

Wakain Thamai

PRIMARY EDUCATION RESOURCE

Billy Missi'n Wakain Thamai

Billy Missi'n Wakain Thamai

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Features of the Billy Missi: *Wakain Thamai* Education Resource Kit

This education kit has been designed in response to the *Billy Missi'n Wakain Thamai* exhibition, and may be used in conjunction with the touring exhibition or as an independent study resource.

It aims to assist both students and teachers with the interpretation and appreciation of the works in the exhibition, as well as to give insights into the practice and culture of the artist.

The kit also identifies key works and themes in the exhibition and provides a context for their use as a resource for students during, and beyond, their gallery experience.

Each page includes questions and activities for students (based on work and theme groupings) that may be adapted to match particular syllabus requirements.

Notes for Teachers

This Education Resource contains content grouped into six themes:

- Ceremony
- Stars
- Sea
- Plant Cultivation
- Flying Fox
- Kinship

Teachers, educators and students are encouraged to use the information provided in this Resource to explore the outlined themes and to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the origins of Billy Missi's work.

This Education Resource connects with the Australian Curriculum (V9) learning area "Visual Arts" and with the Australian Curriculum (V9) General Capabilities:

- Critical and creative thinking
- Personal and social capability
- Intercultural understanding
- Ethical understanding
- Literacy.

It also aligns with the Cross-curriculum Priority Area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures².

This resource encourages teachers and students to recognise and respect the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait art, its significance and purpose.

[1. The Arts | V9 Australian Curriculum](#)

[2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures | V9 Australian Curriculum](#)



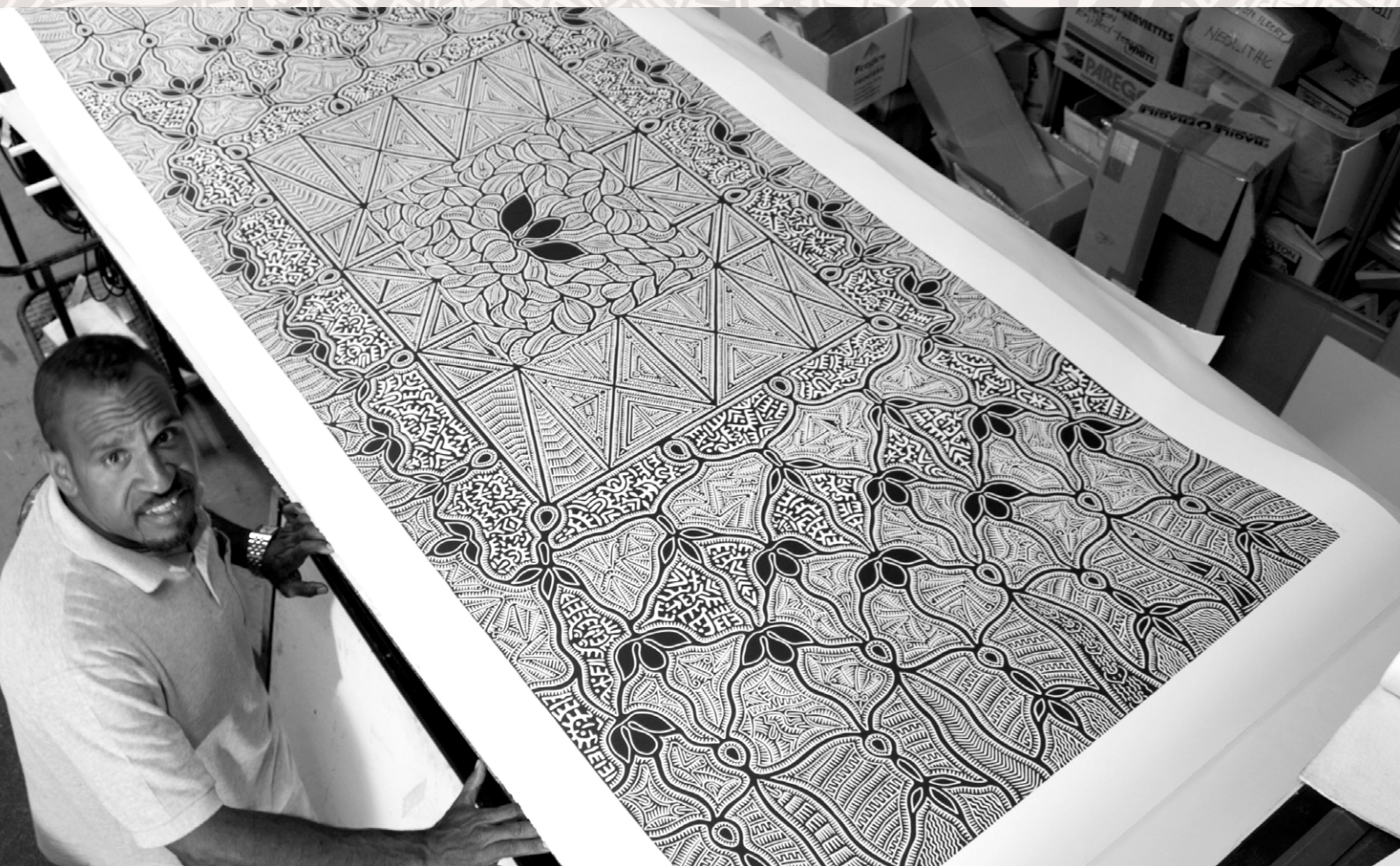
Exhibition Summary

This exhibition celebrates the culture and traditions of Torres Strait Islanders through the legacy of the late artist Billy Missi. Audiences are offered an opportunity to engage with the rich imagery and narratives that reflect the islander way of life. As part of the flourishing Torres Strait contemporary art movement the contributions of artists across both the Eastern and Western Islands are becoming increasingly recognized, with works of many held in prestigious national and international collections. However, few have made as profound an impact as Billy Missi, whose legacy resonates through his powerful art and unwavering commitment to his cultural roots.

