the project, when the opportunity presented itself for a collaborative work, little encouragement was needed from the printers for the artists to produce the screenprint *Gapu, tubig, air, water* (illus. pp. 103–105).

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 architecture within which each of the five artists could contribute to the overall schema. Perhaps unwittingly, but perhaps also as a spontaneous outcome of the synchronicity of this event, this pictorial structure provides profoundly symbolic dimensions to the work. The structure of *Gapu, tubig, air, water* serves to highlight the central image by the senior Yolngu artist Djalu and, in the process of developing the images which frame it, the other artists have implicitly paid homage to his authority and to the Aboriginal participation in the project.

This particular structure and combination of imagery also evokes deep associations between the pictorial conventions of north-east Arnhem Land, as well as ancient cultural connections between the Yolngu and visitors from the Indonesian archipelago which evolved over many centuries of harmonious cultural exchange. Contemporary bark paintings from this region still echo these pictorial conventions, allowing different people and different groups to combine in the production of similarly complex visual imagery to mark significant cultural events. For instance, the great Yirrkala church panels (which stand as the originating icons of the struggle for Aboriginal Land Rights and are now in the Buku Larrnggay Mulka Museum) evoke the same conventional framework as this print.

Both in the choice of medium and in the sequential process used to produce this image,

the non-indigenous artists of this project 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 well aware of their adopted kin relationship and responded accordingly. Thus Mor'O consulted his *ngarndi* (mother) Dhopia 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 kinship association.

As Djalú'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 Djalú about *djári*, 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 Djalú had seen there.

Dhopia completed the cycle by painting her own Yirritja moiety motif of *larrakitj*, the hollow log coffin with *djirrikitj*, the quail who lay their *mapu* (eggs), inside, and *wan'kurra*, the bandicoot, who is looking for *ngatha* (food). Djalú's central image is a part of the story of Bol'ngu, the thunderman, who sends down *djambuwal* (the waterspout), which creates a freshwater waterhole in the middle of the ocean. Other elements of this image are reflections of his earlier paintings of the subject (see for example the painting *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 attention 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 Djalú, it is the site of greatest authority and ancestral power, a reflection of his right to be an artist.

In choosing to write about an image which is unconventional to western eyes, I have deliberately focused on that aspect of the project which took me beyond my expectations, and forced me to

reassess the effects of cross-cultural experience on visual form. How might it be read conventionally? As too disjunctive, as compromised by its stylistic diversity? Or as too didactic, an outcome of the organisers' interventions? From different vantage points, I find I can understand the image in quite different ways: as an inventory, or as 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 about my conventional ways of seeing.

Conclusion

Implicit in every work of art is the internal narrative of its own making. However in the case of works of art made collaboratively, such narratives become central to the ways in which such works may be interpreted and understood. As Vivienne Binns has commented to me, there is a sensual intellectual pleasure which derives from the creative uncertainty such projects engender. Each element of the work resonates with a particular kind of sociality, which is the result of its collaborative process, and each element poses questions about the nature of creativity itself.

The circumstances in which each of these works was produced derive from the conjunction of a particular set of creative displacements — of media, of cultural context, of the circumstances of the engagement between artists. Thus these kinds of work possess specific kinds of internal relationships which translate to the nature of the human relationships, protocols, creative tensions, and the narrative possibilities of the artists' engagement with each other's skills and knowledge.

What are the necessary conditions for a successful collaboration, and how does one judge success? Like any relationship, there is a necessity for trust, commitment, stimulus, curiosity and a willingness to step outside one's familiar frame. In all of these works runs the theme of the nature of the creative relationship and the necessity for each participant to engage with the other's values at a deep level.

And for this viewer, the outcome is deeply satisfying for its 'sensual intellectual' dimension.

Nigel Lendon

In 1997 Nigel Lendon was a Visiting Fellow at the ANU Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, where he wrote the catalogue introduction from which the second part of this essay derives.

The writer is grateful for assistance with finetuning from Robin White and critical commentary from a number of friends: Vivienne Binns, Tim Bonyhady, Claire and Patsy Payne.

- 1 The first mats were made on the understanding that any proceeds would be split three ways. Several sets have been sold so far in New Zealand, plus one to the National Gallery of Australia and one to the Queensland Art Gallery, plus individual commissions. The proceeds have gone towards funding the activities of Teitoiningaina, including housing for women at the Centre and the provision of training to give the women greater economic independence.
- 2 In only two Fijian islands do people make *masi* (tapa) — Moce in the Lau group and Vatulele near the main island Viti Levu.
- 3 The sequence of application of colours is determined by tradition: first is black *loaloo* then the light brown *tassina* (the application of *kesa*, mangrove juice by itself, patted on with netting for underneath padding, producing the textured surface), then brown *umea* and then the final black. Pigment is applied with *tata* — sponge made of shredded tapa, wetted with mangrove juice *kesa*, rolled in the red clay. Black comes from soot made by burning kerosene in an old rusty biscuit tin. In earlier days, black was derived from burning the seeds of the *sikeci* tree.
- 4 Roger Neich and Mick Pendergrast, *Traditional Tapa Textiles of the Pacific*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1997, p.102.
- 5 *The Meeting of Waters: An exhibition of prints and works by artists from the Australasian print project*, Darwin: NTU, 1997.
- 6 The staff of the printmaking studio of the Department of Fine Arts (now called Northern Editions) who initiated and coordinated this project were Basil Hall, Jan Hogan and Leon Stainer. The advisor/curators who nominated the artists were James Bennett, Alison Carroll, and the writer. The first project was funded by the Australia Council, with a second in 1998 funded by SOCOG.

Islands in the Sun
Prints by indigenous artists of Australia and the Australasian region

An exhibition organised by the National Gallery of Australia
in collaboration with Cairns Regional Gallery

Exhibition curators Roger Butler and Brian Robinson

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