

From Papunya to Pakistan

Connecting with Asia through the research projects of Cicada Press,
COFA UNSW

Michael Kempson

College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia

Abstract

Early in 2004, Cicada Press was established at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales (COFA UNSW) in Sydney as one strategy devised to re-invigorate student experience in conventional printmaking practice. This was achieved by aligning instruction in its technical routines with the research culture of an academic institution by using the creative capital found in collaborative partnerships. This paper reports upon the development and challenges that have shaped the activities of Cicada Press with specific reference to the enriching experience developed from the interaction between the artists invited to produce work and the students who participate in the course that supports this program. Cicada Press' pursuit of diverse cultural engagements in the Asia Pacific region will be discussed; featuring workshops, exchange exhibitions and print collaborations in countries as diverse as China, New Zealand, Thailand and Pakistan. One featured example is the ongoing relationship between COFA UNSW and the Indigenous community of Papunya, in the Northern Territory. It was here, in 1971, where the teacher Geoffrey Bardon encouraged a group of senior lawmen to inscribe their ancient culture in permanent images based on their own visual traditions. Despite its international fame as the home of Western Desert Art this community was without an art centre for many years. It was with the support of friends of the community like Dr. Vivien Johnson who, in 2006, organised several workshops and fundraising activities for a new art centre. With Cicada Press's ongoing printmaking collaborations and the COFA trained graduates that assist in the management of the centre, a continuing exhibition program reminds the world of this talented community's distinguished place in Australian art history.

In the print workshops of academic institutions the limits dictated by space and expensive plant equipment require a communal approach to matrix and image production. Unlike direct autographic processes like painting and drawing, printmaking has complex technical routines that demand a more deliberate pace. A positive consequence of this episodic way of working is that printmaking lends itself to a collaborative approach. During my student day's printmaking instruction focussed on a singular and at times pedantic approach, while today at COFA our courses attempt to cater for a range of different artistic temperaments and methodologies. It is important to find a balance between the camaraderie we build in shared working routines while still nurturing an environment that demands an individual approach to creative decision-making. The research group that I direct at COFA—Cicada Press, uses a custom printing model that takes the collaborative approach a step further by inviting artists with little or no experience in printmaking to develop research projects with the active engagement and expertise of staff and the developing skills of students.

Firstly today I'd like to address how Cicada Press functions by outlining some project outcomes and then finish with a brief overview of our involvement in a range of collaborations with artists and institutions within the Asia-Pacific region. However the body of this presentation will focus on an ongoing project with a community of Indigenous artists and in so doing, tell the story of Papunya in

Central Australia, highlighting its fluctuating but preeminent place in the history of the Western Desert Art movement.

In 2004 after taking up an appointment as Head of Printmaking at COFA UNSW it was made clear to me by the Dean that Printmaking was at the crossroads and in need of new direction. As an academic my virtues do not lie comfortably with critical or theoretical inclinations, rather, when confronted with a problem my preference is to seek a practical answers. My solution to this problem was the establishment of an educationally focused custom-printing workshop—Cicada Press. Over the last 6 years artists of national repute, often with little or no experience in printmaking practice, have been invited to enter into a collaborative working relationship. This relationship is mutually beneficial and results in a body of work using primarily auto-graphic print technologies.

The creative act of making a print and the imaginative deliberations behind a work of art, are as elemental as a cloud—heavy with activity, impulse and inclination and it is in the midst of this cloud that I locate the artist. Occupying a marginally different space is the custom printer whose task it is to assist in making sense of one's vision and to place it securely in the world. There is no firm line. If the inspiration is a cloud then the act of making must be in the realm of the solid and tangible. As the custom printer I need to understand these fundamental structures of 'bricks and vapour' and it's my role to know just how to adjust the recipe—the ratio of bricks to vapour—from project to project.

Cicada Press as a workshop model, while developed with a degree of intuition, is positioned under the theoretical umbrella of the Brazilian educational theorist Paolo Freire who emphasised dialogue, community, informal processes and the importance of lived experience in learning.

'Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.'
(Freire, 1998, p. 35)

In the six years since the inception of Cicada Press, nearly 950 editions have been created in projects with 85 artists, primarily from Australia, and recently involving collaborations with International artists. These projects have resulted in exhibitions with institutions in countries within the Asia-Pacific region including Thailand, New Zealand, China and Pakistan as well as the Middle East in the United Arab Emirates.