Billy Missi's artistic journey is defined by the deep respect he had for the interconnection of land, sea, and sky. His works seamlessly merged traditional cultural knowledge with contemporary printmaking practices, creating a unique and innovative aesthetic that pushed boundaries and revealed traditional knowledge. Billy was not just an artist; he was a storyteller who sought to share his heritage and educate others about his cultural identity and context. His ability to blend the rich cultural

traditions of the islands with modern techniques allowed him to redefine storytelling through art, enriching the global understanding of *Zenadth Kes* (Torres Strait) vibrant culture.

Billy Missi was a pivotal figure in the development of the contemporary Torres Strait art movement. He played a key role in establishing the Mualgau Minaral Artist Collective on Moa Island, which later became Ngalmun Lagau Minaral - Moa Arts. This was the first Indigenous led art centre to be established in the Torres Strait. His dedication and entrepreneurial flair helped to secure the funding required for a professional studio to establish in the Islands, and Moa Arts remains an active centre for Islander artists who continue to exhibit works internationally. Billy worked alongside other local artists, such as David Bosun and Solomon Booth, along with the support of Elders and the island councillors, to create a space for artistic enterprise and self-determination. Billy's leadership, humility, and commitment to his community cemented his role as a significant advocate and a champion of both contemporary printmaking and the traditions of his people.



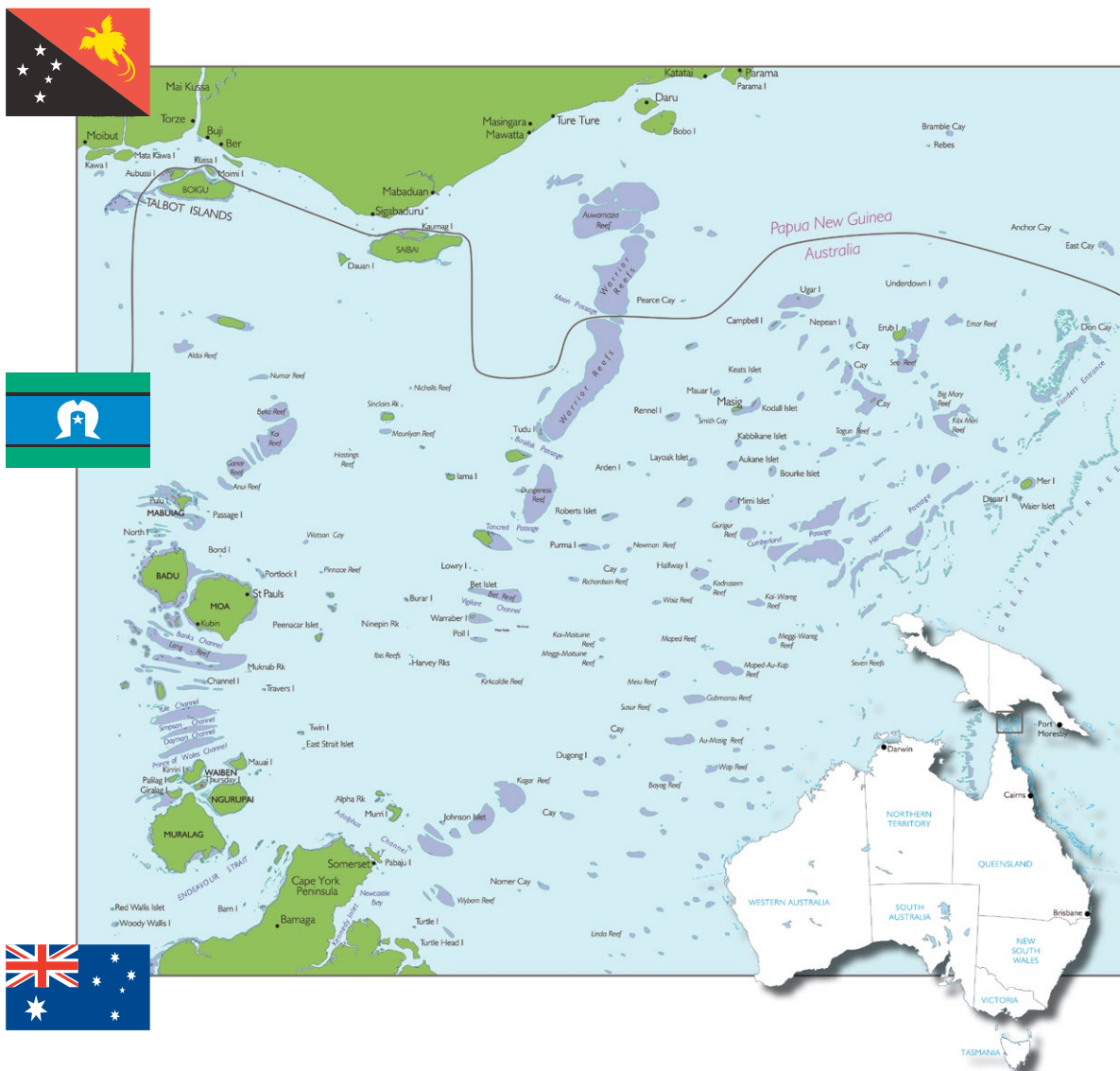
Technique - Lino Printing

Lino printing is a process whereby a block of linoleum is carved using a specialised, very sharp, knife-like tool. The carved shavings are brushed away revealing a raised image, which forms the printing surface. The lino block is then rolled with ink using a tool called a brayer, and passed through a printing press along with the material to be printed on. The inky, raised surface on the lino forms the final image on the paper, while the pieces that have been carved away result in blank, white spaces.

Lino printing is a form of relief printing, as it involves the transferral of printing ink to another surface via areas that are higher than the rest of the block. Other examples of relief printing include woodcuts, rubber stamps and collagraphs.

Billy Missi was one of an increasing group of *Zenadth-Kes* (Torres Strait) artists exploring the use of new mediums or practices such as relief printing as a means of conveying cultural values and tradition.





