



Brian Robinson

tithuyil

moving with the rhythm of the stars

TITHUYIL: MOVING WITH THE RHYTHM OF THE STARS

BY MAIA NUKU

Brian Robinson was born in 1973 and raised on Waiben, an island in the western Torres Strait, a strip of water that stretches between the northern tip of Australia's Cape York Peninsula and the southern coast of New Guinea. Until 12,000 years ago, a land bridge existed between Australia and New Guinea, but rising sea levels following the melting of the ice caps gradually submerged all but the highest peaks of the land, creating an archipelago of over 270 islands within a narrow stretch of water characterized by reefs, powerful currents and strong tides. Over the course of generations, islanders in the Strait (known locally as Zenadh Kes) developed a distinctive cultural repertoire and established trade networks that connected New Guinea and Macassan traders from Sulawesi in Indonesia with mainland Australia. Ritual masks, decorated drums and canoes were integral elements of ceremonial life which aimed at maintaining relationships between humans and the supernatural world and balance in the environment. Islanders engraved wooden charms to assist in their hunting of dugong and turtles, the latter a revered species whose carapaces were harvested and expertly fashioned into spectacular masks with effigies of totemic species such as crocodiles and frigate birds. The carving of turtle-shaped effigies was a centuries-old tradition, witnessed in 1607 by Spanish crew members of the first exploratory voyage by Europeans who recorded successfully navigating through the Strait under the direction of pilot Luís Vaz de Torres, after whom the waterway was named. Proselytizing evangelists from the London Missionary Society arrived to the region with other recently converted Polynesian islanders in 1871, exactly one century after British Captain James Cook attempted to lay claim to it as British territory in the name of King George III.

Robinson explores this melée of historical intrusions and cultural narratives in the important series of expertly executed linocut prints which are presented in this exhibition. In *By virtue of this act I hereby take possession of this land* (2017), the artist unsettles the established portrayal of Cook as heroic navigator and cartographer. Time and space collide as Robinson gleefully disrupts Cook's attempt to neatly chart a new Cartesian geography, enveloping him with the signature swirls of a verdant and abundant nature, a fluid geometry of budding tendrils that seem to steadily work their way into the frame, choking the space around him.

Standing atop a cliff on 22 August 1770, the British captain reckoned to have seen a navigable passage through the Strait and declared it British territory. Naming the site Possession Island, he wrote in his journal entry for that day, "I now



By Virtue of this act I hereby take possession of this land, 2017, edition AP, linocut, 38 x 27.5 in.



Reef Guardian 1, 2017, edition 2/15, linocut, 36.5 x 47 in.

once more hoisted English colours in the name of His Majesty George III to take possession of the whole Eastern Coast of this majestic land ... together with all the bays, harbours, rivers and islands situated upon the said coast.”¹ Robinson focuses the work on this portentous act of possession by appropriating Nathaniel Dance’s iconic portrait of Cook (c. 1775 now in the National Maritime Museum, London) as its centerpiece. Pointing to a set of islands, as if to reinforce his invocation of *terra nullius* which asserted that these newly “discovered” lands were necessarily uninhabited, Cook is vulnerable as a row of giant pixelated Space Invaders hover ominously above his head. Encroaching on the space in the upper portion of the print, they stake an alternative claim against the misguided and dangerous assumption that these lands are empty—of history, of people, of enterprise—by reinforcing the concept of invasion by alien forces. For Bedhan Lag (its Indigenous name) had been inhabited for several millennia by the Kaurareg, a group descended from the Kaiwalagal people who occupied the inner islands in the south west of the Strait.

