

In the Yolngu world, the future is in print

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Young artists in the print workshop at Buku Larrnggay Mulka

IT was an intriguing proposal: a challenge for the distinctly tradition-minded artists of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka in Yirrkala at the tip of North-East Arnhem Land. Would they be prepared to host a new program to engage with the most troubled teenagers enrolled at the local school?

Could art help save the problem children of the Yolngu world, and tempt them down happier, more fulfilling pathways? Could a simple print-making project guide the young away from substance abuse, violence, jail and suicide?

The challenge was multiple: the long-established, much-admired art centre at Yirrkala was not just being asked where it stood on the core social issues confronting the community, but what relevance its well-preserved cultural traditions might have in a modern remote area township.

Longtime art co-ordinator Will Stubbs agonised over the idea, and teased out its implications with his colleagues and artists. Buku Larrnggay has grown into a bastion of high culture for the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land: its art-works breathe with the values of ceremony, they preserve a classical temper and world view. Even the striking visual innovations its artists have undertaken over recent years in bark painting style, in sculpture and new media have been innovations launched from the secure citadel of tradition: new ways of capturing the gleam of clan designs and the pulse of song cycles, not explorations of new themes or subjects.

There was an established print workshop at the art centre, but it was for making high-end art. There was a successful youth project on-site, producing video material: but Buku Larrnggay was hardly natural terrain for delivering a rehabilitation program to youth at risk.

Stubbs wanted to be sure that the artists and the Yolngu leaders who guide Buku Larrnggay were clear about taking on this new set of responsibilities; that the idea wasn't a white do-gooding dream being projected on to Aboriginal agents; that it would unfold without trivialising or demeaning Yolngu traditional culture.

Stubbs, who is married into the clan structure of Northeast Arnhem Land, has something of the zeal of a convert. To his considerable surprise, he was told to ease up: the members of the Buku Larrnggay circle were quite happy to accept the "problem teenagers," who were, after all, their kin.

Up the road, at the sprawling Yirrkala Community Education Centre, the youth development unit was engaged in its familiar search for programs that might have some beneficial effect. Over the past decade, the Yolngu region has been dealing with increasing troubles among the younger generation. As Buku Larrnggay puts it, bluntly, "suicide is not rare," while substance abuse, teen pregnancy, lack of motivation and self-confidence are "the norm". This was the social landscape from which the trainees in the new project were drawn.

A group of six young women joined the print workshop for a five-week program, and made a first set of images. These went on view last August at the Garma festival, which is held each year on a plateau near Yirrkala, and shows community art in an open-air gallery. The images were popular: the young women went back to the art centre to print the orders they had received: the sequence of experiences seemed to solidify them. They have all either returned to the Community Education Centre for their last year of schooling, or taken up work in Yirrkala.

Encouraged, the youth development unit and the art centre decided to press ahead, run another workshop, and push beyond mere training and the making of traditional designs. The aim would be to connect with the young incomers: help them make an art that resonated directly with their own fears and dreams.

Local print-maker Alicia Scobie volunteered her help. The program ran for the last four months of 2010, and grew to include 35 young men and women. They were encouraged to make pictures of themselves. The method was simple, and used that staple of the time, the mobile phone photo. An image of the young artist becomes part of the print and is then embellished with the printmaker's marks: a self-portrait of a kind results, and it seems natural to view the image as a clue to the image-maker's inner state.

Certainly the results had nothing in common with the familiar, solemn Buku Larrnggay prints of clan patterns and designs: high art pieces that all major state collections hold.

"Nothing like them has ever been produced at Yirrkala before," says Stubbs: "They owe nothing to the established Yirrkala art styles or authority, nor do they rely on any sacred knowledge or previous art production experience."

In fact they belong to the Facebook world: both in form and subject matter they chart the hazy frontier between Yolngu tradition and contemporary western ways. The art centre had succeeded in making itself into an environment where the young printers felt comfortable, listening to music, experimenting with different media: the program had given them a way of expressing themselves. With what results?

The finished set of prints can be seen at the Nomad Art galleries in Darwin and Canberra, and will be on display at Garma this August. The work is raw and sharp, a set of stylish self-portrayals: youth art in a familiar jargon. Look deeper, though, and patterns emerge. Djirrmurmur Marika's print shows a young man with a stern expression, wearing a Tupac T-shirt, but in the background he has incised an echo of a clan design. He is not just a 23-year-old with rap music enthusiasms, as he explains in his liner notes: when he was a boy, his father Banula taught him to dance, and ceremonial dancing is his forte today.

The self-portrait print by Gandhurrminy Yunupingu, daughter of the Yothu Yindi singer Mandawuy, shows a smiling young woman with long hair falling over one shoulder, but it also shows crossed-star designs in the background field, stars in creamy yellow: a strong reminder for connoisseurs that the artist is also a niece of Gulumbu Yunupingu, whose versions of this design are shown in galleries around Australia.

These genealogies form a tight network: they bind the print-makers in to the old world. Almost all of them remember the place art-making had in their childhoods.

Mitjangba Maymuru used to watch his father Baluka painting on bark and making carvings. Barrata Marika watched her great-aunt Gaymala Yunupingu rendering the most painstaking images of bushfowl, octopus and stingrays. Art was always a language the young knew. It was strong enough to speak to them all through the months of the Yirrkala prints project.

And the upshot? To the surprise and delight of those watching their progress, most of the printmakers are, to use the social work jargon, "still engaged". More strikingly, the trainee artists now show a keen enthusiasm for careers in art.

They began with rudimentary techniques that made use of photocopies: the path ahead involves a switch to completely digital ways of image-making, with visual elements from different sources all juxtaposed and combined on the computer screen.

Buku Larrnggay has just received a further flow of Australia Council funding: the program will continue, and expand, and follow the fast-evolving technology path. Even the sceptics have come to feel that the experience of the past year holds out some pointers for the future of a tradition-minded art centre. "It's a reminder," says art co-ordinator Stubbs: "A reminder to relax and trust in the power of the art that bubbles up from this country."

The first phase of this experiment in printmaking as social refashioning has come to its initial fruition at a hinge time for Yirrkala and the nearby communities at the furthest tip of Arnhem Land. Last month a new agreement was signed between the local clans and multinational mining group Rio Tinto Alcan, ensuring the continued operations of the bauxite mines that dot the region and guaranteeing a tailored flow of benefits for the next four decades. The main clans of the area have, at last, a chance to shape a sustainable future and craft a viable economy in keeping with their own priorities.

Does the work being made at Buku Larrnggay have anything to teach the two peoples living in the region?

Art, for the Yolngu, has long had two aspects: it has been both an expression of cultural survival and a communicative tool, seeking to convey to the wider world tokens of the depth and complexity of the traditional realm. Buku Larrnggay's artists face a deeper test today, in this phase of expanded opportunities.

Their task is not just to keep alive the traditional designs, and make pleasing art based on them, but to transform a tiny minority society into a strong enclave, operating on an equal footing within the wider nation-state.

It is a challenge best shouldered by the young, the bicultural and self-confident.