The Torres Strait Islands

The Torres Strait (called Zenadth-Kes in traditional language) is the complex body of water separating Cape York Peninsula (at the very tip of Queensland) from Papua New Guinea. There are over one hundred islands in the Torres Strait. The Strait is studded with coral reefs and is very shallow, the average sea depth being only ten metres.

The Torres Strait was named after Spanish conquistador Luis Vaéz de Torres. Torres was involved in an expedition attempting to colonise parts of the Pacific in 1606. After becoming separated from his fleet while sailing west through the Pacific, he stumbled across the strait, which now bears his name.

The islands in the Torres Strait are divided into four general cultural and language groups – the Western, Eastern, Central and Northern (or Top Western) islands. Kala Lagaw Ya is the indigenous

language spoken in most of the Western Zenadth-Kes Islands.

The Torres Strait Islander people have always had a very important relationship with the sea. Traditionally, the sea provided a passage for trade with other islands in and around the Torres Strait. People exchanged items to obtain food and artefacts that they could not produce themselves. Torres Strait Islanders often traded with the western region of Papua New Guinea, for the Papuans had bigger trees growing along their rivers to build dugout canoes and a larger land mass that provided many resources. Goldlip pearl shell, coneshells and carapace plates from the Hawksbill turtle were amongst the most precious items exchanged. As well as trading material items, people shared knowledge about language, day-to-day survival and navigation.



View from Thursday Island.

Marine resources played an essential role in Torres Strait Islander culture, and creatures such as fish, sea turtle and dugong are still harvested from the sea for food and ceremonial reasons.

The ocean influences much of the artwork that comes from the Torres Strait region, including the lino prints by Billy Missi. The images featured in the art produced by Islander artists often represent the textures and surfaces of native plants and animals, while patterning is used to express the ripples and shapes created by light on the ocean's surface.

The stars are also a vital part of Islander culture. They are closely observed, as they signal the

changing seasons, tides, and wind. The relationship between the stars and the seasons determines when the Torres Strait Islander people can cultivate and hunt certain foods from the sea and the land. The stars are also used as navigational guides.

Many outside influences have contributed to the Torres Strait Islands' unique identity. Contemporary Torres Strait artists are very proud of their culture, and use modern tools and techniques to convey traditional stories passed down to them by word of mouth. Billy Missi believed that his work was an important way of passing on these stories to future generations.



THEMES AND WORK

Billy Missi'n Wakain Thamai

Themes

Sagulal

Koey sagulal adhaka thamayzimal koey thonarka.
Warupaw uu ngoedhe dhuyuman zibran mathaman
yadpalgan kuki yaw thonar. Arin ngapa angayk,
kayin danalayg.



Zugubal

Thithuyin a zuguban dapar urngu padaka ukaman.
Setha zugubal ngoelmun yaabu danthayayk,
ngoelmunika danalayg midhikidh laganu a malunu.



Malu Ya

Malunu adhal ngoey koey koesalmal guuba a bubu
midhikidh tharthayika. Ngoey uruyl sesthamayk.
Sena ngulayg kidhikidh poeybayzinga. Maluw
ngulayg a thonaral midhikidh tharthayimik.



Mararm Ar Pui'lw Aidail

Ay bawdhaw thonar kaymel ariw thonariya.
Boeradharka a aydal puyika sena aari
thonartidayzinga.



Sapural

Bupaw puyin noe ay thayan, sapuran mina koeyma
ay purthan. Thana koey goersar, mura kaymel
urimik.



Buai Girelal

Ngoelmun yawadhan nu muynu apasi mina
koe ynga. Buwayka apasi.



Ceremony

Choreographed dances commemorate special
occasions. With a sound like approaching thunder,
the warup expresses the coming of the monsoon
and the rain that brings new life.

Stars

The stars connect the skies with the horizon.
The constellations are our orientation to the
environment and surroundings, both land and sea.

Sea

At sea we are sensitive to seasonal changes.
We come to expect certain animals during particular
times. This is part of the knowledge learned about
seasons and the sea.

Plant Cultivation

Seasonal crops are associated with the coming of
the rains. For ground and tree foods each type of
seasonal rain is aligned with stages of cultivation.

Flying Fox

As the wild trees bear fruit, the flying foxes gorge
themselves, while flocking together in large
numbers.

Kinship

Our learned protocols include the respect for family
and humble gratitude towards acknowledging
kinship.

Billy Missi'n Wakain Thamai



Zugubal (The Stars)

The stars connect the skies with the horizon. The constellations are our orientation to the environment and surroundings, both land and sea.



Kulba Yadail | Old Lyrics
2006

linocut printed in black ink from one block
paper: Arches BFK 300 gsm
matrix: 845 x 475 mm
edition size: 90
publisher: KickArts
printer: Theo Tremblay



Zugubal (The Stars)

The stars connect the skies with the horizon. The constellations are our orientation to the environment and surroundings, both land and sea.

Kulba Yadail (old lyrics) 2006

"In our culture, stories and other knowledge of our world have always been handed down orally from generation to generation since time immemorial. It is this knowledge that provides guidance. From the boys' perspective, it is their uncles, fathers and sometimes grandfathers who teach them this knowledge. This plays a big role later in life.

Kulba Yadail teaches us to read the stars, the moon and the sea. This image symbolises *Kulba Yadail* that describes our environment, our culture and also our identity. The piece is divided into three parts: the constellations of the stars, the land and the four seasons of the Torres Strait. There are important *Zugubal* (star constellations) that move through the sky and are intimately connected to the four seasons. One of the most important *Zugubal* is the *Baidam* (shark) which is closely observed in the Western Torres Straits as a signal for changes in the tides, wind and seasons. The four seasons are represented as *Sager* (south-east trade winds), *Gabu Thornar* (winter), *Naigai* (the calm Northerly wind before monsoon) and *Kuki* (the monsoon).