Robinson enthusiastically underscores the earlier history of the region throughout his body of work. In *Reef Guardian 1* (2017), an armed Zenadh Kes warrior, replete with spectacular turtle shell mask and weaponry, sits atop the thick domed scales of a majestic turtle, dwarfed by the creature’s ancient limbs as it propels him through the ocean, each serpentine wave uncurling like an octopus’ tentacle beneath him. Supported by the majestic energy of the ocean and its creatures, this guardian of the reef rises up out of the flat dimensional plane to defend his own claim to an Indigenous authority and sovereignty. The juxtapositions of the charts, vessels and maps of eighteenth century naval enterprise with the fluid iconography of Indigenous design work against the triumphalist narrative of the epic voyages of Cook to the Pacific. The works effectively destabilize the conventional logic of center and periphery—who precisely is at the margins of this territory?—and reinforce Indigenous claims to sovereignty over land, sea and sky. Robinson’s re-inscription of Indigenous epistemologies dramatically recasts the flat, two-dimensional planes of European cartography to strike at the very heart of Enlightenment science and its ideals. Rich with nuance and meaning, these works stimulate inquiry and are an indication of the thrillingly multivalent and intellectual range of Robinson’s work.

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A prolific and highly accomplished artist, Robinson works in a variety of media that includes drawing, mixed-media collage, printed works and large-scale sculptural installations. A skilled draftsman, Robinson is constantly exploring new, expressive and innovative forms. In vibrant works such as *Kuki, Sager, Zey and Naigai* (works 1-4 in his *Earthly Bloom* [2015] series), he experiments with color and form to create dazzling optical effects, cleverly layering different shapes and textures inspired by the floral designs of lace and fabric to enliven the two-dimensional surface. Design for Robinson is never flat or superficial, but intercedes in the planar dimensions of the work itself.

Robinson has been in the vanguard of Torres Strait Islander art for over two decades and is one of a generation of contemporary artists closely associated with the vibrant Torres Strait Islander print movement that was inspired by a series of ambitious collaborative projects led by pioneering master printmaker Theo Tremblay from his art studio based in Cairns. Originally from the United States, Tremblay has dedicated over thirty years to collaborating with Indigenous artists from Australia and the Pacific in a range of print mediums to create fine art prints for international audiences. With innovations in style and scale, the artists from the Torres Strait Islands distinguished themselves, building strong reputations for expertly-prepared linocut prints that integrated Indigenous narrative with customary iconography, especially the intricate and free-flowing cursive designs which were an extension of customary art forms. The transfer of incised patterns typically used in low-relief carving to embellish ceremonial objects added a new dynamic that energized the work with the vivid designs now creatively deployed to produce large-scale, gloriously detailed prints. Indigenous artists leaped to explore and extend customary themes through the new medium, revitalizing ancestral designs with a contemporary and imaginative edge. Printing was not a limitation; it became an exciting new avenue for innovation and experimentation.

Robinson's creativity is given momentum by his enthusiasm to reveal the connectedness of all things. In the monumental print *Mapping the Cosmos from Kisai* (2018), the artist's interest in time, history and exploration are further examined through the lens of twentieth century space travel. The analogy is an apt one for the sea captains of early voyages to the Pacific, who were equipped with the latest technology to ensure accurate wayfinding and were considered the space travelers of their day. *Mapping the cosmos from Kisai* re-imagines the Apollo 11 Moon landing of July 20, 1969 through an Indigenous lens.

Richly executed with a fluid interplay of lines which ebb and flow, the moon is a dizzying landscape of textures and forms which push to the outer edges of the work, threatening to spill over into uncharted territory. The viewer discerns



Augud, 2018, acrylic, liquitex paint pens and spray paint on canvas, 50 x 37.5 in.



Mapping the Cosmos from Kisai, 2018, edition 7/15, linocut, 41.5 x 60.5 in.





Walek, the bringer of fire, 2017, edition 1/15, linocut, 51.5 x 36.5 in.

