PRESS KIT

DENNIS NONA

Between sky, land and sea. Legends revisited
Torres Strait Islands, Australia
Recent works: engravings & sculptures

January 27 to May 20, 2011
AUSTRALIAN EMBASSY, PARIS
Between sky, land and sea.
Legends revisited
Torres Strait Islands, Australia
Recent works: prints & sculptures

On the occasion of Australia Day
Australian Embassy in France

January 27
to May 20, 2011
Free admission

Information
Australian Embassy in France
4, rue Jean Rey 75015 Paris
Tel. : +33 (0)1 46 22 23 20
www.artsdaustralie.com/dennis-nona.htm

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PRESS RELATIONS :
Heymann Renoult Associées, Sarah Heymann and Annabelle Floriant
+33 (0)1 44 61 76 76 / www.heymann-renoult.com / a.floriant@heymann-renoult.com

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FOREWORD
by David Ritchie, Ambassador of Australia to France

The Australian Embassy in Paris is very pleased to host this outstanding exhibition ‘Between sky, land and sea. Legends revisited’ by one of Australia’s foremost contemporary artists, Dennis Nona.

For many years the Embassy has supported a rich program of Australian Indigenous culture, featuring exhibitions, musical performances, film and book launches, with the aim of developing recognition in France of the vitality and diversity of Australian Indigenous cultures.

This kind of cultural diplomacy allows the Embassy to project a more nuanced image of Australia and develop greater understanding of Australian culture in France. France is important to Australia as one of the major economies in Europe and as a significant political and strategic power with global interests and influence. It is our aim to ensure the people of France appreciate what drives Australia, including our history and culture.

The distinctive pointillist painting style of the artists of the Central Desert regions has become well known in France but less is known of the island cultures of the far north of Australia, the remote Torres Strait Islands. Dennis Nona’s intricate and innovative work marries the traditions of the world’s oldest continuing culture within the contemporary interpretation of an accomplished print maker and sculptor. It is a classic example of the fusion of traditional influences and modern interpretations distinctive to Australian culture today.

Many thanks are in order. The exhibition’s curator Stéphane Jacob and co-organiser Michael Kershaw from the Australian Art Print Network have worked tirelessly with the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing Export Agency to bring this important work to Paris and Rochefort. I thank them for their commitment, energy and creativity. My thanks to the sponsor, O.G.E., for its generous support and to the partners, the Musée des Confluences (Lyon) and the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire de Rochefort.

Lastly, I thank the artist Dennis Nona for this important contribution to the recognition of the great diversity of Australian Indigenous art in France. It is a privilege to play a part in presenting this outstanding work. I hope you enjoy the exhibition and, importantly, learn a little bit more about Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
by Dennis Nona

I wish to dedicate this exhibition to my Mother, Elma Yvonne Nona who passed away recently. She was not only a devoted Mother but also an accomplished storyteller who has been the inspiration for many of my works.

I also wish to acknowledge our Elders past and present and our ancestors.

One in particular I would like to acknowledge is Waii, a legendary Badu Island warrior, seventh generation ancestor of mine and also a member of the Tupmul, or stingray clan to which I also belong.

Waii was a revered warrior who with his brother Soibai, fought one of the last epic battles before the arrival of missionaries to the Islands. As a mark of respect their skulls were preserved on Math Island, which is close my Island of Badu, and it is where they can still be seen today.

Their story, which is popular and well known, was the subject of one of my earlier linocuts.

Waii is also a word used in our language to describe the influx of sea creatures to the reefs that come and go with the incoming and outgoing tides. I liken this to my international exhibitions that see works travel great distances by air and sea then return to Australia at their conclusion.

I would like to thank my printmakers, Theo Tremblay, David Jones, Jacek Rybinski and Basil Hall and also the foundry, Urban Art Projects, where my metal sculptures are produced.

Special thanks to The Australian Art Print Network and Di and Mike Kershaw who are my agents, publisher and exhibition tour organisers. Also special thanks to Arts d’Australie • Stephane Jacob who is my European representative and French exhibition organiser and curator.

I would also like to acknowledge QIAMEA for their valuable support for this and other international exhibitions in which I have participated.

Thanks also to the Australian Embassy who are now hosting my second solo exhibition in Paris.
From Australia Day (26 January) for a period of four months, Dennis Nona is the featured artist of an Australian Embassy exhibition, ‘Between sky, land and sea. Legends revisited’, from 27 January to 20 May, 2011.

In association with Stéphane Jacob, the Australian Embassy in Paris invites the public to discover some 50 recent works by Dennis Nona, the internationally recognised artist of the Torres Strait Islands that are located between Papua New Guinea and the northernmost tip of Australia.

Like the successful Embassy exhibition in 2006 which introduced French audiences to Dennis Nona’s work, this exhibition is curated by Stéphane Jacob (of Galerie Arts d’Australie • Stéphane Jacob, Paris) and The Australian Art Print Network (Sydney), in association with the Australian Embassy Paris and the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA).

The exhibition presents a series of new works by Dennis Nona that majestically combine fine art prints and sculptures: 33 etchings; 6 linocuts; 11 sculptures and an intriguing installation that provides a window into the ancient customs of the Torres Strait Islander people.

The exhibition features monumental works of exceptional artistic and technical expertise including a spectacular four-metre bronze sculpture depicting a crocodile and human figure, a six-metre linocut and an etching of 5 x 2 metres.

The art of Dennis Nona transports the viewer to a captivating world through the imaginative combination of totemic sea creatures (turtles, dugongs, sharks, crocodiles and sting rays), the constellations, and mythical Jérôme Bosch-like figures within complex background narratives relating to the ancient legends of the Islands.

Dennis Nona was born in 1973 on Badu Island in the Torres Strait, the tropical archipelago that has a unique culture similar to that of Melanesian people but distinctly different from mainland Aboriginal Australia. He learnt traditional wood carving as a child and absorbed the myths and legends of his people that were related to him by family and elders from his community. Following his secondary education the artist obtained a Diploma of Art from Cairns TAFE, a Diploma of Visual Arts in Printmaking from the Institution of Arts, Australian National University and a Master of Arts in Visual Arts, Griffith University, Brisbane.

The artist pioneered the development of the highly intricate linocut prints that have now become identifiable as a regional style. 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.

Nona is noted for his innovation, technical expertise and the scale of his works. In recent years he has explored etching and sculpture and has brought to these new media a highly individual style not seen before. He has embraced the cutting away of metal from his etching plates. This adds to the complexity and enhances the delicacy of the fine detail seen in the works. The irregular shape of the metal results in a

Ubirikubiri of the Awailau Kasa
2007. Bronze and Pearlshell, edition 2/6, 1.10m x 1.20m x 3.60m.
1st prize Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award 2007.
distinct embossing of the paper thereby adding a further dimension to these two dimensional works that are reminiscent of ancient turtle shell masks and other ceremonial regalia.

Nona’s growing reputation for sculptural works has seen him undertake several commissions in Australian and in Saudi Arabia for a 7 x 4.5 x 2.5 metres bronze and pearlshell installation for the King Abdullah University of Science & Technology. At the Confluences Museum in Lyon that is currently under construction, a monumental 8.5 x 6 x 2.4 metres work will be installed in the Museum’s forecourt.