The relationship between the stars and the seasons determines when we can cultivate, hunt and harvest the land. The swaying pattern that runs diagonally from the top left to the bottom right symbolises all of this complex knowledge, that is known as *Kulba Yadail*."

Student Activities

In *Kulba Yadail* (old lyrics), the complex knowledge passed from generation to generation is represented by a swaying pattern. Can you see it? Is there knowledge or advice that has been passed from your parents to you? What is it? How would you express this using pattern or line? Create your own drawing based on this idea.

Investigate star constellations in the area where you live. Research them and create your own drawing or star map.

An important *Zugubal* (star constellation) is the *Baidam* (shark), which signals changes in the tides, wind and seasons. Have you noticed anything that indicates the changing seasons in your area? What are they?

How has Billy represented the four seasons in this work?

Think about how you would tell a story to a friend without speaking. What methods of communication would you use?





Sagual (Ceremony)

Choreographed dances commemorate special occasions. With a sound like approaching thunder, the warup expresses the coming of the monsoon and the rain that brings new life.



Mawan Sagual (Mawa ceremony)
2006

Linocut printed in coloured ink from one block, hand coloured
paper: Hahnemüle 350 GSM
matrix size: 1000 x1990 mm
edition size: 35



Mawan Sagual (Mawa ceremony) - Detail



Sagulal (Ceremony)

Choreographed dances commemorate special occasions. With a sound like approaching thunder, the warup expresses the coming of the monsoon and the rain that brings new life.

Mawan Sagulal (Mawa ceremony) 2006

"In the Western Torres Strait, our ontological beliefs are not only expressed orally but also through dance; in its movement and song. *Mawan Thai* (the Mawa Ceremony) was once performed widely throughout the Western Torres Strait. It was a celebration of the arrival of native fruits and yams, such as *Ubar* or *Wongai* (native plum), *Kowai* (bush apple), *Mergai* (bush berry), *Gabau* (wild yams) and others. It was our ancestors' beliefs that Mawa provided these fruits, and *Mawan Thai* was a celebration and thanksgiving to him for these gifts. But it was more than simple dances, it was a transcendence of the physical, a way to connect with the life forces that flow through our trees, our seas and ourselves.

The *Mawan Thai* was celebrated across the Western Torres Strait and extending into the Central Torres Strait, yet each island had its own unique way of expressing and performing it (see A.C. Haddon, 1904:347-349).

The man in the Mawa mask in the foreground orchestrates the movement of the dance. He is anonymous. A line of dancers in the background frame the figure of Mawa, and express their joyfulness of the riches of the crops. The basket below centre represents a good season for *Gabau* (wild yams).

Kaisi (the onlookers) carefully observe the strong and fit dancers as the ceremony proceeds. My uncle once told me that it was during these ceremonies that marriages were arranged. The members of the tribe that produced the biggest harvest were those most favoured".

Student Activities

Investigate the ways in which different cultures celebrate food. Can you think of any traditions associated with food?

The central figure in the foreground wears a *Mawa* mask. He orchestrates the movement of the dance. Masks are used in different ways – how many uses can you think of? What happens when we put a mask on?

Marriages were often arranged during the *Mawa* Ceremony. Dance was also used as a way to express the connection with the life force that flows through everything. Why do we dance? Research the role of performance and dance in your own and other cultures.

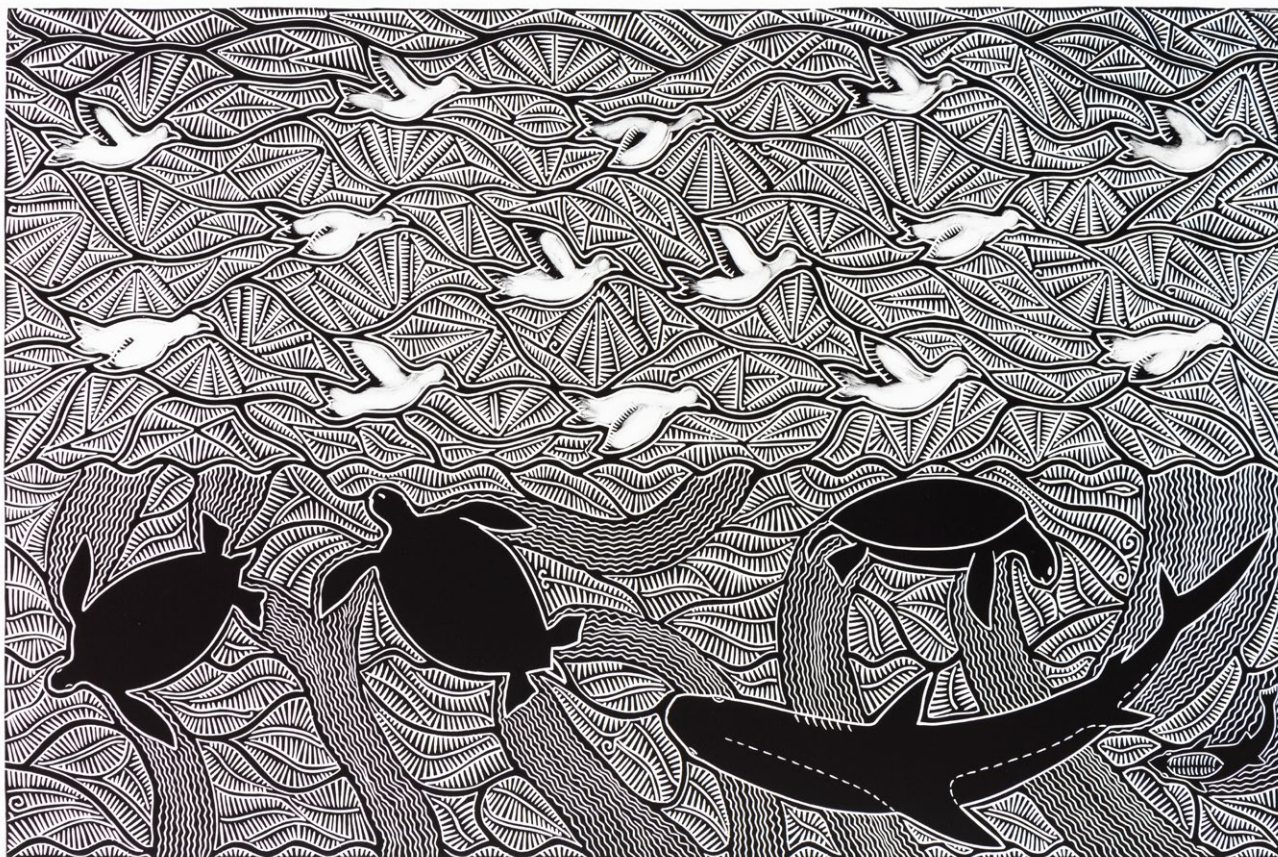
How many dancers can you see in the work? How many different kinds of food can you see?