The intent of Cicada Press's supporting courses, are different from most programs offered in art schools where the focus is normally on the outcomes of the individual participant. Importantly our students experience a working relationship with artists who have varying conceptual and aesthetic interests. The differing procedural strategies employed in this collaborative relationship between artist and printer is of crucial instructional benefit. What better way for a student to deal with the challenge of understanding their own creative process than to participate in the conceptualising, the choices and struggles and the crafting to completion of work by artists they respect. As sometimes happens, more can be learnt from the insight that emerges when working with artists that you might not necessarily understand or appreciate, and with personal connection, one hopes, comes respect and understanding. The work Cicada Press has done with tribal Indigenous artists is one such example.

In Australian parlance, the settlement of Papunya—situated on the northern tip of the majestic West MacDonnell Ranges in the Western Desert region of the Northern Territory—is considered a 'remote' community. It is home to people who have developed a way of life that is intrinsically linked with this location and its environment. The region accommodates at least 5 language groups - the Anmatyerre, Arrente, Luritja, Pintupi and Warlpiri who have lived in relative coexistence for at least 40 thousand years. The University of Melbourne's, Professor Paul Carter describes Aboriginal

knowledge of country as a concept of a place in which separate Western concepts of politics and sociology, history and geography, ritual and religion all form a metaphysical identity that is both singular and collective. (Carter, 2004, p. xiv)

However, respect of Indigenous Australians and their culture hasn't been widespread since European settlement, even early into the 20th century, tragic clashes in the Papunya region occurred. In the 50s the Australian government built a bore for water and rudimentary housing in Papunya to provide room for the increasing number of people who were compelled to leave their traditional life. By the early 70s the community had grown to more than a thousand and as a consequence, tensions emerged between tribal groups who, contrary to their custom, were forced together. These circumstances were exacerbated by poor living conditions leading to disease, violence and premature death. By 1970 roughly half the population at Papunya was under 16 years of age. (Johnson, 2000, p.190)

It was into this troubled environment that a teacher by the name of Geoffrey Bardon, an art education graduate from the institution that was to become COFA UNSW, took up an appointment at the local Papunya School in 1971. Perceived as being different from other non-indigenous residents, he was sympathetic to and sought friendship with these tribal aborigines. Ultimately though, in the space of 18 months in Papunya, this engagement was to take such an exacting toll on his health that he was never to fully recover. Despite this, Bardon became the catalyst for a painting movement known as Western Desert Art that opened an understanding, appreciation and respect for the culture of these first Australians and to forever cement a distinguished place for Papunya in the annals of Australian art. (Johnson, 2008, p. 2)

For it was the painting of a mural on a wall of the Papunya School that was to change the course of history. Bardon sought to re-educate 'an out of control younger generation' via art (Johnson, 2000, p.190) by asking the children to paint their stories and as a consequence learnt that specific elders of the community had custodial responsibility for particular 'Dreaming' totems. The mural depicting the Honey Ant Dreaming refers to the site of a great gathering of ancestors where the massive petrified body of the revered Honey Ant lays nestled in three hills to the east of their community. This Dreaming story is important to all language groups as it links mythological travelling routes and neighbouring country. (Johnson, 2010, p. 2) The gathering of tribes in Papunya mirrored this dreaming story, and despite previously mentioned antipathies, it was also an unprecedented setting for the exchange of ritual knowledge. It was this knowledge that Geoffrey Bardon was able to assist in directing into artistic expression. He insisted that artists paint these Dreamings using traditional motifs. Consequently, the action of creating the mural was for these men, the first time that they had seen themselves in their own image, writ large on the face of a European building. It heralded a shift in their thinking from the production of ephemeral images as a communal ceremonial activity, using sand painting and body decoration. One outcome of these cultural productions was that it created unforeseen and dangerous problems in protocol and indigenous law and as an endnote the mural was later whitewashed, an act of gross cultural violation, and an indication of the indifference and hostility that Bardon faced with some white authorities.

After the company Papunya Tula Arts was formed in 1972 there came a gradual acknowledgement that these acrylic paintings by Aboriginal Australians be defined as contemporary art. Today Papunya Tula Arts is a phenomenal cultural and financial success and as a result of their example, it is now taken for granted that most Indigenous communities will have a commercially vibrant art centre.

In the 90s the Papunya Tula operations bypassed Papunya when the painting sheds were built on Pintubi land in a new community called Kintore 300km to the west. Those living in Papunya - including the last of the original painters, their widows and descendants - did not have a place to paint and store their work. Not only did they have no art making facilities - unlike almost every other Indigenous community in Australia—they also had no organisation committed to promoting the now

sporadic offerings being produced. As a consequence Papunya went into a perilous downward spiral.