The prestigious art journal, Australian Art Collector, has nominated Nona on several occasions, and again in its 2011 issue, as one of 50 most collectable artists. This accolade is borne out by major institutions that have collected his work. The National Gallery of Australia hold over 30 of his works in its collection. All Australian State and Territory Galleries, many Regional and University Galleries and important overseas institutions also hold the artist’s work in their collections.

The state of Queensland covers a vast area, from the far north of Cape York and the Torres Strait Islands beyond, across the Gulf of Carpentaria and central and west regions to the eastern seaboard and the south east region. Queensland’s geography as well as its history contributes to the diversity and distinctive nature of Indigenous art forms.

Queensland is home to the second largest population of Indigenous Australians. It is in the rare position of having two quite different Indigenous cultural groupings inside its borders, that of the Aboriginal mainland groups and that of the peoples of the Torres Strait islands between Cape York Peninsular and Papua New Guinea.

Evidence of Aboriginal occupation dates back more than 60,000 years and early art can be seen in paintings on rock surfaces and caves in Cape York, in the Laura rock escarpment and Princess Charlotte Bay in Queensland. The diverse Aboriginal visual art styles of the mainland regions – including the rainforest, Cape and Gulf regions of far north Queensland - are quite distinct from the art generated in the Torres Strait Islands. The contemporary work of city-based Indigenous artists – particularly from Brisbane- is often in stark contrast to the art created by artists from north Queensland.

Today the Queensland Indigenous visual arts industry is vibrant with both young and mature artists creating works across all the mediums of painting and sculpture, ceramics, body adornment, feather and fibre works, as well as in literature and the newer technologies of film, photography and digital imagery.

Note: From 3 June to 30 September 2011, select pieces from this exhibition, including some of the earliest and most emblematic of Nona’s work, will be shown at the Rochefort Art and History Museum at the Hôtel Hébre de Saint-Clement.
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. In 2007, he became the youngest Australian artist and first Torres Strait Islander to win the 1st prize of the prestigious Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award. In 2008 and again in 2010, Dennis received the Telstra Works on Paper Award. The artist is constantly pushing the boundaries of the media in which he works. 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 such as the British Museum (London), the Tjibaou Cultural Center (Noumea), the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire (Rochefort) and the Musée des Confluences (Lyon).

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 a Master of Arts 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; British Museum, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Cambridge University Museum UK and the Museum of American Indian Arts, USA.

Dennis Nona, in his studio, Creating the flying foxes for his monumental work ‘Mutuk’. Photograph © Andrew Baker.

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.

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 Awailau Kasa, in 2007. And now the recent bronze and pearlshell project for the new Musée des Confluences in Lyon, a 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.
SELECTION OF MAJOR WORKS DISPLAYED: PRINTS AND SCULPTURES

The exhibition presents a series of new works by Dennis Nona that majestically combine fine art prints and sculptures: 33 etchings; 6 linocuts; 11 sculptures and an intriguing installation that provides a window into the ancient customs of the Torres Strait Islander people.

The art of Dennis Nona transports the viewer to a captivating world through the imaginative combination of totemic sea creatures (turtles, dugongs, sharks, crocodiles and sting rays), the constellations, mythical Jérôme Bosch-like figures within complex background narratives.

Yawarr

Linocut, ed. 7/20, 1.22m x 6.10m, 2007
Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney

Yawarr is the central character in the story that tells of how he was transported on rainbows between the Torres Strait Islands of Badu, Nagir, Poruma, Aurid, Masig and Mer. It is also a gardening story that relates to differences between the sizes of the crops on different islands.

Yawarr lived at a place called Kainply (the burial site where the Badu Island ancestor, Goba was killed). Wabou Pad is the name of the hill where Yawarr made his vegetable garden. Yawarr had three wives. At harvest ceremony time they would pile up the wild yam - saurr, cassava - gabau, taro - manata and sweet potato urrgabau, on the ceremonial grounds. When the villagers from Zaum, Bait and Koitade saw Yawarr’s vegetables they were amazed because they were three to four times bigger than the ones they grew.

The villagers asked Yawarr to tell them about the magic that made his vegetables so big. He took two men from each village to his garden and showed them his secret which was to place the vegetables in the ground in a special way. When they returned to their village they forgot what they had been shown so they went back and asked Yawarr again. However, they had to wait two to three months for the monsoon season before they could sow their crops. By the time the monsoons came they had forgotten again what Yawarr had told them. The villagers went back to Yawarr but he refused to tell them a third time. Yawarr’s refusal angered the villagers and they sought the help of the Madub people (dwarf like spirits) to inflict some magic on Yawarr in order to punish him.

The next morning Yawarr gave each of his three wives two of every vegetable including several types of bush yams, sweet potatoes, cassava, sugar cane – guru, and instructed them to go down to the coast and gather bush berries - wiwi wiri, mazaru and wapi, and mud crabs – gurrba, for lunch. When the wives left, he went to his garden at Wabou Pad where he was confronted by the Madubal. They called on the rain and thunder to create a rainbow - curuwai. They surrounded him, brandishing their pui (long rods with hooks on each end) and hooked Yawarr under his arms and rolled him down the hill. They put him in the rainbow and carried him to the neighbouring island of Moa (Banks Island) to a place called Bulbul. There they created a sacred rock, Kula, that can still be seen there today. Yawarr protested saying, ‘I did no wrong, I have three wives and children to care for, take me back to Badu.’

The Madubal mocked him and created another rainbow to Nagir (Mt Ernest Island) where he was taken. Yawarr insisted he be taken home but was mocked again and taken on another rainbow to Poruma (Coconut Island) by the Madubal. He protested and was mocked yet again and this time taken on a rainbow to Aurid (Aureed Island). Still protesting he was finally transported to the Eastern Island of Mer (Murray Island).

On the far right of the print the wild yams, banana trees - katam, sugar cane and other vegetables in Yawarr’s garden can be seen. Above the banana trees are the villagers who approached Yawarr to learn his magic. Their heads represent the clan totems of the Island, stingray, crocodile, dugong and dog. Yawarr is seen above the sugar cane with his Pat (digging stick) demonstrating to the two villagers the secret of how he plants his vegetables to make them so big. Yawarr’s three wives can be seen below with the vegetables and mud crabs they used to make lunch. They are holding coconut baskets - eiuw. Above this section of the print are three Madub people approaching Yawarr with their Pui (hooked sticks) that they used to roll him down the hillside. The three groups of frogs at the top of the print represent the rain that allowed the Madubal to create the rainbows they used to transport Yawarr from island to island. Five Madub people can be seen carrying Yawarr on the rainbow. The bat like figure linked to these five signifies the powerful magic that they and other sorcerers can create to enable them to fly from island to island. Below this are Yawarr’s three wives that the Madubal took on their return to Badu after having left Yawarr on Mer. The left hand side of the print shows Yawarr arriving at Mer on the rainbow. The village is on the tail side and the main waterhole is located around the nostril area of the dugong.
**Saulal**

*Etching, ed 11/45, 80 x 120 cm, 2010. Collection Arts d'Australie • Stéphane Jacob, Paris*

Winner, Works on Paper, 2010 Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

Saulal explores the phenomenon of the turtle mating season which starts on the Australian mainland and travels north through the Torres Strait Islands. At the start of the turtle mating season the Biru Biru (birds) migrate north from the mainland, across the Torres Strait to Papua New Guinea. At the end of the turtle mating season they migrate south back to the mainland. The flights of Biru Biru are seen in the afternoons when the sun, shown in the print, is moving towards the horizon. Turtles are found on the outer reefs and also closer to shore, near the mangroves and in the creeks that run into the sea. The ones closer to land feed on mangrove pods, one of which is depicted near the mouth of the turtle. The flesh of the turtles that inhabit the two areas have a distinctly different taste. The ones closer to shore have a muddy or ‘freshwater’ taste that is not as highly prized as those found on the reefs. Two Remora or sucker fish are seen with the turtle. These were used for the traditional hunting of the animals. A rope made out of coconut fibres was tied around the tail of the sucker fish and then released from a canoe into the water where the hunters knew the turtles were feeding. The sucker fish would attach itself to the turtle and tow the canoe until the turtle tired. It would then be pulled to the surface and harpooned.