Malu Ya (The Sea)

At sea we are sensitive to seasonal changes. We come to expect certain animals during particular times. This is part of the knowledge learned about seasons and the sea.



Gainau au Kubi I Flock of Torres Strait Pigeons
2008

linocut printed in black ink from one block
paper: Arches BFK 300 GSM
matrix: 670 x 1010 mm
edition: workshop proof



Gainau au Kubi I Flock of Torres Strait Pigeons - Detail



Malu Ya (The Sea)

At sea we are sensitive to seasonal changes. We come to expect certain animals during particular times. This is part of the knowledge learned about seasons and the sea.

***Gainau Au Kubi* (flock of Torres Strait pigeons) 2008**

"In *Zenadth-Kes* (the Torres Strait) since time immemorial, seasonal timeframes were always told by sightings of animals, birds, changes in vegetation, tides, rains and the constellations.

This image is about *Gainau* (Torres Strait pigeons) crossing over from Papua New Guinea's Western Province, South to Cape York's East and West coasts.

When these sighting occur, it indicates to our people that the *Soalal* (turtle mating) season is on, and the sharks are carrying eggs. It is when they are very vicious and touchy.

This knowledge as been handed down orally from generation to generation by our forefathers".

Student Activities

Many animals migrate to different parts of the world at certain times of the year. Why do they do this?

Do some research on a migratory animal then create your own artwork, using patterns to convey its journey.

Why are sea turtles so important in Torres Strait Island culture?

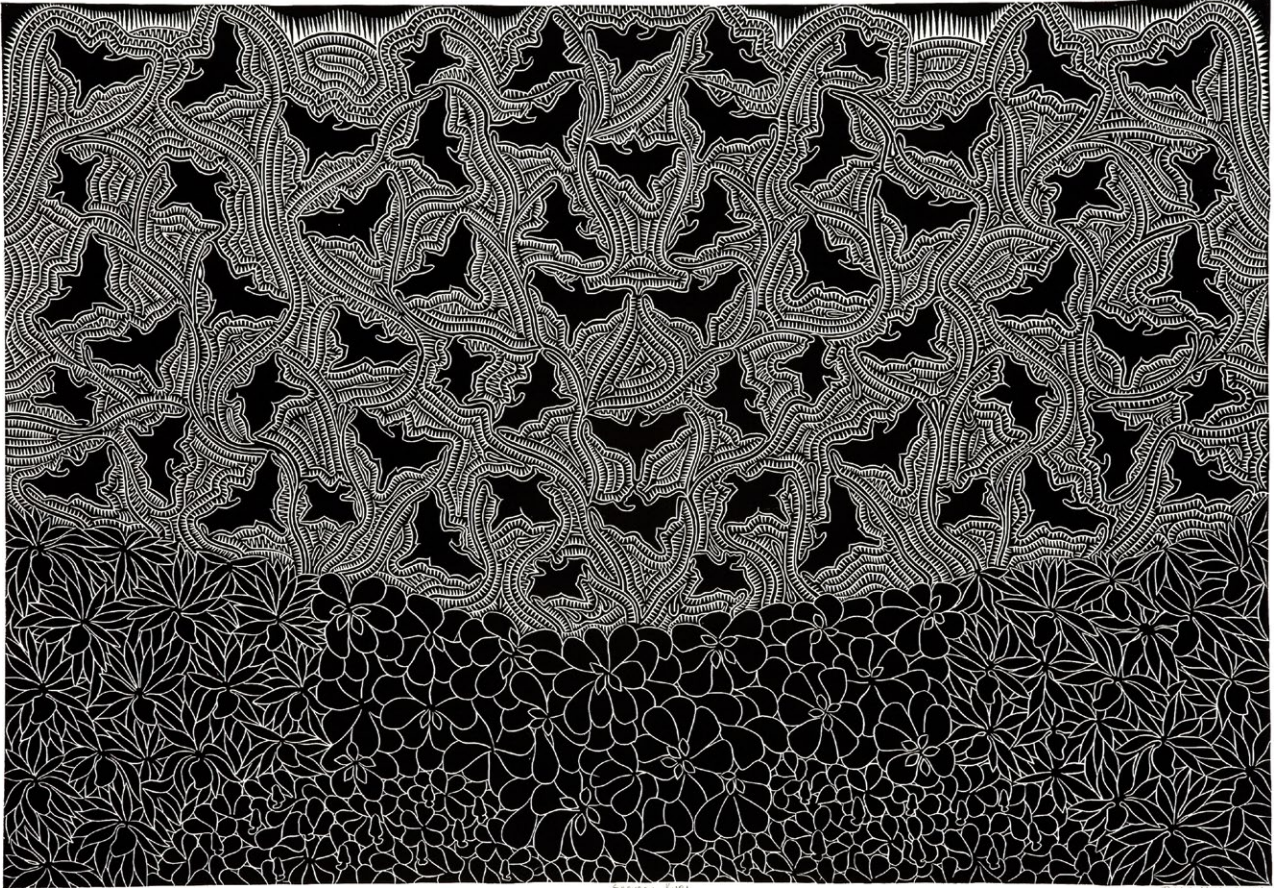
How many pigeons/turtles/sharks can you see in the work?





