

Pandanus Gallery proudly introduces Thomas Ray Ahwang and his first collection

Two worlds and two artistic techniques are interwoven in this exciting new collection from Torres Strait Islander artist Thomas Ray Ahwang.

Education, communication and understanding are the keys to our progress and Thomas draws on these to express his desire for a better future for himself, his people and indeed, all people.

The artist's guileless desire for betterment and need to express himself through his art has seen his creative spirit emerge from hard times living on the street to developing a mesmerising combination of carving and painting that captures the differences between Indigenous culture and the modern world.

Opportunity for email clients to view the exhibition and register interest prior to "Meet the Artist" on Saturday, 14 November, 2009 or in the weeks following.

Even though you may be unable to physically attend on Saturday, you can be among the first to experience this innovative collection of work that is a ground breaking direction for Indigenous art in Queensland, and possibly beyond.

Pandanus Gallery Directors Anna and Paul La Fontaine recently discovered Thomas Ray Ahwang and his unique work after one of his former teachers, Charles Street from Weipa TAFE, emailed an example to them. They were instantly drawn to Thomas' unusual technique of using numerous layers of painting overlaid with carving to weave a gentle and lyrical story about the pull between weak and strong in the natural world.

The works suggest a poetic and philosophical component that the title of each reinforces. Another striking feature is the subject matter, a rich mixture of Indigenous views of the natural world and the contrasting, sometimes destructive imperatives of modern, Western life. In a sense, it is an eloquent warning and simultaneous protest expressed by an Indigenous spirit seeking opportunity, growth, harmony and balance within the human race as a whole, and especially as an Australian.

Thomas uses prepared plywood, painting flora and fauna as the central metaphor and progressively carves shapes consistent with his desired theme. This process is repeated - sometimes over three or four layers - to give a dynamic effect of great depth. His colour palette is from the natural world and, whether used subtly or with intensity, produces a vibrant and evocative visual experience.

Pandanus Gallery has a philosophy of supporting emerging artists who communicate through their work, so Anna and Paul decided to support Thomas' return to Cairns to enable him to concentrate on developing a body of work during a semester off from his Bachelor of Printing studies at the Victoria College of Arts.

Communication is central to Thomas' art and one of his larger pieces, *Anchored*, draws on images representing different forms of communication. From the modern world are the symbols for play and fast forward and from the Torres Strait is the snaking line which traditionally illustrates the passing down of stories from one generation to the next.

Thomas said his work expressed his desire for young people to be respected for their beliefs and heritage and to benefit from an education which showed that respect. "In the past Indigenous identity has been compromised by the Western system. Now I am pleased to see the education system in the Torres Strait where I grew up is taking into account the heritage of the people there," he said.

Intelligent by nature, Ahwang considered a number of career options and courses, including an offer to complete a law degree. However, the perceived gaps in his education meant he struggled to generate a consistent means of support in order to commit to both studies and his artworks. His struggle to come to terms with this has led to periods of extreme disadvantage.

Hard times have nurtured both Thomas' creative spirit and his desire to succeed. Despite the challenging life experiences from which Thomas and his art are evolving, his work has a lyrical gentleness devoid of both attack and anger that welcomes the viewer into a world of great possibilities presently beyond acknowledgement by the modern world.

The visual, intellectual and emotional content of this first body of work by Thomas Ray Ahwang is little short of astounding and bears the hallmarks of an emerging artistic talent of great potential.