**Goba II**

*Etching, Ed 2/30, 229 x 183 cm, 2009. Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney*

Goba is a true story from the artist’s island of Badu. It is about a dishonest and greedy man who traded between the two main Badu Island villages of Argan and Wakid. Argan is near reefs teeming with fish and turtle while Wakid is near estuary mangroves and swamps with abundant mud crabs and shellfish. These localities provided the resources that enabled Goba to successfully trade between the two villages. At Argan he caught turtle which he exchanged for Bui Sama at Wakid. Bui Sama is made from mangrove pods (Buid) and is an important ingredient in the cooking of turtle meat. Its preparation was a process that was only known to the Wakid people at that time. The Wakid people became suspicious of Goba as the turtle he was trading had very little fat and often no liver, both of which are prized parts of the turtle. Goba made unlikely excuses as to why this was so which heightened the Wakid people’s suspicions.

The figure of Goba is seen inside the turtle that is overlaid on a stingray or Tupmul, which is one of the Argan clan totems. The figure at the top of the print is the Kuik Mabaig who is the Chief of the Kwod. He is holding a Bu shell that is blown to summons the members of the Kwod together. The making and use of the Bui Sama is an involved and complex process. The Buid or mangrove pods are placed in an Abituli (basket) and soaked in a freshwater creek (Sarrka) for about one week. When they become soft they are dried in the sun on a Wàk or grass mat. The pods are then minced and mixed with the turtle meat prior to cooking. The Bui Sama helps break down the fat and enhances the flavour of the meat. Goba’s burial place is a sacred site that can be seen as a mound of rocks on Badu Island today.
Mutuk is a traditional legend unique to the artist’s island of Badu. It is a story about a man from the village of Argan who eventually came to grief as a result of his greed and refusal to share food with his fellow clansmen. In those times the customs and laws were very strict. All people were obliged to share with each other and most importantly with the members of the Kwod which was a group of highly respected men, made up of a chief and other clan leaders. Every morning Mutuk would leave the safety of his tree house to go fishing, at a point near the reef where he usually caught an abundance of Snapper and other fish. Members of the Kwod heard about Mutuk’s bountiful catch and were curious as to why he was not sharing with his neighbours. So they sent one of their members to his home to establish exactly how many fish he was catching. Below Mutuk’s tree house a huge pile of fish skeletons were found. These were taken back to the Kwod as evidence of his greed. It was decided that Mutuk’s transgression should be punished, so the sorcerer members of the Kwod sang over the bones to cast a spell on him.

Soon after, when Mutuk was out fishing, a large Snapper flicked off his spear and slid down the rock towards the water. Mutuk jumped in to the water to retrieve the fish but was caught and swallowed by a huge Bailer Shell shark (Alup Aw Baidam). The shark headed north, away from Badu in the direction of Boigu.

Becoming aware of Mutuk’s absence, the sorcerers were satisfied that their spell had worked and began preparing for the funeral ceremony that would take place at Mutuk’s village of Argan.

While Mutuk was inside the shark, he could tell by the temperature if it was swimming near the surface or in the depths of the sea. Because of the currents it was cold near the surface and warm down deep. When he experienced a long period of cold he realised the shark must be swimming on a reef.

Mutuk had been swallowed while he was holding a Celalal or pippi shell. He used this shell to cut himself out of the shark’s belly. When Mutuk emerged from the shark he found himself in waist high water in sight of an island which happened to be Boigu. Like all strangers arriving on the island the Boigu people were initially hostile towards him until a Badu woman who had married a Boigu man, recognised him. She was in fact Mutuk’s sister.

After several days following Mutuk’s arrival, the Boigu people decided to take him back to Badu. After setting off in a canoe manned by Boigu warriors Mutuk’s sister observed a large number of flying foxes flying to the south east towards Nagir. In the Torres Strait these mammals are associated with very powerful magic. This occurrence is know in language as Patcap. The formation and direction of flying foxes was a sign that something untoward would happen to Mutuk on his return to Badu. Mutuk’s sister was distraught with the knowledge of his impending fate.

On Mutuk’s arrival back on Badu the Argan villagers were alarmed and surprised as the preparation for his funeral ceremony was still in progress. The Kwod decided that he should be beheaded and that sealed his fate.

This legend is a cautionary tale that taught the Badu Islanders the importance of sharing and observing the laws and customs, and the consequences if these rules were transgressed.

Mutuk can be seen in the shark’s belly holding the pippi shell and also on its back representing his journey back from Boigu to Badu. The Kwod is represented by the six shells below the dorsal fin. The fish skeletons discovered beneath Mutuk’s tree house is seen in the dorsal fin. The snapper Mutuk caught is shown in the shark’s mouth from which Mutuk’s hands are emerging. The three flying fox spirit figures are seen on the sharks back with paddles and images of traditional masks in their blades. Various regalia are seen on these three figures including their tails which reflect the Sagi seen hanging from traditional grass skirts. A dugong is seen in the circular element below the front flying fox representing one of the main totems from Boigu. Two Ramora or sucker fish are seen attached to the sharks belly were used in the traditional hunting of dugong and turtle. The fifteen flying foxes seen trailing the shark are the ones observed by Mutuk’s sister much to her despair, as Mutuk left Boigu on his return to Badu.
Ubirikubiri of the Awailau Kasa
Sculpture, Bronze and Pearllshell, ed.2/6, 1.10m x 1.20m x 3.60m, 2007. Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney

Winner, Overall, 2007 Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

Ubirikubiri is one of many stories and dances adopted by the Torres Strait Islanders from their Papua New Guinean neighbours. The story is told on Boigu, Mabuiag, Mer and the artist’s island of Badu. The artist first heard the story from the noted cultural authority and linguist, Ephraim Bani. Badu Island elder, Issac Charlie, who first witnessed the performance of the Ubirikubiri dance on Badu in 1926, was also consulted prior to the creation of the sculpture.

The dance was performed by the crocodile clans on Badu and the other islands as a means of maintaining tradition and the spirituality of the people belonging to this and other totems. It was also a means of strengthening and perpetuating the crocodile spirit, Ubirikubiri.

The 1926 performance took place at Argan Village which is located on the Awailau Kasa (River). The mask used in the dance was made of turtle shell - Karral - by the artist’s grandfather, Jomen Tamwoy and Mr. Baira. This mask was kept at Motau but no longer exists. Badu Island elder, Tuisofoa Nomoa, recalls seeing the mask and says that its loss was a consequence of the Pearling Industry that was booming in the late 1920s. Many of the Islanders were at sea for months at a time which meant that a lot of the ceremonies and dances were lost along with the material items associated with them.