Sapural (Flying Fox)

As the wild trees bear fruit, the flying foxes gorge themselves, while flocking together in large numbers.



Sapur au Kubi | Dark Flock of Bats
2006

linocut printed in black ink from one block
paper: Arches BFK 300 gsm
matrix: 693 x 955 mm
edition size: 90



Sapur au Kubi | Dark Flock of Bats - Detail



Sapural (Flying Fox)

As the wild trees bear fruit, the flying foxes gorge themselves, while flocking together in large numbers.

Sapur Au Kubi (dark flock of bats) 2006

"During mango, almond and cashew nut season a lot of *Sapur* (Flying Foxes) come to our village and gardens. When the sun begins to set in the western sky, the *Sapur* usually come in flocks from the thick mangroves that fringe the coastline. The *Sapur* only come out at dusk to raid the fruit trees so that people cannot see them. Otherwise they would be targeted by hunters and chased away. Despite this they do make a lot of noise as they feed.

The *Sapur* suck the juice out of the fruit and dispose of the rest making a lot of mess under the trees. They do this all night until morning breaks when they take flight back to their isolated, thick scrubs and mangroves.

Growing up in the islands in the 1970s, these sightings were common during fruit season. It is our uncles who tell us that whenever flocks of *Sapur* approach the gardens, the fruit is ripe. This image shows a large number of *Sapur* flying to the village to feed on the fruit trees. They circle above the trees to choose where they will feed for the evening".

Student Activities

Sapur (flying foxes) appear at dusk and feed during the night so that people cannot see them. How do flying foxes find their way around in the dark?

How many different kinds of flora can you see in the work?

Do some research on flying foxes. What are 'camps'? When are they occupied?

How many flying foxes can you count in the artwork?

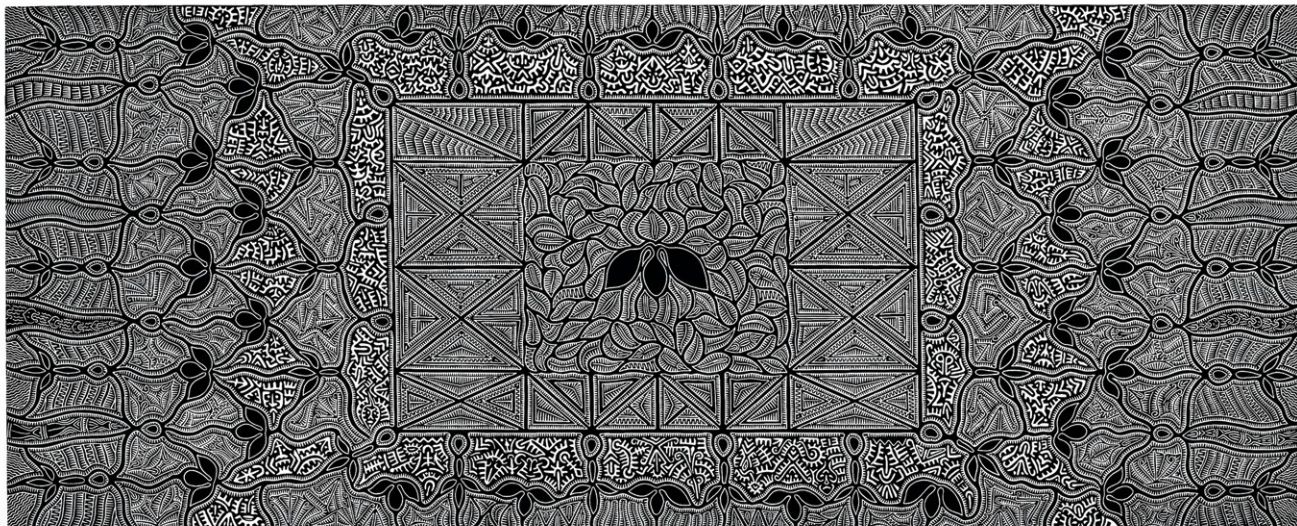
What do you think the swirling pattern in the sky represents?





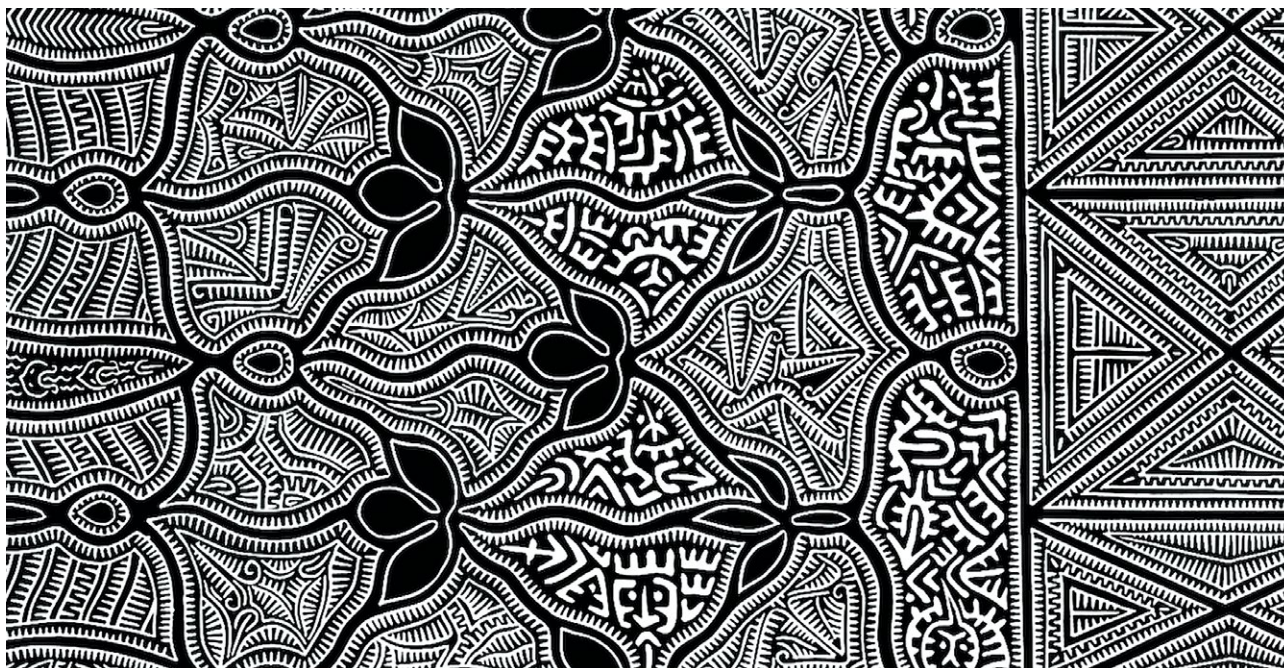
Buai Girelal (Kinship)