Friends of the community, like the scholar Dr. Vivien Johnson, sought to redress this sad irony for the founders of Western Desert art. In 2006, several painting and print workshops were organised for fundraising. After the triumph of the inaugural *New Beginnings* exhibition at COFA UNSW's Ivan Dougherty Gallery in 2007, sufficient funds allowed the community to open a new centre called Papunya Tjupi Arts. Currently managed by two COFA graduates, there is an ongoing series of COFA workshops and educational opportunities of mutual benefit. Today, Papunya Tjupi serves over 140 artists, empowering Papunya residents to share knowledge and foster self-determination through arts practice, community activities and meaningful employment. In the words of one of Papunya's Warlpiri elders, the nationally famous artist Michael Nelson Jagamara, the goal for the communities cherished art centre is twofold: 'So that our children will know their stories but also so that our children will have an occupation for the future'. (Johnson, 2010, p.2)

The prints that are a practical outcome of this activity with Papunya Tjupi Arts are included in exhibition projects, and referenced in the associated seminars and workshops developed with comparable institutions, particularly in Asia/Pacific region. While the prints produced by artists at Cicada Press form the core of many of these exhibition exchanges, often undergraduate and postgraduate students will also be participants in these collaborations. This offers an invaluable opportunity to develop new experience and broaden their cultural awareness, particularly for those who travel to participate with scheduled events.

An early project was an initiative of Kitikong Tilokwattanotai, a Masters graduate from COFA UNSW in 2004. This large exhibition, held at the Chiangmai University Art Museum in 2005 and reciprocated at COFAspace in Sydney the following year, featured work by staff and students of both institutions. In January 2011 another exhibition project, this time with The Faculty of Art and Architecture of Rajamangala University of Technology also included a seminar and workshop. One gratifying outcome from Kitikong's experience at Cicada Press was his own custom-printing workshop in Chiangmai called CAP. We share ideas, expertise and moral support in his work with many internationally recognised Thai artists, including Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Kade Javanalikhorn and seek to develop exchange projects with the indigenous Hmong tribes-people of the country's mountainous north and artists from Papunya. Another project with a collection of Chiangmai artists along with international friends from Australia, Japan and the USA resulted in *Confluence of 9* held at the National Gallery of Thailand, Bangkok in 2008.

Projects with our near neighbors in New Zealand have included residencies at Cicada Press by expat Kiwis including: Euan Macleod; Chris O'Doherty aka Reg Mombassa; Alison Clouston and Locust Jones. In 2008 Jenny Neligan, Director of Bowen Galleries in Wellington, asked me to contribute to and print for a project titled 'Crossing the Tasman'—a portfolio edition of prints by 14 artists, all of whom located themselves between Australia and New Zealand—which was unveiled at the Melbourne Art Fair of the same year. One artist, Gregory O'Brien—a prolific draughtsman, poet and curator from Wellington, made an etching inspired by a poem he wrote in 1982 called *Basement kitchen, Circular Quay, Sydney*. I learnt of his toil in the kitchens of the legendary jazz club together with his brother Brendan and the now noted Australian artist Noel McKenna (an artist who works with Cicada Press). In this infinitely small world, while they were occupied in the Basement kitchen, my wife-to-be Nicky Crayson, was making a career for herself as a 16 year old prodigiously accomplished chanteuse out in the nightclub-proper.

After seeing the 'Crossing the Tasman' prints the doyen of New Zealand art dealers, Peter McLeavey approached O'Brien with a fundraising proposal for the Maxwell Fernie Trust—an organization devoted to polyphony and organ music at St Mary of the Angels, in Wellington. The diptych, 'For Maxwell Fernie I & II', produced in an exchange of plates and proofs via air mail, was the entire content of an exhibition at Peter McLeavey Gallery in March 2009 - walls graced by arguably New Zealand's greatest painter, Colin McCahon. Our printmaking collaboration has

continued and in June 2009, Cicada Press released an edition of 'A poem by Charles Brasch', commissioned for the literary journal *Landfall* in Dunedin and in March 2010, 27 prints from Cicada Press were exhibited at Bowen Galleries.

'In the studio, Michael Kempson's various functions include that of impresario, enthusiast and proponent of 'intelligent design'. His great skill is to run a workshop where artists can be true to themselves, yet where they can also be shunted forwards or sideways—where they can respond to a medium they may or may not know well. Interactions between artists, academic staff and students are integral to the educational and research nature of Cicada Press. My experience is that such interactions consolidate the thinking rather than serve as a distraction—ultimately, it is a process of learning for all concerned.