an astronaut exploring his environs, moving towards the distinctive TARDIS Police Box known to generations of BBC television viewers as the time-traveling device used by Doctor Who to explore galaxies in the universe. Robinson shows his skill as a draftsman with carefully executed blueprints for the Star Wars Death Star, the Millennium Falcon, and Wall-E. So often relegated to a periphery, in this view of Earth from the Moon, it is Australia and the Pacific that take center stage in the middle of the frame. Facing the viewer, a second astronaut prepares to plant a flag on Mare Tranquillitatis (the site of the lunar landing) supplanting the American flag for that of Zenadh Kes, which features the iconic Island emblem of the *dari* (headdress) with a single star at center and reinforces the Indigenous connection of islanders to the cosmos above. The print is ambitious in its imaginative reach, depicting a vast swath of sky dusted with the milky constellations of stars, spiraling across the sky or clustered in distant galaxies. Robinson refers to these patterns as *tithuyil minaral*, explaining that they connect the spiritual present with the ancestral past.² For it is Zenadh Kes that used the coordinates of these same stars to assist their own exploratory voyages across the ocean. The rich visual drama of the night sky—itsself an ocean—is made the more emphatic in Robinson's skillful rendering in contrasting black with white. This then is a moon—Kisai—that belongs to ancestral lifeways, anchored in the embodied generational knowledge born of direct ancestral relationship with the environment.³

There is a depth and complexity to these works. Robinson uses negative space as a central device in arranging subject and ground so that the eye is forced to draw out formal relationships. Working hard to discern the outlined figures of a pair of astronauts disguised in the landscape, their neatly delineated graphics contrast with the rich animated texture of the surface of the moon itself, which is shown bursting with life. Robinson comments: "There remains a strong belief in the land and ocean as sentient ... that ancestral spirits imbue the environment, creating a situation in which spiritual and physical aspects cannot be altogether separated." Spiritual life is indeed grounded in these ancestral ties to the land, sea and sky that are alluded to materially in the vivid designs and masterful patterning that saturate the lower section of this print. Sets of crested arcs expand and contract, giving way to contoured sections that swell with the budding energy of nested lines and notched triangles creating an optical effect of shimmering vibrancy which infers a metaphysical space reserved for the spirits of sea, land and sky that inhabit cosmological dimensions in the landscape. Far from being understood as simply decorative, these *minaral* (ancestral designs) are understood to have a singular potency, or efficacy.

This theme of active agency is explored to an extraordinary degree in *Ai Baud* (2018), *Walek, the bringer of fire* (2018) and the wittily titled *3 Fishermen and a Lamborghini* (2012), three spectacular works whose rich and masterful



Charms to defeat the cracken, 2015, edition 3/15, linocut, 54 x 37 in.

patterning celebrate the ongoing cosmological and spiritual dimensions of Zenadh Kes life. Another work, *Charms to defeat the Kraken* (2015) is replete with a variety of charms and potent devices that appear to pit Western and Indigenous knowledge systems against each other. Here a monstrous sea creature of mythological proportions takes on elements of Jules Verne's giant squid from his epic *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. The creature's body is inscribed with bold and graphic designs, his tentacles grasping a canoe at the border of the chart as if to overpower it, pull it beneath the surface and claim it for the ocean. The sea chart with its neat grid of latitudinal lines unfurls to reveal various *augud* (customary charms) used by islanders: an engraved wooden charm featuring the hooked beaks of a pair of frigate birds, a totemic species with giant wingspan revered for its ability to navigate long distances across open sea. Another local charm comprises a whittled length of wood from which a pair of speckled cowrie shells and sea heron feather are suspended. Partially visible at the folded edge of the European map is the iconic emblem featuring the logo of DC Comic's hero Superman who was able to disrupt linear time by racing around the planet backwards to reverse its progression. These powerful emblems reinforce ideas of spiritual agency and efficacy. They are dynamic and energized with an active, even apotropaic, function, warding off potentially malevolent influences and encouraging specific outcomes. Just as Islanders channeled the divine and supernatural to give visible form to the intangible, so Robinson repurposes the imagery of cult heroes alongside a foregrounding of Indigenous aesthetics to create a refreshing new iconography that disrupts and challenges.