Our learned protocols include the respect for family and humble gratitude towards acknowledging kinship.



Urapun Kai Buai | One Big Kin
2007

linocut printed in black ink from one block
paper: Hahnemüle 350 gsm
matrix: 1000 x 2500 mm
edition size: 35



Urapun Kai Buai | One Big Kin - Detail



Buai Girelal (Kinship)

Our learned protocols include the respect for family and humble gratitude towards acknowledging kinship.

Urapun Kai Buai (one big kin) 2007

"Torres Strait Islanders are all related to each other; or so my grandparents, uncles and aunties told me when I was young. Growing up in the islands has made me see and realise that. The sharing of food and traditional visits and staying over, in the village or on neighbouring islands, called *Garab Thiay*, are important kinship events.

Wongai is a native fruit of our region and I use it as a metaphor for kinship. Therefore it is placed at the very centre of this piece. The wavy lines going outwards represent the movement of relatives to all four corners of the Straits. This happened mainly through intermarriage.

Identical patterns on either side of the work represent relatives to the East, West, North and South of our region. Tight, strong patterns represent the bonds between extended families. These were maintained through the practice of culture, through the choreography of dances, song and through *Garab Thiay* traditional visits.

In this work the seeds of the *Wongai* represent the beginnings of a family on another island. The leaves or plants represent the family growing there. The bearing of fruit represents a generation of children.

Today the increase in intermarriage has made it far more complicated for modern Torres Strait Islanders to understand their family relationships. The patterns on the far left and right represent the fact that it is very important to our current elders to pass on the knowledge of these movements of people; for our kinship knowledge to be available to the younger generations, so they can know and consider them.

In the late 1800s the first genealogy of the Torres Strait was recorded by Rivers as a part of the A. C. Haddon expedition. Later, in 1901, it was released in six volumes and through the journals and tables of family trees you can understand these relationships.

All of this has inspired me to turn the oral history and written journals into a work of visual art and to call it *Urapun Kai Buai* (one big kin)".

Student Activities

In the work *Urapun Kai Buai*, wongai, a native fruit of Billy's region, is used as a metaphor for kinship. Think about your own family. How would you represent your relationship? Do you have a family crest, symbol or motto? Create your own.

Investigate your family tree. How far can you go back? How are you linked? Try to create your own family tree without words, using your own symbols to represent your relationship.

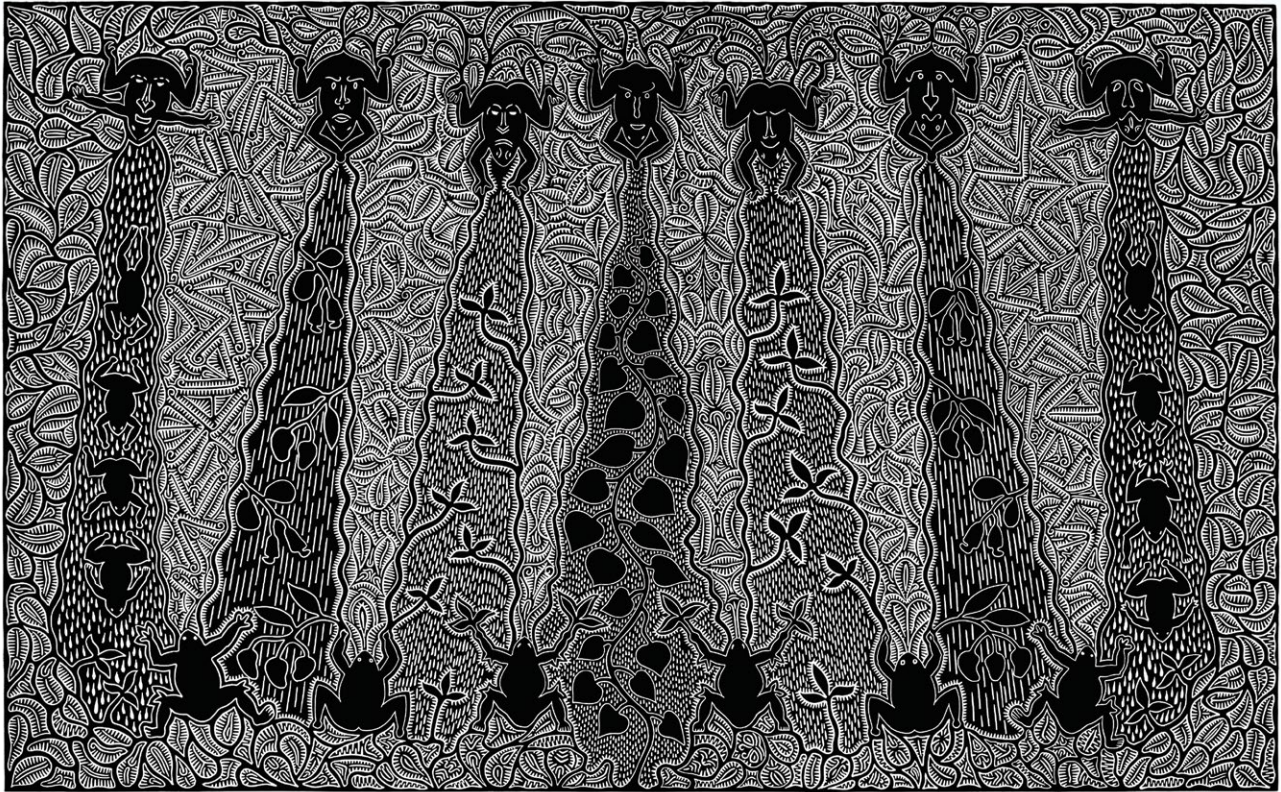
How does your family get together or celebrate? Investigate family traditions in other cultures.