Links between Cicada and New Zealand artists will, I have no doubt, consolidate in the future. Projects such as 'Crossing the Tasman', 'For Maxwell Fernie' and the Bowen Galleries exhibition have raised Cicada Press's profile on this side of the ditch. Artists of the calibre of Elizabeth Thomson and Niuean-born John Pule are eager to come to Sydney and participate.' (O'Brien, 2010, p. 38)

The business section of Sydney's broadsheet newspaper is rife with articles that feature news of the partnership developing between Australia and China. Reports offer insights into the cultural complexities of this economic powerhouse, with an underlying message stressing the importance of developing personal relationships. In my associations with China I have found this to be true.

My first contact with printmaking in China was in Sydney in 1993 when I met Su Xinping, who attended a survey exhibition of his elegantly drawn lithographs of provincial figures from his homeland in Inner Mongolia. Through an interpreter we struck up a friendship and spoke of the potential for a show of prints to further cultural exchange between our two countries. In 2008, 15 years after that first meeting Su Xinping was now Head of Printmaking at the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA), Beijing. Together with Teng Cheng Hua, we curated the exhibition *SILK & SAND: Chinese and Australian Prints*, an exchange of work by staff, students and artists associated with each school. On the return leg of the exhibition, together with some of the participating Australian artists including one COFA student, we enjoyed lavish banquets - affirming a thoroughly deserved reputation for overwhelmingly generous hospitality.

In October 2010, with 10 other artists from academic institutions around the world, I was invited to Xi'an, famous for Qin Shi Huang's terracotta army, as a participant in the 2nd *International Printmaking Workshop*. An initiative of Professor Yang Feng, Head of Printmaking at the Xi'an Academy of Fine Art (XAFA), it was a practical exchange of ideas and techniques with staff and students from one of China's top eight Art Academies. It culminated with an immense exhibition, filling two entire levels of a 5-storey complex, the larger of XAFA's two dedicated art museums.

The exhibition *Personal Space: Contemporary Chinese and Australian Prints* opened at Manly Art Gallery and Museum in April 2011, being my most ambitious curatorial and touring project to date. The contribution by 25 highly respected practitioners from each nation demonstrated the quality and breadth of printed art that has emerged over recent years. The Australian selection represented many of our major artists, like Fiona Hall, Elisabeth Cummings and Raymond Arnold including some who produced their work at Cicada Press. Giving a thorough overview of printmaking in China was a much more difficult proposition. As a consequence, centres of printmaking excellence were selected in distinctly different regions: three were from the range of major art schools, specifically in Beijing (CAFA), Xi'an in the west (XAFA) and Shenyang in the northeast (Luxun Academy of Fine Art). The fourth was from the Guanlan Original Print Base in the southern city of Shenzhen. Hosts of the Guanlan International Print Biennial, they also maintain extensive print research and production

facilities, offering residencies for Chinese and foreign artists in an exotic and dynamic creative environment. The resulting selection from all four institutions was made in consultation with leading artists, curators and academics from those regions and includes some of the most important artists working in China today. Xu Bing, selected by *Art in America* as one of the 15 most notable international artists and awarded a Doctor of Humane Letters by Columbia University in 2010, is one prominent example.

What is most inspiring about China is the scale of printmaking instruction in the major academies and the ongoing development of the facilities housing an unfathomable array of plant equipment and technology. At XAFA alone they have over 100 students graduating annually from the printmaking course and during the workshop I attended, not only was a 22-storey building for new teaching studios and workshops being erected, also two 30-storey towers for staff accommodation/studios had just been completed. In a country like Australia where we work very hard to encourage people into a print studio, I was amused to find that the Guanlan Print Base is the only print workshop whose activities are a booming tourist attraction, with guards doing their best to keep spectators out.

To be confronted by vast studio spaces, crammed with state of the art equipment with students immersed in their practice, offers the tantalising impression that all is right in the world of printmaking. While I have nothing but respect for the political and organisational skills of those able to garner such institutional support, it is for many, a remote scenario. The challenges facing print educators are all too common: limited capital and consumable budgets; competing demands upon working space; the extensive range of mediums and technologies available to students; disinterest and even cases of managerial neglect. However facilities alone doth not make an art school. Countering a desire for a utopian working environment is the remarkable array of quality prints being produced by workshops with the barest of components. I have been fortunate to see many of these in the Asia-Pacific region and I have an equally high regard for the quality of the instruction and relevance of the academic programs developed by teachers that support the production of these positive outcomes, seemingly against the odds.