A rich milieu of cultural influences weaves through Robinson's art practice creating compelling, high-spirited works that function rather like enigmatic puzzles which audiences can delight in deciphering. Cultural references bridge the Classical era of Greek and Roman mythology, Renaissance masters and the Age of Enlightenment that spawned the scientific expeditions which first led European explorers into the Pacific. Add to this a healthy dose of fictional character—androids, superheroes and intergalactic time-travelers of popular film and television—for a rich line-up of cast and characters. Robinson explains: "There is a semiotic function here that represents a collusion of signs and symbols creating a visual language and narrative driven by [my] own experiences. The lens of this world is illuminated by the aspirations of two universes, where cultural icons are assimilated as representative spirits into the ontological world of Zenadh Kes."⁴ Nowhere does this synthesis come together more succinctly than in the major work *As the rains fell and the seas rose* (2012) which presents the inner workings of Robinson's imagination as a theatrical arena: its stage propped precariously on a set of classical columns, its scenography a wealth of constellations in a starlit sky. Watching from the wings are three Zenadh Kes warriors, anchored firmly to the left of the frame looking directly ahead

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as a tsunami of epic proportions, alive with vital energy, rises above their heads threatening to engulf the known world whose cast of characters—Batman, Mickey Mouse, the eponymous antagonist of the *Alien* films—appear swamped in the frenetic energy of the play’s main action. Robinson deftly crafts an entirely new iconography to propel us forward into this interior world: “My creativity is driven by the connection of these things and the resulting visual language ... [which] can be considered similar to a cartographic system that produces and preserves knowledge of the traditional tenure and place of my people.”⁵

Punctuated with mischief and humor, Brian Robinson’s works exude a joyful ebullience that is at once exciting and infectious. Navigating a distinct space-time continuum, these compelling works act as a personal mnemonic for the artist, particular in its detail, specific in its tastes, a unique assemblage of icons and emblems that channel a continued connection to the past. These assimilated references acknowledge the cosmopolitanism of earlier generations of Torres

Strait Islanders who adopted and adapted diverse cultural influences from many waves of visitors encountered across the centuries, reminding us of the constant innovation that has been, and continues to be, an integral aspect of cultural life in the Pacific.

NOTES

¹ J. C. Beaglehole (ed.) *The Journals of Captain James Cook: Vol I. The Voyage of The Endeavour 1768-771*, pp. 387-8 (Hakluyt Society, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge).

² Chris Malcolm and Sally Butler, *Brian Robinson Tithuyil: Moving with the Rhythm of the Stars* (Perth: John Curtin Gallery, 2019), 2.

³ Kisai in the local dialect of the Kala Lagaw Ya language group in the Western islands of the Torres Strait refers to the moon.

⁴ Brian Robinson, quoted in Malcolm and Butler, *Op. cit.*, 2.

⁵ *ibid.*



ABOUT BRIAN ROBINSON

Brian Robinson is of the Maluyligal and Wuthathi tribal groups of the Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula and a descendant of the Dayak people of Malaysia. Born on Waiben (Thursday Island) and now Cairns-based, Robinson is known for his printmaking, sculpture and public art in which he uses a variety of techniques to produce bold, innovative and distinctive works that read as episodes in an intriguing narrative, revealing the strong tradition of storytelling within his community. His work has featured in many exhibitions nationally and internationally, including in Berlin, Noumea, Washington DC, New York, The Netherlands, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and his work is held in major collections including National Gallery of Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery/ Gallery of Modern Art, Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia and the Australian National Maritime Museum. Robinson's public art is visible in a number Australian cities, from Perth to Cairns. He is a curator who has worked on key exhibitions about artwork from the Torres Strait, and served as Deputy Director of Cairns Regional Art Gallery from 2006-2010. He is represented by the Mossenson Galleries.



ABOUT MAIA NUKU

Maia Nuku was born in London and is of English and Maori (Ngai Tai) descent. She is the Evelyn A. J. Hall and John A. Friede Associate Curator for Oceanic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Her doctoral research focused on early missionary collections of Polynesian gods and their extraordinary materiality, which sparked an interest in drawing out the often eclipsed cosmological aspects of Oceanic art. She followed up her involvement on the major exhibition *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760–1860* (2006) at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts with postdoctoral research at Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, where she served as part of a research team exploring Oceanic collections in major European institutions—*Artefacts of Encounter: 1765–1840* and *Pacific Presences: Oceanic Art in European Museums*.

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