IT’S SAGER, THE DRY SEASON OF TRADE WINDS, blowing from May through to September across the Torres Strait. That means a window of opportunity for the region’s artists and steadily expanding cultural infrastructure, at the centre of which sits Gab Titui Cultural Centre on Thursday Island. The centre was opened in 2004 to support around twenty local communities and has emerged as something of a catch-all culture bag. Replete with a climate controlled museum space named after the late Ephraim Bani (1944-2004), the eminent Torres Strait Islander linguist and historian who was one of the key visionaries behind the centre, the Centre runs temporary public exhibition spaces, a commercial space and café. It employs a dynamic group of local trainee staffers who are teamed with dedicated arts and cultural development staff, mentors from community, workshop providers, and visiting contractors to offer a range of services regardless of the season. Every year a lot has to happen in these months before the wet moves in, once again, to wreak havoc with communications, supply chains for materials, education services, travel and tourism, each of which are crucial elements for maintenance of the ever-morphing nature of material culture production in the region.

Over these ‘winter’ months as many as 100 visitors a day make their way through Gab Titui Cultural Centre and with each comes the two-sided coin of cross-cultural exchange. While promotional and professional opportunities for visual and performance artists abound during these interactions, there is a necessary tension which emerges, as there has been between Islanders and visitors since well before the emergence of the post-colonial condition. These encounters reveal the extent to which local histories inform the present, however complex, unpredictable, or ‘significantly fertile’ for all sides they may have become. As Nicholas Thomas has noted, the Islands have never really been insular in a social sense.1 Trade in a bewildering variety of products proceeded, and there were established ground rules for dealing with foreigners long before the arrival of (far-flung) traders and missionaries, who themselves preceded anthropologists by several decades in the late 19th century. It’s partly been because of these ongoing tensions that novel forms of local innovation tend to rupture any expectation that notions of the traditional, customary and contemporary cannot accommodate more complex patterns of connection.

Language, song, dance and belief are the conceptual and performative underpinning of linocuts and etchings by some highly recognisable names in Australian art, like Billy Missi, Alick Tipoti and Dennis Nona, or the impressive headdresses by George Nona and Yessie Mosby. They show at the Centre alongside works by emerging artists like Solomon ‘Solly’ Booth, jewellery by Florence Gutchen, weaving by Jenny Mye, and Georgie Curry’s quirky objects. Income generated at the Centre is a motivating factor, reinforcing their hard work can pay dividends, and that significant careers are to be forged and prolonged locally. These dividends take many forms. While the fiscal is obviously paramount, it’s been the ways these and other initiatives in the region have also facilitated the growth of technical skills and cultural research, which grows confidence, spawns morphing artforms, and employment, that we might speak of genuine and sustainable returns to people and place. Equally important is the multiplier effect of wider critical comprehension around Australia regarding such practices, courtesy of the significant embedded messages Islanders relay by their efforts, and the increasing number of Indigenous arts workers coming through the sector. Yet, perhaps the biggest value Gab Titui offers as a ‘cultural centre’ is its crucial act of reversal, in that whilst over the past few decades exhibition and display materials have been ‘exported’ and installed in galleries around the country and abroad, it is now possible to recontextualise gallery works in the Torres Strait. Here local and visitor audiences can detect and debate for themselves how different attitudes toward past and present manifest, and how the Diaspora of TSI makers from outside the Islands contest and compare their own cultural research outcomes with those from within. In the past two years the Centre has sent community generated projects on national tours, and the Zamiyakal Dance Machine exhibition as far a-field as the East-West Center in Hawaii.

A related factor is how the Centre seems to effectively tread the thin line between being a kind of buffer for artists while balancing retail and other market interventions. Speaking at the 2009 Cairns Indigenous Art Fair...
symposium, Nicolas Rothwell urged that Queensland was in a unique situation. It could either completely stuff up potential lessons suggested by centres elsewhere, citing over-production and a ‘supply at all costs ethos at the expense of quality and value’, or take advantage of its ‘frontier’ status. He suggested Queensland’s recent publicly developed and funded forays into increased marketing for Indigenous art could employ more check and balance, more caution, and still promote art as the great object of Western desire. At the heart of future art centre projects in Queensland, he argued, should be a philosophy that gives primacy to art and culture as a marker of deep cultural knowledge, and the rest would follow.

In light of this, over just a few years, and not without the odd hiccup, it appears Gab Titui has emerged as a crucial interface between makers and audiences, and as a hub to provide support and advice for a network of art centres and operatives already extant, or about to start up in outlying islands. Given the challenges and costs associated with small cultural enterprises or individual practices in remote communities, let alone amid an island matrix, Gab Titui may soon lay claim as a best practice facility. It has so far affected positive and real change via cultural development and maintenance without fixating on sales and exports alone. It’s no mean feat, particularly in light of the expectations of stakeholders and a rapacious tourism sector on its doorstep.