Ubirikubiri was one of the dances that survived and was first performed again in 1985 on Badu. This performance was witnessed by the artist. Renowned Badu Island choreographer and dance mask creator, James Eseli has produced a number of crocodile masks that have been used in more recent Ubirikubiri performances. His masks can be seen in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia and National Museum of Australia.

Following the death of his wife a man decided to give his daughter a pet to help console her and keep her company. He brought her a puppy but she didn’t like it. He then brought her a piglet but she didn’t like that either (both the dog and piglet are seen on the body of the crocodile). One day when he was out spearing fish on the beach he came across a baby crocodile which he caught and took home to show his daughter. She really liked it and named the crocodile Ubirikubiri. Her father made a pen for the crocodile. As it grew he kept enlarging the pen.

After it had become fully grown the father went to visit friends in another village and neglected to feed Ubirikubiri the entire time he was away. When he returned Ubirikubiri was very hungry and very annoyed having been left without food for such a long time. As the father went to feed Ubirikubiri some fish he grabbed him and killed him then broke out of the pen placing the father on his back and heading off to the Mai Kasa leaving the tracks seen in the patterning of the sculpture.

The daughter, who had not been at home when Ubirikubiri seized her father, saw the broken pen and evidence of a skirmish. She followed Ubirikubiri’s tracks to the river calling out to the crocodile to tell her about her father. At Ziba Ziba (that time of day when the sun has almost set) Ubirikubiri appeared on the river bank with her father on his back. She pleaded with the crocodile to give up her father but shaking his huge body he refused and headed back in to the river.

There is a moral to part of this story that instructs us that if animals are taken from their natural environment they must be looked after and treated and cared for properly.
Dadu Minaral

Bronze, ed. 10/12, 120 x 65 x 65 cm, 2007.
Collection Musée des Confluences, Lyon (inv.2009.23.1)

Dadu is the name given to the decorated poles that supported the turtle that was used during the ceremony for the initiation of young men of the Waru Agudal or Turtle Clan on Badu Island.

This ceremony has not taken place since the 1800s and none of the poles are known to exist. The artist has created the sculpture based on information given to him by a Badu Island elder whose knowledge was passed down to him from his great grandfather.

The ceremony is known to have taken place at Surum which is a sand bank attached to Math, a small island off the artist’s island of Badu.

The forks at the base of the poles were sunk in the sand to support the turtle that was later removed, butchered, cooked in an Amai (earth oven) and feasted on as part of the initiation ceremony.

The Gapu (sucker fish) seen on the underside of the turtle is also a Badu Island totem that was used in the traditional hunting of turtle and dugong.

Gubuka

Sculpture, Bronze, Aluminium and Pearlshell, ed. 5/12, 106 x 88 x 82 cm, 2008.
Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney

The sculpture depicts two species of Stingray, Guuwerr (the bronze stingray) and Tupmul (the aluminium stingray).

While out fishing or diving they would be observed, at certain times, leaping out of the water. This action of the stingray is an indicator of an imminent change in weather conditions. When observed during times of rough weather (Muturuka) it indicates a change to calm conditions. The action of the stingrays represents a spiritual connection between these sea creatures and man. In the moment the stingrays are airborne and before the flop back to the surface of the water, islanders of a particular totem will instinctly utter the word, Gubuka. Traditionally, Gubuka was the preserve of the person of the Tupmul Augad (totem) who was one of several men representing other island totems who sat in the Kwod (the Western equivalent of a parliament). Tupmul is the artist’s totem and is one of the main totems on his island of Badu. The two different metals used in the sculpture reflect the different colours of the two stingray species. Tupmul is pale white in colour while Guuwerr is a darkish brown. In creating the sculpture the artist has reflected on the synchronicity or affinity that exists between the sea creature and the man that possesses its totem.
The artist is one of a number of contemporary artists to embrace skatedecks as a medium. Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Australia’s 2009 Venice Biennale representative, Shaun Gladwell have all produced works relating to this street culture. A shape that is reminiscent of traditional masks and shields and the intricate patterning produced by the laser cutter that is seen in his linocuts, etchings and sculptures in metal, also attracted Nona to extend his repertoire into this new medium.

This legend originated from Badu Island. There are two islands off Badu Island called Zurath Island and Math Island. On Zurath Island there lived a dogai (witch) and on Math Island there were people living there. One delightful day Gabu Kai Kai rowed his canoe to Zurath, where the Dogai (witch) was. When he arrived in Zurath, he saw an enormous tree with ripe haubau (fruit). The next day, early in the morning he decided to take another trip to Zurath again to gather more haubau (fruit). When he arrived there he decided to climb up the haubau tree with his basket. Suddenly he heard a footstep and it was the Dogai. The dogai glanced under the tree, for the haubau, but only saw footprints that remained in the sand. Gabu Kai heard the Dogai saying: ‘Who stole my haubau?’ Gabu Kai stood silently among the branches. The dogai looked up and finally saw the thief, with a basket full of haubau-al. Then the Dogai said to Bau Kai Kai ‘What are you doing with my haubau? To pay me back you have to throw me down one haubau.’ The Dogai took one step and ate the haubau and said: ‘I want another one.’ So he threw another down to the Dogai. The Dogai took two steps and ate the haubau. The Dogai wanted another and another one until he threw the last haubau as far away as he could and the Dogai ran after the haubau. While she ran after the last haubau, Gabu Kai Kai quickly jumped down the tree and sprinted to his canoe and rowed fast back to Math Island. The Dogai swam after him but was too slow and returned back to Zurath Island. Gabu Kai Kai arrived back home and told his people about the Dogai. So they all decided to make a plan to kill the Dogai and go to Zurath Island the next day. That afternoon they prepared all their weapons for the next morning. Early in the morning they rowed their canoes furiously. When they arrived they went up to the big caves and finally saw the Dogai sleeping in one of the caves. One of the warriors threw his spear at the Dogai and speared her left arm. She jumped up and ran out of the cave. They chased her and she tried to bury herself in the ground but the ground was too hard. She decided to run down to the beach where the sand was soft and buried herself. They quickly chased her and cut off her right arm and breasts. Gabu Kai Kai and the warriors rowed back to Math Island and were overjoyed with their performance. The old people told them to throw the breasts and the arm in the sea, but the young boy said: ‘No, we’ll tie them on the tree and practice spearing them for the afternoon. Later that afternoon one of the boys took the breasts out into the sea but left the arm on the tree. That evening the Dogai came while everybody was asleep, searching for her arms and breasts. As she searched among the trees she chanted over and over again: ‘Come to me my arm’ and finally she found her arm on the tree. She snatched her arm off the tree and placed it back on her shoulder. The booming noise as she placed her arm made the villagers awaken, but, she couldn’t find her breasts and swam back home to Zurath Island. The next day the old man asked the young boy if he threw the left arm in the sea. He said ‘No, only the breasts.’ The old man said: ‘That is why there was a big noise last night. The Dogai came back to take her arm.’ Today you can see her breasts which turned into a rock between Zurath and Math Islands. The laser cut image on the Skateboard is a reproduction of the artist’s original linocut.
DENNIS NONA: A CONTEMPORARY ART TERROIR-IST
by Simon Wright (introduction to the catalogue)