Mararm Ar Pui'lw Aidail (Plant Cultivation)

Seasonal crops are associated with the coming of the rains. For ground and tree foods each type of seasonal rain is aligned with stages of cultivation.



Ari Sulam Ka | Calling on the Rain
2007

linocut printed in black ink from one block
paper: Hahnemüle 350 gsm
matrix: 1005 x 1615 mm
edition size: 35



Ari Sulam Ka | Calling on the Rain - Detail



Mararm Ar Pui'Iw Aidail (Plant Cultivation)

Seasonal crops are associated with the coming of the rains. For ground and tree foods each type of seasonal rain is aligned with stages of cultivation.

Ari Sulam Ka (calling on the rain) 2007

"The frogs call up to the rain spirits, who provide the water in preparation for new life in the cycle of nature. The work asks us to consider what it is that we should be asking for and to acknowledge the interconnected and dependent nature of survival. The rains mark the beginning of a new cycle, and it is at this time that if you ask for what you need, you will receive.

While the rain signifies seasonal change, there are many types of rain, and they have different names. *Ubarau Peoythurathai Ari* is the light rain associated with *Wongai*, *Malgui Ari* is steady rain ideal for planting and *Laga Sizarai Ari* is the rain of the first monsoon for the season and is associated with very heavy downpours".

Student Activities

Stories often teach us important things. Think about a story that has taught you a lesson and share it with the people around you.

Some traditional stories in Billy's culture outline the importance of conserving natural resources. How do you think this relates to the world today?

How would you use images to raise awareness about important issues in today's society?

Think about an issue that concerns you then design an artwork based on that idea, without using any words. How would you convey your message?

Look at the frogs. Do you notice that some have patterns on their backs? What do they remind you of? Why are they different to the other frogs in the picture?



Glossary

Abstract: pertaining to the non-representational art styles of the 20th century; having onl yintrinsic form

Acknowledge: to recognise or take notice of

Ari Sulam Ka: calling on the rain

Baidam: shark

Bathu Ya: medicine

Buai Girelal: family

Carapace: a bony shield or shell covering some or all of the back part of an animal, as of a turtle

Ceremony: a formal activity conducted to observe an important occasion

Choreograph: to manage, direct or manoeuvre

Conserve: to preserve or save

Constellation: a group of stars (to which a name is often given)

Contemporary: of the present time; existing or occurring at the same time

Culture: the behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular a particular social, ethnic or age group; a form or stage of civilisation

Elder: an influential and senior member of a tribe or community

Gabau: wild yams

Gabu Thornar: winter

Gainau: Torres Strait pigeons

Gainau Au Kubi: flock of Torres Strait pigeons

Garab Thiay: kinship event

Genealogy: lineage or ancestry; an account of the descent and ancestry of a person, family or group; a study of family ancestries or histories

Gorge: to stuff with food; to eat greedily

Immemorial: extending back beyond memory, knowledge or record

Kaisi: onlookers

Kinship: being of kin; family relationship; relationship by nature or qualities; affinity

Kowai: bush apple

Kuki: the monsoon

Kulba Yadail: old lyrics

Laga Sizarai Ari: the rain of the first monsoon

Malgui Ari: steady rain

Malu Ya: the sea

Mararm Ar Pui'Iw Aidail: rains

Mawan Sagulal: Mawa ceremony

Mawan Thai: the Mawa Ceremony

Mergai: bush berry

Metaphor: something that is used to represent something else

Migrate: to pass from one region or climate to another

Migratory: periodically migrating; nomadic or wandering

Monsoon: rainy season

Naigai: the calm Northerly wind before monsoon

Orchestrate: to arrange or manipulate

Sager: south-east trade winds

Sagulal: ceremony

Sapur: flying fox

Sapural: flying foxes

Sapur Au Kubi: dark flock of bats

Seasonal: depending on or accompanying the seasons or a particular season

Signify: to mean, express, indicate or imply

Soalal: turtle mating

Thadharal Sinik: spear fishing

Tradition: a long-established or inherited way of thinking or acting; a continuing pattern of culture, beliefs or practices; a customary or characteristic method or manner

Traditional: pertaining to, handed down by, or in accordance with tradition

Ubar or Wongai: native plum

Ubarau Peoythurathai Ari: light rain

Urapun Kai Buai: one big kin

Wadhuam: uncle

Zenadth-Kes: Torres Strait

Zugubal: the stars or star constellations

Billy Missi'n

Wakain Thamai

Credits and Acknowledgements

This Education Resource has been produced in association with the major body of work created for the *Billy Missi'n Wakain Thamai* exhibition.

Billy Missi'n Wakain Thamai is an exhibition developed by NorthSite Contemporary Arts (Gimuy/Cairns) and touring Australia in partnership with Gab Titui Cultural Centre/ Torres Strait Regional Authority (Waiben/Thursday Island) and Museums & Galleries Queensland. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government's Visions of Australia Program.



Touring Partners



NorthSite Funding Partners



Where possible this education kit uses the language names provided by the artist. The spelling of Indigenous works and names varies. They generally appear in this publication according to conventions of accepted usage and authoritative sources.

Dimensions of works of art are given in millimetres (mm), height preceding width.

Photos of Billy Missi by David Campbell unless indicated otherwise.

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