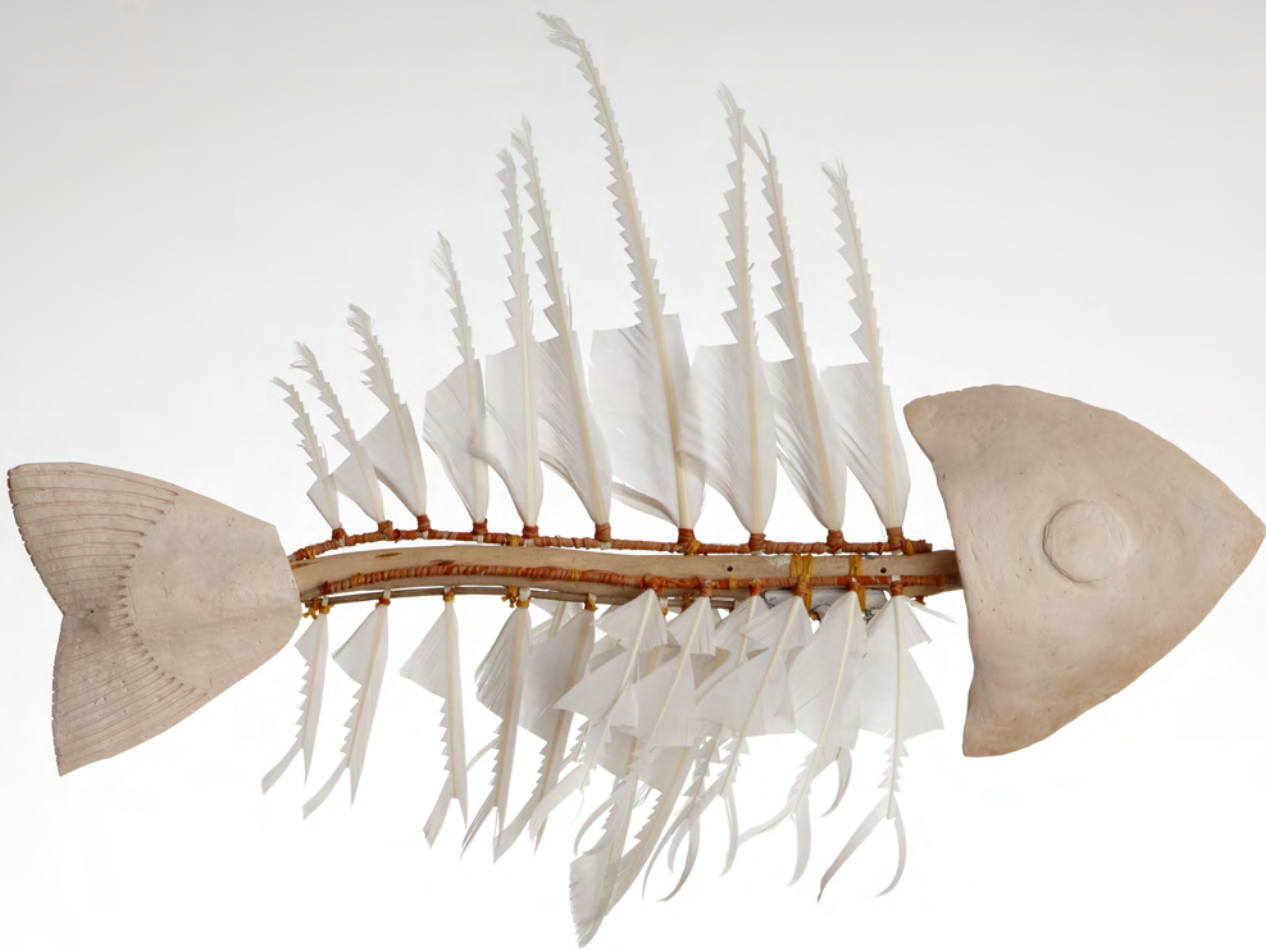




gurari – saltwater drinker

RICARDO IDAGI

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ESSAY BY KIRA RANDOLPH

When Ricardo Idagi was growing up on the Torres Strait Island of Mer (Murray Island) in the 1960s, the favored primary schoolyard taunt was “coconut.” A coconut is akin to a traitor; it means that underneath someone’s black skin is a preference for white people. This divided identity is just one of many devastating effects of colonization that informs Idagi’s artwork. His diverse practice includes *dari*, the Torres Strait headdress, earthenware sculpture such as *The Coconut*, and masks evocative of a fractured self, seen in *Black Skin, White Mask*.

The Torres Strait Islands, part of the state of Queensland, comprise more than one hundred islands dotted between the northern-most point of Australia and southern Papua New Guinea. Many cultural and linguistic differences exist between Torres Strait islanders and mainland Indigenous Australians, and each retains their separate identity.

Namesake Luís Vaz de Torres navigated the strait in 1606. The earliest European settlement was established in the region in 1803 and from this date onward, the lives of Torres Strait Islanders were forever disrupted. Subjugation, disease, and the imposition of Christianity irrevocably altered cultural practices, language, diet, and spiritual beliefs. Idagi’s *Barramoney (Til Next Week)* juxtaposes the historic livelihood of many Torres Strait people who were barramundi fishermen with the contemporary reality for those who must “borrow money.” Idagi’s artistic practice of making of *dari* similarly reflects upon contemporary Meriam life by revitalizing the traditional headdress with a minimal modern aesthetic.

The pearling industry gained momentum in the Torres Strait in the 1860s and was responsible for widespread regional growth, much like the California gold rush, perpetuating further losses of land and sea. In 1871 Meriam people were enslaved to build a missionary school. In Idagi’s words, “what the missionaries delivered was the final apocalyptic curse.” The missionary rule, enforced by whip, was motivated by the belief that Islanders needed to become “civilized.”

It is against this history that Idagi uses his artwork to cultivate awareness of the traumatic past, seeking a process of healing and decolonizing for himself and his family. *Gurari – Saltwater Drinker* takes its name from the artwork that Idagi made in honor of his great grandfather, Mino ata. Mino ata was given the name Gurari by the people at the Mer mission. The literal translation means “saltwater drinker.” When Idagi was a child his mother told him the origin of this name.

It began when old Mino ata started walking back to his birthplace of Webadu, sitting on the rocks during low tide each night, drinking saltwater until he went crazy, “singing to himself, laughing and crying.” As Idagi later learned, the saltwater was actually alcohol, which brought the craziness, brief euphoria, and then despair. Through the cycle of addiction, the name Gurari stayed with Idagi’s family for four generations, until now.

Standing at three and a half feet tall and made of empty beer cans, *Gurari – Saltwater Drinker* has no mouth and no voice. It is the personification of alcoholism. Idagi’s transference of Gurari onto this mask constitutes a strong act of reclamation. Now it is the mask that embodies the desperation of the saltwater drinker, of Gurari, a process that has redeemed not only Mino ata but also his grandchildren, freeing them of this name.



“Idagi uses his artwork to cultivate awareness of the traumatic past, seeking a process of healing and decolonizing...”

Ricardo Idagi, *Black Skin, White Mask*, 2012, glazed raku clay.
Image courtesy Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne.

Idagi's childhood home has become infamous as the first site where the *terra nullius* claim was effectively contested. Translated from Latin, this legal doctrine means “land belonging to no one” and was used to justify colonization. During a land rights conference in 1981, Mer Islander Eddie Mabo spoke about the complex nature of Indigenous land inheritance. This speech was a catalyst for the Mabo vs. Queensland trial, a case that played out in Australia's High Court for over a decade. The final verdict resulted in a landmark decision in 1992 recognizing native title rights for Meriam people, as well as Indigenous land claims in other parts of Australia.

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing is Idagi's reflection on the outcome of the Mabo decision. Despite governmental acknowledgement of continual occupation and ownership, the historic mission remains standing and Mer has not been restored to its people. This sculpture represents the animalistic element of authority. The changing nature of power is reflected in the wolf-headed fish, shown taunting a grief-stricken man. We know that he is not alone in his anguish. Masses of people are pictured suffering alongside him in silence.

Through artworks such as *The Coconut*, *Barramoney (Til Next Week)*, and *Wolf in Sheep's Clothing*, Idagi uses familial and personal explorations to remember his ancestors, revive cultural practices, and reclaim his heritage.





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RICARDO IDAGI

August 29 – December 21, 2014

RICARDO IDAGI ARTIST RESIDENCY

September 15 – October 4

Gallery Tour: September 20, 10:30 am

Artist Talk: September 23, 7 pm, R.S.V.P. required

Sponsored by Australia Council for the Arts

Presented in partnership with Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ricardo Idagi is a Meriam man who grew up on Mer (Murray Island) in the Torres Strait, north of mainland Australia. He was encouraged to produce art by Eddie Koiki Mabo, who is famous internationally for winning native title rights to Mer Island in 1992. Idagi studied art at Cairns Technical and Further Educational Institute. He has been included in a number of major exhibitions over the last five years, and has won two prestigious Australian art awards: the Western Australian Indigenous Art Award (2009) and the New Media category of the 28th Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (2011). His work is held in the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Queensland Art Gallery, and the Art Gallery of Western Australia, among others. He lives and works in Melbourne, and is represented by Vivien Anderson Gallery.

Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia

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