How to make sense of the past, where generations of intellectual property is at once respected and yet capable of being re-shaped by creative formats which evolve and depart from previous methods of delivery, is a fine balancing act. In the case of Dennis Nona, one of Australia’s most significant contemporary visual artists, ‘the past’ is a place that resembles a Gordian knot of epic proportions. Each historical strand is tied around the other in a ball, and teasing them out via interpretation in the present moment is fraught with various regional, communal, familial, political, religious, cultural, and economic contestations. Discursive traditional lineages have the potential to unravel and stray well beyond what many would say was the natural domain of art, but for Nona, it’s a challenge he’s come to accept as part of the business of his art. Over time he has matched an incredible technical virtuosity across several mediums with continual academic research and a steady visual acumen to create a growing, stunning body of work. To have achieved this by mid-career without having ever taken up painting, perhaps the most fetishised of all art market currencies, and to have carved out such a trajectory via print making and sculpture, says a lot about his motivation and respect for a sense of place, or what many readers might think of as terroir.

The conditions of place, above all, are the things we would say that provide vital agency and incident in his art. His evocation of the elements - geography, geology, seasons – and their inextricable links to how these have affected change on generations of people, has run in parallel with his understandings of the changes heralded by yet another set of forces that arrived out of the winds and seaways. Tall ships, colonisation, and their subsequent aftermath - the administrative and religious annexation of his homelands in the 19th century - are equally vital aspects which underpin his project. From their inception in the late 1980s, each one of his works has traced a kind of double vision in the formulation of his identity; of the specific and the universal. In his rendering of the specific lay valuable pieces of local cultural maintenance and knowledge transfer, exemplified by his use of mineral (patterns) associated with ancestry or artefact, or links to great stories of humanity and survival, such as war, hunting and trade, each passed through generations of custodians. In his reckoning of the universal lay fertile, abstract concepts such as an open cosmos, the unseen and unknowable, and portents of the future.

Nona has emerged as a leading exponent of how to navigate a career doing contemporary art related to the Torres Strait region, and shares certain obligations and responsibilities with only a handful of artists seeking to emulate this position. Many of whom, such as Alick Tipoti, Billy Missi and Brian Robinson he has either worked with closely, or influenced considerably. Others, such as James Eseli and Ken Thaiday, inspired him as a young man. And yet he has also come to accept as part of the business of his art. Over time he has matched an incredible technical virtuosity across several mediums with continual academic research and a steady visual acumen to create a growing, stunning body of work. To have achieved this by mid-career without having ever taken up painting, perhaps the most fetishised of all art market currencies, and to have carved out such a trajectory via print making and sculpture, says a lot about his motivation and respect for a sense of place, or what many readers might think of as terroir.

The conditions of place, above all, are the things we would say that provide vital agency and incident in his art. His evocation of the elements - geography, geology, seasons – and their inextricable links to how these have affected change on generations of people, has run in parallel with his understandings of the changes heralded by yet another set of forces that arrived out of the winds and seaways. Tall ships, colonisation, and their subsequent aftermath - the administrative and religious annexation of his homelands in the 19th century - are equally vital aspects which underpin his project. From their inception in the late 1980s, each one of his works has traced a kind of double vision in the formulation of his identity; of the specific and the universal. In his rendering of the specific lay valuable pieces of local cultural maintenance and knowledge transfer, exemplified by his use of mineral (patterns) associated with ancestry or artefact, or links to great stories of humanity and survival, such as war, hunting and trade, each passed through generations of custodians. In his reckoning of the universal lay fertile, abstract concepts such as an open cosmos, the unseen and unknowable, and portents of the future.

He has consistently been at the forefront of innovation to achieve new formal resolutions, in order to solve pictorial problems and carry the image into new territory. Perhaps the first of these was his early role in the invention of kaideral during the printing of linocuts, the first medium he practised as a student artist in the late 1980s. Related to ‘dob-inking’ or ‘a la poupee’ it is a technique coined by Nona and other TSI printmakers growing, stunning body of work. To have achieved this by mid-career without having ever taken up painting, perhaps the most fetishised of all art market currencies, and to have carved out such a trajectory via print making and sculpture, says a lot about his motivation and respect for a sense of place, or what many readers might think of as terroir.

Over centuries TSI people have utilised carving, tattoo, image transfer, and the notion of multiples to convey symbolic and utilitarian meaning, on skin and body, on land and flora, and in relation to the sea. Importantly, Nona has also set about creating a unique process, fashioned from a set of protocols developed via consultation, to preserve the integrity of intellectual property he works with. Often this ‘source material’ is on loan, or used under license of others, with permission and conditions. As such, Nona is representative of a group of artists who deal not only with what might be deemed traditional legends and myths, but also with departures into the realm of the everyday; the banal, social and family life of people.

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rewarding aspect of his work in this medium, and often resulted in works across the edition with highly individual characters. The term kaideral, as spoken by Zenadh-Kes people, literally means ‘glistening waves’, and was given great animation by another of Nona’s contemporaries, David Bosun, a fellow Diploma of Art student at TAFE College in Cairns, North Queensland:

‘Like the sea whipped up by the wind in the distance, or turbulence in dangerously shallow coral seas. The glistening water is a mariner’s sign for caution – a weather or water current change’.

A keen sense of place and the ways by which art can attest to its fickle, nuanced and contested conditions also pervades Nona’s more recent innovations. Reputedly one of the largest works of its kind in the world, Yawarr (2007), a monumental six metre long single sheet linocut, speaks of infinite depth, vastness and a unique set of historical referents related to Alfred Cort Haddon’s Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898. Perhaps ironically, it has been the work of Haddon and the things that caught his eye that inspired Dennis Nona to visit Cambridge and conduct further research on TSI holdings in other international collections. Haddon’s research, aimed primarily at European audiences, was rooted in the ethnographic and anthropological discourse of the mid 1800s. Sculpted masks, like other examples also held in the Picasso Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art, were not considered art forms as they might be today, nor were the other carved objects, or recorded songs and dances he collected. Haddon published and distributed widely his interpretation of the significance of these works in the shaping of Torres Strait societies, prior to the 1871 arrival of European missionaries. Reflecting on that research, Dennis Nona (along with several of his contemporaries) became determined to stimulate wider understandings of the connection between material culture and language, custom and law, from their perspective, as an act of re-appropriation, or contemporary reclamation. Access to such material around the world, and research into related artefacts, has given rise to some of his most internationally acclaimed and exhibited work. It is Nona’s art that now plays an ongoing role in both the reclamation and retelling of information critical for cultural maintenance and development. It is another facet on what has become a critical contemporary practice.

Epic detail, finesse and scale have also become the hallmark of recent forays into etching, and cast bronze sculptures. Award winning works, such as Saulal (2010), which won the 27th Telstra Works on Paper Award this year, have announced a brilliant command of the medium, and a balanced role in the collaborative equation with Master Printmakers in order to achieve pristine editions. The monstrous Mutuk (2008) etching, executed on a sheet almost two metres high and five metres in length, is one of Nona’s greatest works in two dimensions, artfully using the visual equivalence of rhythm and meter to sing a song cycle related to Badu Island custom and law, greed and punishment.