The 'Buzzwords' project was developed with the Pakistani artist and curator Abdullah Syed at Cicada Press in 2008/09. In his etchings, Syed cleverly uses the visual metaphors of apiaries that highlight the West's limited understanding of Islamic culture. His sharply witty prints do not lack a degree of robust confrontation, for they highlight the contradictions of the political barriers, social protocols and economic challenges confronting Muslim and Judeo-Christian communities; and this without ever losing sight of the human values that we share. Abdullah then introduced me to another Pakistani artist and curator Roohi Ahmed, whose visit to Sydney coincided with a presentation delivered at an International Drawing Research Institute—COFA UNSW conference, and as a consequence she was invited to engage with the students at Cicada Press. Together they form a formidable curatorial team.

In 2010 I visited the coastal city of Karachi for a retrospective of my work, *Seen/Unseen—Michael Kempson/A Survey of Prints*, at V.M. Art Gallery. Abdullah and Roohi, a lecturer at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVSAA), organised with the Head of Printmaking the late Ussman Ghauri an 8-day printmaking workshop at IVSAA with 12 local artists. The aim was to create a box print portfolio, the proceeds of which went towards an upgrade of the printmaking department's resources.

'In present-day forums the voice of subversion is becoming increasingly vociferous, with academics and writers speaking animatedly of the imperative need for a global village and a world with fewer boundaries. But these ideas are nothing more than utopic and miasmatic euphemisms, because beneath the veneer of 'comfort words', the world is more divisive than it has ever been. As artists and writers we would like to believe that we are above the fray of petty wranglings or political and social

discriminations, but that is not so. The east-west divide is as strong as ever, as is the deep-seated and ingrained belief that western ideology is the dominant force in the pursuance of cultural development. Recognizing these parameters, any un-condescending attempt to breach boundaries and bridge the divide must be acknowledged as an authentic yen for the most valid kind of pedagogical and professional progress. In this respect Michael Kempson's visit to Karachi, Pakistan in April 2010 was a milestone of sorts, because it proved to be an intense and passionate exchange of ideas, techniques and methodologies on the common platform of printmaking.' (Risvi, 2011, p. 9)

Furthermore, Roohi and Abdullah decided that one exhibition would not suffice, so a few days after my opening a show titled, *Aboriginal Dreams—Paintings, Etchings, Linocuts—Indigenous Art from Papunya Tjupi*, opened at the IVSAA Gallery to a huge public response with at least 4 television crews promoting the event. To quote Abdullah Syed in his curatorial essay:

'The exhibition is a rare opportunity to study Aboriginal Art and its parallels to Pakistani indigenous and contemporary art, in formal, historical and conceptual terms. Links to Aboriginal art patterns can be made in Pakistani textiles as well as other distinctive indigenous forms, such as Truck Art.' (Syed, 2010, p. 3)

In the explosion of colour and design festooned on buses and long haul trucks by individual Pakistani drivers, I recognised a correlation with an innate assertion of cultural identity found in the art from Papunya. Most who see Western Desert Art don't understand the meaning of the pulsing rhythms inherent to the prints and paintings, but the direct or elemental connection made with viewers is real and powerful none the less. In an auditory sense, like the meditative rhythms of cicadas, the prints we produce in collaboration with the invited artists at Cicada Press, seek to make a similar impression and resonate to establish genuine connection with those with which we engage.

References

- Carter, P. 2004. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, from *Papunya A Place Made After the Story* by Geoffrey Bardon and James Bardon, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press.
- Freire, P. 1970-1998. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum.
- Johnson, V. 2000. *Seeing is Believing: A Brief History of Papunya Tula Artists 1971-2000*, from *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius / edited by Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink*, Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW.
- Johnson, V. 2008. *Lives of the Papunya Tula Artists*, Alice Springs: IAD Press.
- Johnson, V. 2010. *Once upon a time in Papunya*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Johnson, V. 2010. *Papunya Tjupi from Aboriginal Dreams—paintings, etchings, linocuts—Indigenous Art from Papunya Tjupi*, Australia, Karachi: IVSAA.
- Langton, M. 2000. *Sacred Geography: Western Desert traditions of landscape art*, from *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius / edited by Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink*, Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW.
- O'Brien, G. 2010. 'The glorious kitchen: Cicada Press, COFA UNSW,' *Imprint Magazine*, Print Council of Australia (Winter) Vol 45: no. 2.
- Risvi, N. 2011. 'Michael Kempson in Karachi: exhibitions, a workshop and an exchange of ideas,' *Imprint Magazine*, Print Council of Australia Autumn Vol 46: no. 1.
- Syed, A. M. I. 2010. *Introduction: Aboriginal Dreams from Aboriginal Dreams—paintings, etchings, linocuts—Indigenous Art from Papunya Tjupi*, Australia, Karachi: IVSAA.

Michael Kempson is a Senior Lecturer within the School of Art and Director of Cicada Press, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia.