

SESSERAE: The works of Dennis Nona

Education Resource for Secondary School Students

This Education Resource has been produced by Chris Handran, DELL Gallery @ QCA, for use during and after a visit to the exhibition Sesserae: the works of Dennis Nona. For more information, contact (07) 3735 6101 or c.handran@griffith.edu.au.



Sesserae (Badu Island Story) 2004-5

Linocut, hand coloured 1110 x 1980 mm Courtesy of the artist and the Australian Art Print Network, Sydney

About the artist: Dennis Nona

“I was born in 1973 on Badu Island in the Torres Strait and as a young boy I was taught the traditional craft of wood carving. This, along with my cultural heritage, learnt through story telling and ceremonies, helped me to develop my linocut skills that feature an intricate decorative style based on the rich narrative legends of the Torres Strait Islander people. The symbols I use of sea creatures, masks and designs are from our traditional masks, artefacts and my concept-figured designs.



I feel strongly about retaining my culture through my art. I hold an Associate diploma of Art from Cairns TAFE and a Diploma of Visual Arts in Printmaking from the Institute of Arts, Australian National University, Canberra. I am currently completing my Masters in Printmaking at Griffith University in Brisbane.”

The life and culture of the Torres Strait

The Torres Strait spans the 150km between the northern tip of Queensland and the Southern Shores of Papua New Guinea. Badu Island, where Dennis Nona was born, is one of the western Torres Strait Islands.

There are over 100 islands in the Torres Strait, approximately 19 of which are populated. These have been home to Torres Strait Islanders for at least 3500 years. In this time they have developed their own unique culture, which bears traces of influence from the 'mainlands' both north and south. The biggest influence on the development of TSI culture, however, has been their surroundings.

Look at the map at right. What are three significant things about Badu Island that you can discern from this map?



map of Badu Island reproduced with thanks to Gary Swinton, School of Geography and Environmental Science, Monash University

The sea surrounds the small islands of the Torres Strait; it provides a home for the Islanders, a means of transport, a source of food, as well as being a force to which Islanders are exposed. As such, the relationship to the sea is of the utmost importance in Islander's everyday lives.



Lagaw Wakaintamain (Thinking of Island Home) 1997
Linocut 310 x 340 mm Courtesy of the artist and the Australian Art Print Network, Sydney

Both before and after colonisation, a healthy trade existed between the Islands. From the mid 1800s, the pearling industry produced increased contact with Europeans, with many Islanders employed as ships' crew or as pearl divers. With the decline of these industries, many Islanders were forced to move to the mainland in search of work. Today, two-thirds of Torres Strait Islanders live on the mainland of Australia. Despite this dispersal, they maintain strong links with their home.

Imagine that you had to leave your home to search for work in a culture that was completely different to your own. How would you maintain contact with your homeland and its culture?

Reading between the lines: traditional knowledge

The prints of Dennis Nona are heavily influenced by the traditional stories of Badu Island. These stories would traditionally be told verbally or through dance and performance. Dennis has said “I am a dancer myself when I draw. I know exactly how I’m going to draw certain things, like I’m dancing myself”. The story determines the composition of the picture, just as it would the choreography of a dance.



Sesserae dance performed by the Badu Island Dance Team. Photograph by Mick Richards

Look at the works in the exhibition and select one that you think tells a story in an interesting way. How has Dennis composed the picture to tell the story? How has he suggested the passing of time? _____



Examine the ‘negative spaces’ in Dennis Nona’s linocut prints. How would you describe the patterns and shapes that you can see in between figures and objects? What is the effect of these details on the overall composition?

The traditional stories of the Torres Strait often contain very important knowledge for Islanders. The stories are used as a means of passing on this knowledge. The Sesserae story, for example, teaches hunting techniques, knowledge about plants, trees and vines, cooking techniques, important rituals and customs. It also highlights the importance of sharing this knowledge amongst the community.

Identify two other works in the exhibition that could also be used to pass on knowledge. What sort of knowledge do they contain? _____

Look at how the exhibition has been organised into themes. Which of these themes relates to your life and culture or to the art that you make? How do they relate? _____

Printmaking in the Torres Strait: a new medium for old skills

Since the early 1990s, there has been an explosion of printmaking activity in the Torres Strait. The work of Dennis Nona is at the forefront of these developments. Traditional skills including wood carving and carving into sea shells have influenced the distinctive style that is developing. These traditional skills were not thought of as 'art' in the sense that they are today; in Dennis Nona's traditional language, there is no word for "art". The word "minarr", which means pattern making, was applied to wood carving, rock drawing and body decoration, suggesting that these skills were thought of as being part of everyday life.



left: Dugong 2005 carved Red Cedar
right: Dibadib (Shell Necklace) 2004 Etching 220 x 330mm

Are there aspects of your life or culture that could be considered as art, but are not normally described that way? _____



The main two printmaking techniques used by Dennis Nona are linocut printing and etching.



Linocut printing is a technique where an artist carves into a block of lino, which has a rubbery texture. This block is then inked and put through a printing press, transferring the image to a sheet of paper.



Etching is a process where an artist works on a specially prepared metal sheet. Chemicals and acids are used to etch the image into the metal. This sheet is then run through a printing press to transfer the image to paper.

Dennis Nona has compared the process and the results of linocut printing to traditional woodcarving, and that of etching to shell carving.

Identify some etchings and some linocut prints in the exhibition. How would you describe the differences between these prints? How might these differences relate to traditional carving techniques?

top: carving a lino block
middle: preparing an etching plate
bottom: using the printing press