The lead up to a major museum touring exhibition around Australia in June 2005 marked another significant juncture in Nona’s practice. Transposing knowledge used previously for printmaking, with no preliminary drawing or modelling, he used a chainsaw, some chisels and a hammer to carve and sand a huge dugong (a large grey mammal also known as a ‘sea cow’) from a 2.5 metre length of red cedar trunk in less than two weeks. The dugong was to be exhibited as part of a ‘Nath’ installation, used until the 1940’s throughout the Torres Strait to hunt the sea mammals for food and medicinal purposes. Shown alongside printed works, it was a catalyst for new sculptural possibilities, and a precursor to the first series of bronzes cast and struck at the internationally renowned Brisbane foundry, Urban Art Projects, later in 2005.

With backing from Australian Art Print Network, Nona worked at UAP studios to fashion elaborate shapes, cut and modelled from styrofoam, prior to the addition of a thin rubberised surface into which he carved intricate designs. The approved form was then cast and struck as a proof in bronze. His distinctive minaral, or carved surface designs, oscillate between decoration and narratives travel. Recent examples of his cast bronze, such as Gubuka (2008), an imposing duet of dancing stingrays, communicate primarily via their form, although there is, as with most of his work, a text to accompany the work as a way of contextualising authorial intent. Complex information regarding appropriate times for zagul [hunting], weather and tidal patterns, breeding times and locations, ocean currents and danger, via reading of various embedded designs, such as constellations and other symbolic shapes, are conveyed across each surface.

One of his most complex and ambitious sculptures to date is the major work titled Ubirikubiri of the Awailau Kasa (2007), which won him the Telstra National Awards in
2007. Based on a linocut edition he’d made earlier, the work has cross-cultural resonance, and relates to the legendary tale of a villager from nearby Papua New Guinea who paid the ultimate price for not looking after his pet crocodile. With educative and moral overtones aimed at young audiences in the region and beyond, the accompanying story describes how the crocodile paraded his dying captor on his back after a period of neglect and starvation, to the horror of onlookers. These large and impressive works have propelled Nona’s graphic work into a third dimension, and continue the artist’s interest in finding new ways for old expressions, to communicate within and without the region. In planning now is what may turn out to be his ultimate accomplishment, a massive bronze public sculpture proposed for the front of the Musée des Confluences (Lyon). At eight metres in height, and seven metres in length, Gapu Danghal will forever celebrate the relationship between hunter and hunted, water and land, science, society and art, artist and audience.

Working consistently since the early 1990s and now with well over 5000 thousand editioned works in circulation, and almost 4000 of them sold, Nona can lay claim to being one of Australia’s most collected artists, with works in significant permanent collections around the world. His work is informed by the two worlds he moves between, fuelled on the one hand by an imagination and intellectual property only he can access, and from the other hand elucidated with unique technical mastery. With recent exhibitions in Paris, London, NYC, Berlin, Korea and at Australia’s most important public museums, including The National Gallery of Australia and the Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Dennis Nona has made an enduring contribution to the art of our time.

Australians are comfortable with Nona’s art being associated with a contemporary revival of material culture practices in his home region, and with the wider recognition he has gained for his skill and conceptual rigour. His winning of major awards that recognise his art making alongside an Indigenous background, such as the 2007 Telstra National Aboriginal and TSI Art Awards, and those that reward him as an international art citizen, such as The Angel Orensanz International Art Award (NYC), serve to remind us that regardless of how Dennis Nona is categorised, his work often escapes simplistic reading. While he may be from a certain place, and has managed to distil visually something of its unique suite of conditions, Dennis Nona performs a balancing act aimed at tastemakers and collectors regardless of the site of reception. For this we raise a glass and acknowledge him as a contemporary art terroir-ist.


Simon Wright has delivered over 200 exhibition projects across private and museum gallery sectors in Australia since 1995. He is currently Director of Griffith Artworks and Griffith University Art Gallery and a contributor to art journals, magazines and auction house catalogues. In 2004 he received the inaugural Regional Galleries Association of Queensland and Museums Australia [QLD] Gallery and Museum Achievement Award [Individual Category], and an Australia Business Arts Foundation Award in 2006. He joined the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation in 2007, and served as a member of The Commissioner’s Council for Australia at the 53rd Venice Biennale of International Art in 2009.
The small islands of Torres Strait sit silently between the two giant lands of New Guinea to the north and Australia to the south. Here Islanders go about their everyday lives with little notice from the outside world. And yet it is here also that in 1991 Indigenous groups changed forever the character of Australian law by refusing to recognise, and challenging in Australia’s highest court, the legal concept of Terra Nullius – the then-prevalent idea that no-one owned lands or waters in Australia until annexation by the British Crown.

The ancestors of today’s Islanders arrived in Torres Strait at least three and a half thousand years ago, and with the arrival of people, that vast seascape, dotted with small volcanic islands, coral atolls and low swampy islands, changed forever. Exactly who these first colonisers were is still a mystery. To the north Papuans lived for tens of thousands of years, but they do not seem to have possessed the seafaring technology required to colonise the islands of Torres Strait. To the south Aboriginal peoples also lived for tens of thousands of years, but neither did they colonise the far islands of the Strait. So who were the distant ancestors of modern-day Torres Strait Islanders? Where did they come from? And why did they suddenly come to occupy small islands that for thousands of years had remained vacant? Despite more than thirty years of archaeological research on the islands, it is only now that clues of this earliest phase of Islander history are beginning to emerge. And today the island of Badu, Dennis Nona’s home island, holds a key to understanding this early history.

Torres Strait Islanders stand in a peculiar geographical position. To many, Islanders are a people-in-between: not quite Melanesian, nor Aboriginal, but a people squeezed between those two worlds. Yet it would be a mistake to simply see Islanders in this way, for Torres Strait Islanders are of their own making, rich in a social life that has, through time, developed its own, very particular, cultural practices and worldviews. And it is these characteristically Islander practices and worldviews that inform the art that Dennis Nona has made his own.

The first signs of Torres Strait Islander history in the archaeological record date to slightly more than three and a half thousand years ago on the islands of Badu and on a small islet just off its neighbour Mabuiag. These early traces indicate the timing of exploratory visits by seafaring colonisers, and with this the beginnings of village life on the islands. Resident populations were then low, and it is most likely that at first only a few islands were settled. By two and a half thousand years ago, however, we see for the first time in the archaeological record widespread evidence of people in the northern, eastern and western extremes of the Strait, on the islands of Saibai, Dauar, Badu and Pulu. Populations had grown to such an extent that for the first time they begin to be commonly found in archaeological sites across the span of Torres Strait.

From their first coming, the ancestors down to the present Torres Strait Islanders have clearly always been specialised sea peoples. This is unambiguously evident by the large amounts of shellfish, turtle and dugong remains found in the ancient sites. Across the Strait we find that when people arrived they began to burn the landscape and transform once-dense forests into grasslands onto which the villages were then built. By seven hundred years ago, populations had increased to such an extent that numerous new villages suddenly began to be established, along with new ritual sites such as sacred stone alignments and dugong jaw-bone arrangements in well-chosen places away from the villages themselves. But the biggest innovations in spiritual life seem to have been initiated...
after about four hundred years ago from earlier forms, when massive
dugong bone mounds began to be built, signalling new and intensified
interactions with the sea and its creatures, physical and spiritual.
When the missionaries arrived in the 1870s and 1880s, many of the
secret rituals associated with these sites and their spirits ceased to be
performed, but the sea’s sacred endowment has remained influential
to this very day, as has local knowledge of the world’s sacred fecundity.

