Blending Cultures:

Traditional Patterns and Hybrid Identities in the Past Two Decades of Australian Printmaking

By: Ben Rak

Different cultures, different ethnicities, different traditions. Almost all cultures have some form of graphic tradition that has evolved uniquely and is often manifested as repetitive patterns used in the manufacturing of traditional clothing as well as in the decoration of ceremonial objects and structures.

The past twenty years have witnessed the rise of globalization. Mass migration and the transfer of information have heralded a renewed focus on the postcolonial condition, and with it the artistic use of patterns as a graphic representation of cultural identity within a global paradigm.

Since the first fleet of British ships arrived in Australia in 1788 and encountered the local Aboriginals, whose presence dates back about 45,000 years, the continent has experienced several periods of intense immigration. Between 1850 and 1860, the population tripled with the influx of Europeans and Chinese drawn to the gold rush, and in the twentieth century, nearly three million displaced Europeans arrived after World War II. After the 1973 abolition of the government's "White Australia" policy, South Asian migrants began arriving in larger numbers, bringing the total population of the country to over twenty-two million in 2011.

As in the United States, the history of immigration in Australia has become a core component of the nation as a true melting-pot society, comprising a diversity of individuals who are at the same time unique and alike. As a result, many members of Australian society find themselves negotiating a dual identity, be it a European-Australian, Aboriginal-Australian, or Asian-Australian combination. Thus, cultural heritage plays a distinct role in the Australian national psyche.

Over the years, artists have manifested their Australian identity through their investigation of Australian masculinity, the continent's flora and fauna, personal interaction with the land, and the associations or divergences of multiple cultures. In this article, I reflect upon the practice of three print artists and one artists' collective that explore their cultural identity through the use of patterned motifs related to their own heritage.

Milan Milojevic, *Outside-In #2*, digital print and etching, sixteen pieces 18-1/2 x 12-3/4 inches, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

Milan Milojevic is a Tasmania-based print artist who, since the nineties, has been researching the cross-cultural nature of his own heritage. Born in Australia of German and Yugoslav parents, Milojevic notes that as a first-generation Australian, his identity concerns have weighed heavily on his image making decisions and seem to have become the most crucial aspect of his practice to date.[1]

Milojevic's artistic process is informed by the aesthetics and visual language developed by naturalist engravers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He scans the prints found in books from this period and samples sections from them, collecting a digital library of traditionally printed marks. Milojevic then proceeds to digitally construct fictitious flora and fauna inspired by the writings of the magic realists, notably Jorge Luis Borges and his *Book of Imaginary Beings*. Very often, Milojevic overprints these digital prints with more traditional forms of printmaking, such as etchings and woodcuts. He constructs his creatures from body parts of different animals, such as the body of a bird combined with the head of a deer or the bodies of both a fish and a bird—with one part always European and the other, Australian.

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The hybridity of European and Australian flora and fauna has come to represent Milojevic's own fractured identity, which is trapped between the reality of his Australian upbringing and his desire to create his own fictional spaces as a response to collected stories based on memory, myth, and fact of a homeland he never witnessed.[2] In the blending of old and new, through the mixture of digital and traditional techniques, Milojevic creates an innovative "hybrid" practice.

Vernon Ah Kee, *Cantchant*, installation of surfboards and digital prints, dimensions variable, 2007. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

Samuel Tupou, *Staring at the Sun*, screenprint on acrylic, 24 x 24 inches, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

I see Milojevic's novel use of engraving and woodcut motifs as a form of traditional cultural patterning, though not of any specific national culture. His marks constitute, in my mind, a central aspect of the customary graphic lexicon of European art, but with a twist — he transforms the marks to fit his personal narrative, taking ownership of the marks and the cultural capital inherent in them.

With his Aboriginal and Chinese heritage, the artist Vernon Ah Kee finds himself constantly negotiating his indigenous identity with the dominant European culture found in Australia. His Kuku Yalandji, Waanji, Yidindji, and Gugu Yimithirr ancestry has been key to the development of his work, in which he explores and critiques the polarity between black and white cultures in Australia.

Ah Kee is a multidisciplinary artist working with a wide gamut of media, including video, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, and installation. In the past twenty years, his practice has elevated him to the status of one of Australia's preeminent contemporary Aboriginal artists. I had the opportunity to work with him in 2010, when he developed a series of etchings and lithographs at Sydney-based workshop Cicada Press. I have worked there for the past seven years with master printer Michael Kempson.