For the myriad shire and island council representatives, the Torres Strait Regional Authority, the state and federal governments, and agencies on the ground (physically or financially) such as The National Museum of Australia, Arts Queensland and The Australia Council, Gab Titui is at the coalface of a complex web of familial, traditional, legal and contemporary viewpoints. Most are vested with delivering, or collaborating to build capacity, skills and training.
in the face of real concern about the exodus of young people, their diminishing cultural knowledge of the region and family histories, future employment prospects and susceptibility to climate change.

Evidence of rising sea levels, changes detected in seasonal weather patterns and sustainable fishing are not only reported regularly in the Torres News, but are increasingly embedded narratives for contemporary artists to 'fix' in image, song and dance. A collective strategic objective, to which each public organisation is aligned, is to find ways to keep people in the region or bring kids back from boarding school in Cairns. For Gab Titui and local agencies like the TAFE College based on Thursday Island, this also means agitation for further educational opportunities delivered locally which foster an amalgam of cultural maintenance and creative acumen as a kind of ‘culturepreneurial’ outcome. Both the Centre and TAFE are evidence that the emergence of ‘contemporary’ Islander arts is not a new phenomenon, arising from the entry of individuals into mainland Australian schools, but rather a more ‘uneven process’, as Thomas described, shaped as much by local innovation as by the opportunities available to those like Missi and Tipoti who earlier this year moved to Cairns.

In a particularly exciting burst of activity during the dry season, no less than four most seismic and positive outcomes for TSI artists have already occurred this year. Each has been delivered locally, with national and international implications, and facilitating new waves of artists, artworks, training, innovation and profile building. The 3rd Gab Titui Indigenous Art Awards, inroads created by TAFE operatives and the opening of two new art centres, on Moa Island, and Badu Island, are each catalytic moments worth briefly unpacking.

Indigenous curators such as Stephen Gilchrist at the National Gallery of Victoria, Tina Baum at the National Gallery of Australia, and Keith Munro at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art have each judged the Gab Titui Indigenous Art Awards, while gallerists such as Vivien Anderson in Melbourne and Rebecca Hossack in London are already committed to showing new works. This year's category win by Nigel Waia (and Frank Petero's work in the 2008 awards) underlines the strength of the Islands' inherent weaving tradition and its dynamic interplay with new materials, well utilised by another recent arts/environmental initiative known as The Ghost Net Project.1

The positive effect of teaching administered by the Tropical North Institute of TAFE campus on Thursday Island, and particularly through the exemplary efforts of Di Abaid, has also had a radical influence during 2010. Evidently, by bringing the courses to outer islands for a week at a time, Abaid has struck increased levels of interest, enrolment and completion, and the levels of increased complexity in some artworks by students has already been remarkable. This year, some of her students, including Angela Torenbeek and the major prize winner at this year's Gab Titui Award, Solomon Booth, have already proven to themselves and others there is a solid new wave of art practices in the region. New linocut printmakers, weavers, dancers and carvers are coming through, and importantly, new methods in how TAFE can deliver for the region.

Finally, as this edition of Art Monthly goes to press, the management and opening of two new art centres will have been facilitated, each to serve vibrant communities of established and new artists. Moa Island Art Centre, which has a constitutional remit to service the communities of Kubin and St Paul’s, will be an incorporated entity headed up by a new manager, Anthony Murphy, who recently left Injalah Arts for the role. Solomon Booth, Melita Ware and Angela Torenbeek are among several community members eager to sign up to the co-op model, and emphasis will be aimed at grassroots, local artists and multi-arts platforms including weaving, rather than just printmaking and ‘art stars’.

Badu Island Art Centre is also set to come on line, with new managers Sean Clough and Angela Griffith. They are former Arts Queensland staffers with previous roles in Indigenous art centre infrastructure funding; Badu happens to be building a new facility as the current ‘centre’ is a small cement block. There is great anticipation the new management will capitalise on sentiment and aspirations for this new building and equipment, especially a printing press. Badu Art Centre is chaired by Josh Au with board members including Laurie Nona, Dick Williams and Alick Tipoti, and the prospect is that there are currently ten students in the TAFE course wanting to sign up to the centre. Alick Tipoti is a mentor, and he has connections which may yield a new press, also having been involved in teaching printmaking at the Thursday Island TAFE. With that sort of support, and Tipoti’s strong links to commercial galleries, the new art centres, together with Darnley Island Art Centre, are well placed to use the forthcoming wet season to set up, stockpile materials and get cracking before making some new ripples next Sager.  

3. According to Sue Ryan, former Art Centre Manager at Lockhart River and facilitator of The Ghost Net Project, ghost nets are hazardous fishing nets which are lost, abandoned, or discarded at sea, and they travel the oceans carried by currents and tides, ‘fishing’ continuously as they go. Ghost net related scopings studies and art workshops in the Gulf/Cape York region led to similar workshops in the Torres Strait, at St Paul’s community on Moa Island, and at Saibai Island in June, with ghost nets used as raw material for woven artforms. Further reading at: www.craftaustralia.org.au/library/review.php?id=ghost_nets

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