Throughout this long period of cultural transformation one thing
remained common: Torres Strait Islanders maintained their status
as one of the world’s most sea-oriented peoples. What does it
mean to be a sea people? For one, sea peoples spend much of
their everyday lives interacting with the sea, travelling, trading on
seafaring craft such as the large Torres Strait Islander babagul,
obtaining food using the specialised technology and magic
knowledge such as employed from boats or when harpooning
dugong from naath platforms (see Linocut Prints ‘Dhangala’ and
‘Nath’), and simply thinking about those elemental forces that help
shape everyday life: the waves, the sea-borne winds, the clouds
which come from and go to distant oceans, the guiding stars above
the oceans, the tides, the animals both affiliative and dangerous,
such as the fish and turtles and sharks.

In western Torres Strait there are two words, mal mapassi, that refer to
the swinging underwater currents and the motion of the seagrass as
the winds above the waves change their direction. Mal mapassi is the
underwater sea as it becomes heavy and starts to swing as the wind
works against the water. To be a sea people requires a special affinity
with the sea, one that goes beyond simply eating sea-food. Being of
the sea means thinking through the sea. All peoples think about the
world in ways that implicates more than material things; we all live in
a world imbued by the mysterious powers that make the world work.
For sea people, these forces are sea-bound: they come from the
sea, they operate from the sea, they relate to the sea. Seascapes are
spiritscapes, and the land is but a speck in a sea-world stretching on
all sides, ever more open and vast than the enclosing coastline.

It is in this spiritual orientation of the sea that Torres Strait Islander
culture, and Torres Strait Islanders, have always operated. Even today,
when Christianity has become such an important dimension of Islander
life, the sea holds power as a spirit-world, from the depths of the ocean
where sea spirits live, or where pearlshell divers have lost their lives
and now rest, to the waters where the animals travel not randomly but
along predestined routes spiritually ordained, to the sea surface where
spiritual forces control the waves, and the skies where the winds blow,
driving boats astray or bringing them home, and to the clan augad, the
sacred totems through which people identify with their spirit creatures,
usually of the sea. It is in this spiritual geography that the sea itself
lives, and in which people work and live and travel each day of their
lives. The homelands – or, more correctly, the homewaters – that
Islanders dream of when away from home. It is of such water-worlds
and spiritscapes that Torres Strait Islander storytellers speak when
recounting tales of the ancestors. These are the callings that Islanders
hold dearly when singing of ‘my island home’.

It is in such water-worlds and spiritscapes that Dennis Nona lives and
breaths, and of which his art speaks, not in words but in imagery.
Three dimensions: the sea, the spirits, and storytelling through dance,
music and artwork. An art-world through which Dennis does not
merely imitate ‘nature’, but through which he pronounces a sacred
knowledge that speaks through the sea, and in doing so carries with it
the message of the spirits and the ancestors, from one generation to
the next. In Torres Strait, Indigenous language is most important, for it
is in these words that stories are told, and that history is fashioned. It
is through his Badu language, Kala Lagaw Ya, that as a child Dennis learnt the stories
of Badu history and Badu legends, through his mother, his father, and, most importantly
among the Badulgal – the people of Badu – through his aude, his uncle Johnson Joe,
and his ate (grandfather) Yopeli Panuel who as he grew up told him deeper dimensions
of the stories and their dances. One such story is of Ubirikubiri, which he first
heard from his father as a child. Dennis’s father had from his earliest days heard the
stories, at home, but most profoundly in those places to which the stories relate, on
a dinghy as he waited with his father for the tide to turn, or as he walked by a story rock.

In Kala Lagaw Ya there is a set of words that means ‘the person who translates a
story into a song’, nao’u imay mabaig. In everyday travels across the seas, or in the
old days during battles between enemy tribes, or whilst fishing off a canoe or dinghy,
people experience their worlds in new ways, and every now and then something different,
something strange happens: a whirlwind comes and turns the boat around; a fish
jumps from a sea-eddy; a school of sharks surround a cray-fisherman; a dhogai
spirit-being plays havoc with the fish; an unexpected wind or sea-current draws a
voyager off-course. Such events are written into songs, songs into dances. ‘When you
journey from island to island’, says Dennis, ‘somebody will find a song and the song
will find its dancers’, each dance action flowing with the wind, the waves, the rain
and the sparkle of the guiding stars. This work of translation is the job of the nao’u
imay mabaig, the culture man or woman who, with the help of his or her clansmen or
clanswomen, with advice from the Elders, composes new memorialisations for popular
retelling and performance.

The kabau mabaig, the dancer, lives these stories in public performances already
carefully choreographed months, years, or centuries in advance. Yet while the language
of the dancer is rich, there is no Kala Lagaw Ya word for ‘art’. There is a word, minarr,
that means ‘drawing pattern’, something applied equally to pigment drawings on a
rock surface as to decorations on a canoe, or clan designs tattooed on a body. For
Dennis, his artworks hold patterns, special minarr designs that are danced to him
by the spirits of his homeland and home waters, the gidau mari, the spirit-people
who live in the stories. It is they who visit Dennis when he creates his artworks, and
who shape the designs, the minarr. He can hear their voices, see their dancing, guiding
his pencil or brush or cutting tool.
Most telling in this respect is an event that began Dennis’s life as a professional artist. One night in 1992, on his return from pearl shelling, Dennis had a dream that was to profoundly influence his life. In this dream he visualised a waterworld. However the surface of that world was not horizontal but a vertical, curtain-like drape of waves in front of him. In this world a shadow passed and stopped: the Zurath dhogai which the next morning he came to draw into the artwork we now see in his Linocut Print ‘Zurathau Dhogai’. Dennis had found his style, his distinctive minar. Before commencing a new work, Dennis now talks to the spirits, asking the mari spirit forces to which he owes allegiance as a Badulaig to guide his actions. These are happy spirits to which he speaks, and Dennis’s carving tool and brushwork dances as the spirits dance to the music of warup drums in his mind and through his body. They speak to him. ‘I am a dancer myself when I draw’, says Dennis. ‘I know exactly how I’m going to draw certain things, like I’m dancing myself’. Just as the dancer knows every action that will come next, every move carrying his body onwards, so, too, does Dennis’s artistic dance carry the actions into imagery. He is nao’u imay mabaig in a new creative medium, composer of stories into artworks, guided by the gidau mari, the story spirits. And just as each dance has a story to it, so, too, does each work or linocut tell its story. In his artworks every face is different, for each has individually approached Dennis in his mind. These artworks are locations of special culture-stories, much akin to the adiu lagal themselves, the sacred places where the spirits live, for in the art are found new expressions of long-existent spirit-worlds. Dennis’s artworks are new sites for the spirits. That is why when Dennis approaches a new work he talks to the gidau mari and they, in turn, guide his art-felt dance.