While Ah Kee is most famous for his text-based digital prints, his 2007 installation *Cantchant*, at Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art, best demonstrates his use of Australian Aboriginal patterning to represent an amalgamated cultural identity. In this installation, decoratively patterned surfboards hang from the ceiling throughout the room, and the walls are covered with large, digitally printed text works reading "hang ten"

and "first person." In this work, Ah Kee calls attention to the disparity between the culture of white Australians and that of Aboriginal Australians. The patterns he uses on the surfboards are derived from Aboriginal rain forest shields and appear in the colors of the Aboriginal flag — red, yellow, and black — while the surfboards themselves represent beach culture, a core lifestyle component of the predominantly white coastal-dwelling population. Dr. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, in her catalog essay for the exhibition Cantchant at the Institute of Modern Art, explains that Ah Kee uses the beach as an "important site for the defense and assumption of territorial sovereignty. It is where the invaders landed."[3] By combining the Aboriginal graphic patterns with the surfboards, Ah Kee is challenging the whiteness of what is possibly the most iconic Australian symbol — the beach culture. In contrast to Milojevic's practice, Ah Kee uses traditional patterning to demonstrate otherness rather than hybridity.

Unlike Milojevic and Ah Kee, Samuel Tupou is an emerging artist who has been producing art for nearly 10 years, with his career gaining momentum since 2007. Tupou's practice is based solely on the use of print techniques, primarily silk-screen printing on surfaces such as PVC, acrylic, and acetate. His entire oeuvre deals with his cultural history: he was born in New Zealand of Tongan descent and is currently living in Australia. Tupou's interests lie in the use of tapa-cloth patterns to represent his Tongan identity (tapa cloth is made from bark and printed or painted with culturally significant patterns; it is traditionally used for clothing in Tonga, Samoa, Hawaii, Tahiti, and other Polynesian islands). His images consist of geometric backgrounds overlaid with depictions of astronauts, bikini-clad women, soccer players, and other subjects reminiscent of Australian culture.

The combination of Tongan and Western motifs demonstrates Tupou's approach to the representation of his mixed heritage. Works such as *Staring at the Sun* incorporate both his past and present through a stereotypical, kitsch rendition of a tropical paradise — the way a "westerner" might envision the island lifestyle. This clichéd representation suggests that Tupou is dealing with his Tongan heritage via myth and media, not through personal experience. He creates a playful dialogue between the cultures, indicating that he himself is trapped somewhere in the middle. While his use of hybridity is similar to Milojevic's construction of images, Tupou's references to low art and popular culture diametrically oppose Milojevic's use of European engravings.

The application of cultural patterning in Australian printmaking can also be seen in the work of an artists' collective known as Papunya Tjupi Arts. Based in the remote desert community of Papunya in Australia's Northern Territory, the collective was established in 2007. The collective represents a revival in the community after a period of decline and neglect following its initial fame in the early seventies as the birthplace of the dot-painting style known internationally as Western Desert Art.

Doris Bush Nungarrayi, *Untitled (Dog Dreaming)*, aquatint, 31-1/2 x 24 inches, 2011. Printed by Michael Kempson, Ben Rak, Sian McIntyre and Sally Marks at Cicada Press. Courtesy of the artist and Papunya Tju pi Arts.

The collective's members are predominantly Aboriginal women, who gather at their art center to create images of undulating patterns, employing their own visual lexicon to pass on their cultural traditions and legends to a new generation. Often identified as a non-representational view of country, the works produced by these women foster knowledge of, and offer a record of, their land, traditions, and heritage.

Having produced prints for the past seven years in collaboration with master printer Michael Kempson and myself at Cicada Press, artists from the collective such as Doris Bush Nungarayi, Tilau Nangala, and Martha McDonald Napaltjarri have helped establish the graphic representation of their cultural history in the etched marks of their dotted patterns. These patterns have come to represent a singularity of identity — in this case, the Aboriginal identity. In Australia, only the Aboriginal peoples are "permitted" (from a cultural point of view) to use this sort of pictorial rendering. Thus, the work of this collective stands in direct opposition to the hybrid approaches of Milojevic, Ah Kee, and Tupou. The use of the dotted patterns embodies a distinct identity and the narratives ingrained within.

Martha McDonald Napaltjarri, *Untitled*, aquatint, 21 x 20 inches, 2009. Printed by Michael Kempson, Sian McIntyre and Quillan Brodie at Cicada Press. Courtesy of the artist and Papunya Tjupi Arts.

In her essay "Independence Cha Cha," Manthia Diawara suggests that in a global age, we take a serious view of the transtextual overlaying of the narratives that permeate traditional cultural patterns. It is the dialogue that occurs between separate cultural traditions that describes the human condition in a melting pot society. As Diawara explains, "we're not black or white, Igbo or Nigerian, European or African. We are all of these at the same time and from time to time."[4]

1. "Milan Milojevic," Tasmanian School of Art. www.utas.edu.au/tasmanian-school-of-art/people/milan-milojevic (accessed July 30, 2012).
2. Michael Kempson, *Personal Space: Contemporary Chinese and Australian Prints: a Manly Art Gallery & Museum and Cicada Press touring exhibition* (Sydney: Manly Art Gallery and Museum, 2011), 37.
3. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, catalog essay for the exhibit Cantchant, Dec. 2007 – Feb. 2008 (Brisbane: Institute of Modern Art, 2007).
4. Manthia Diawara, "Independence Cha Cha." In *Yinka Shinobare: Double Dutch* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen; Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien; Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2004), 23.