

BIOGRAPHY – DENNIS NONA

region	Torres Strait
state	Qld
community	Badu Island
born	1973
active	1989
studio	Brisbane
totem	Tabu - Snake totem of the Nona family of Saibai Island and Tupmul - Stingray of Badu Island
language bloc	Western Torres Strait
language	Kal-lagaw-ya
medium	Limited edition prints - linocuts, etchings and lithographs. Wood and cast bronze sculptures. Paintings. Installations.

Dennis Nona is widely acknowledged as one of the most important Torres Strait Islander artists.

Born on Badu Island in 1973 he was taught as a young boy the traditional craft of woodcarving. This skill has been developed and translated into the incredibly intricate and beautiful linocuts, etchings and sculptures created by the artist since the commencement of his art practice in 1989.

The artist holds a Diploma of Art from Cairns TAFE, a Diploma of Visual Arts in Printmaking from the Institution of Arts, Australian National University, Canberra and is currently completing a Master of Arts degree in Visual Arts at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane.

His work can be seen in the collections of most of the major Australian art institutions and in several important overseas collections. These include the National Gallery of Australia; Queensland Art Gallery; National Gallery of Victoria; Art Gallery of New South Wales; Art Gallery of South Australia; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Rochefort, France; Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Cambridge University Museum UK and the Museum of American Indian Arts, USA.

Nona pioneered the development of the highly intricate linocut prints unique to the Torres Strait Islands. He has documented, in a vivid visual form, the ancient myths and legends of his island and the wider Torres Strait that had previously been transmitted by oral story telling and dance.

He uses a more graphic way of storytelling. Instead of a work based on a single image like that of the traditional Torres Strait Islander art, he introduced many, following what was being done by mainland Aboriginal artists. In this way he could relate an entire narrative in one single work with all the characters and events in one image. To link the work he introduced a matrix of delicately lined clan patterning, so binding the entire story to its place of origin. Since this breakthrough, the intricate designs and bold figurative imagery created by printmakers like Nona,

have given local culture a vital reinvigoration. Today they are central to a cultural revival and elders now refer to them to help them to relate ancient stories to others. These were fast fading from common knowledge and being lost to new generations of Islanders suffering the cultural dislocation often imposed by the impact of European settlement and influence.

Within Nona's work there is a celebration of island myths and legends, of how humans, animals, plants and landscape took their meaning from epic or magical events in the past. It was a culture where fighting was glorified and warriors were held in high esteem. Legendary heroes wore distinctive local headdress and masks. They played drums and used objects associated with their ritual ceremonies and dances. It was a culture of head hunters, cannibalism and raiding parties that attacked homes built in tree tops. It was a society where men, women, sorcerers and witches came to their final grief by being transformed into sea creatures or cast into the sea to become the islands and rocky outcrops evident throughout the Western Torres Strait Islands today.

The attraction of Nona's work lies in the way he has drawn on the rich traditions of Torres Strait Islander carving which he has transferred to linocut and more recently etchings and sculpture. Far more flexible in their visual reference and expressive means than that of traditional work from the Torres Strait Islands, his works are highly skilled, contemporary compositions. Each work expresses a powerful materiality that comes from exquisitely crafted hand-made surfaces, a complex of finely chiseled hand made lines on to lino blocks, etching plates and the moulds for cast metal sculptures.

All the artist's recent prints have been etchings. While he has not dismissed linocuts, the etching medium allows him to introduce even finer imagery and explore the subtle effects of tusche, aquatint and sugar lift. The artist has embraced the intricate shaping of the metal plates on which he works. These shapes recall the fine detail seen in old turtle shell masks and other traditional objects.

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Nona often works on a monumental scale. This enables him to visually translate some of the long and complex legends of his island in intricate detail. His first was the now iconic two metre Sesserae linocut. This was followed by another but larger linocut, Yawarr, measuring six metres and then Mutuk, his extraordinary five metres x two metres multi plate etching. Nona's metal sculptures have followed much the same trajectory. They have increased in size from his first work, Neitau Dhangal, a work executed in 2005 on a modest scale, to the award winning, 3.5 meters Ubirikubiri of the Awillau Kasa, in 2007 and now the recent bronze and pearlshell project for the new Musée des Confluences in Lyon, monumental sculpture that will measure 6 metres high and 8.5 metres long.

The artist is constantly pushing the boundaries of the media in which he works. This presents serious challenges to the printmakers and foundry metal workers with whom he collaborates. The resolution of these challenges and the results he is able to achieve, is one of the reasons why his work is so unique and stands apart from other contemporary artists.

His skill and constant innovation have resulted in works of great beauty and complexity. This is why it is seen in depth in Australia's National Gallery, all the State Galleries and in a growing number of important overseas institutions.