And for this reason also, Dennis’s works are not just private works. They are community works, in the sense that the stories, the dances, and the spirits from whence they come are culture-bound. Three and a half thousand years of seascapes, of spirit-worlds come together in these creations, guiding, dancing in artworks, such as those in the present exhibition. These are, in ways deeper than framed artworks hanging on walls, testimonies to ancestral worlds which, like knowledge of the constellations, we can only begin to imagine, to experience, and to know.

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This text was commissioned from the artist’s nominated writers by Griffith Artworks as part of research for the SESSERAE project, and published following consultation and permission from Mura Badulgal Native Title Corporation, Badu Island. Dennis Nona travelled to Monash University to work with the authors on the essay with support from QIAMEA and Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.

**TREASURE HUNT**

‘Muses et Musées’ have created a fun program for children aged 7 to 13. With the aid of a booklet containing questions and games, children are guided through the exhibition, past geese, turtles, crocodiles and dugongs, discovering the beauty and lyricism of Dennis Nona’s works, as well as the legends and customs of the Torres Strait Islanders, both past and present.

**Have a look at this shell.**
True or false: the islanders used it for:
- ☐ decorating their homes
- ☐ listening to the wind
- ☐ cooking
- ☐ making sounds
- ☐ warning against danger

‘Dangal Agada-le’, etching, ed.23/65, 36 x 40 cm, 2010.
Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney
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EDUCATIONAL BOOKLET PRODUCED WITH THE SUPPORT OF

**Australie tours**
SPÉcialiste du Rout du Monde
Stéphane Jacob, Director of Arts d’Australie • Stéphane Jacob Gallery is a member of the Chambre Nationale des Experts Spécialisés en Objets d’Art et de Collection (French Chamber of Fine Arts Experts) and of the Comité Professionnel des Galeries d’Art (French Commercial Galleries Association). He is a graduate of the Ecole du Louvre and is the former Communications Director of the Musée National des Monuments Français (National Museum of French Monuments) in Paris.

A specialist in Australian contemporary art, in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, today Stéphane Jacob is recognised by both collectors and museums as one of the leading European specialists in this domain.

More than a hundred works from the Arts d’Australie • Stéphane Jacob Gallery form part of the collections of French public institutions such as the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris), the Musée des Confluences (Lyon), the Musée des Abattoirs (Toulouse), the Musée d’Art & d’Histoire (Rochefort)… For over 15 years, he has devoted himself to the promotion of Australian art through numerous events: 2011 Pavilion des Arts et du Design; Dreamtime exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Les Abattoirs 2009, many Contemporary Art Fairs, Les Champs de la Sculpture 2000… Other exhibitions of note include the 2010 Australian Trilogy: Dennis Nona, Abie Loy Kemarre, GW Bot or the Contemporary Aboriginal Art exhibition in Lubljana, Slovenia in 2003. He was also curator of Australia: the young man and the sea, engravings by Dennis Nona (Torres Strait, Queensland), the very first French exhibition of Dennis Nona’s work at the Australian Embassy in Paris in 2006.

Stéphane Jacob has also taken the unique step of welcoming art-lovers and experts to his apartment (transformed into a showcase of indigenous art), where he can transmit his knowledge of and passion for the subject in a warm, convivial atmosphere. This unusual approach, combining scientific rigour and the originality of the art works on display, has been regularly praised by both the written and audiovisual press.

PARTNERS
Australian partners
The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney, Australia, Artist’s Agent, Exhibition Tour Organiser, Publisher of Artist’s Works, catalogue Publisher

Internationally and within Australia there has never been a greater interest in the work of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. The efforts of The Australian Art Print Network, since its inception in Sydney in 1996, have done much to foster this interest.

In its early years the main focus of the Network was the publishing and distribution of fine art, limited edition prints. While this is still important to the company its role has widened to embrace other areas relating to the development and marketing of Australian indigenous art. Sculpture is now important to the Company as several of the artists it works with gravitated to this medium.

The Company now represents individual artists and curates their work into exhibitions that are shown in galleries around Australia and internationally. The better known of these include Dennis Nona, Alick Tipoti and Ken Thaiday who are all recognised as important Australian contemporary artists. All three are from the Torres Strait Islands. The focus on artists from this region was one of the reasons the Network established a second gallery in the Far North Queensland city of Cairns. In this gallery the work of these artists can be seen along with work from Art Centres and other individual artists from Cape York and the Torres Strait Islands.

The Network has developed into a multi faceted indigenous arts organisation. It is a print publisher and distributor, artist’s agent, exhibition curator and tour operator. It has exhibiting galleries in Sydney and Cairns and works with other galleries around Australia and internationally to showcase important indigenous artists and in particular those from Far North Queensland and the Torres Strait Islands. The Network is unique in that no other arts organisation in Australia replicates what it does.
T he Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA) was established in 2003 by the Queensland Government and is part of Trade and Investment Queensland, within the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation (DEEDI). It acts as a conduit between Government, the arts industry and the indigenous community to raise the profile of Indigenous artists and art movements from the state of Queensland, Australia.

QIAMEA works to build long-term relationships with key organisations within the arts industry to present and promote the very best of Queensland’s Indigenous arts. QIAMEA develops marketing and exporting strategies for the arts market to achieve new opportunities for Indigenous artists from Queensland, with a strong focus on maintaining cultural integrity within the Indigenous arts export industry.

The state of Queensland covers a vast area, from the far north of Cape York and the Torres Strait Islands beyond, across the Gulf of Carpentaria and central and west regions to the eastern seaboard and the south east region. Queensland’s geography as well as its history contributes to the diversity and distinctive nature of Indigenous art forms.

Queensland is home to the second largest population of Indigenous Australians. It is in the rare position of having two quite different Indigenous cultural groupings inside its borders, that of the Aboriginal mainland groups and that of the peoples of the Torres Strait islands between Cape York Peninsular and Papua New Guinea.

Evidence of Aboriginal occupation dates back more than 60,000 years and early art can be seen in paintings on rock surfaces and caves in Cape York, in the Laura rock escarpment and Princess Charlotte Bay in Queensland. The diverse Aboriginal visual art styles of the mainland regions – including the rainforest, cape and gulf regions of far north Queensland - are quite distinct from the art generated in the Torres Strait Islands. The contemporary work of city-based Indigenous artists – particularly from Brisbane- is often in stark contrast to the art created by artists from north Queensland.

Today the Queensland Indigenous visual arts industry is vibrant with both young and mature artists creating works across all the mediums of painting and sculpture, ceramics, body adornment, feather and fibre works, as well as in literature and the newer technologies of film, photography and digital imagery.

Queensland’s Indigenous artists have been taking their unique artistic expression to international audiences for a number of years. Their visual art works are receiving considerable recognition demonstrated through acquisitions into significant public and private collections across the globe. The artists have been at the forefront of shaping contemporary dialogues for Indigenous arts and culture in the national and international arena. Artists such as Judy Watson, Vernon Ah Kee, , Rosella Namok, Samantha Hobson, Fiona Foley, Ken Thaiday Snr, Thancoupie, Alick Tipoti, Richard Bell, and Sally Gabori have been international cultural ambassadors. The work of Judy Watson featured at the opening of the Musee du quai Branly in Paris. City-based Vernon Ah Kee became the first Queensland-based artist, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to be invited to exhibit at the Venice Biennale in 2009. Sally Gabori has led the profiling of the exciting Mornington Island art movement, and has attracted strong international interest through successful exhibitions in London and at the Korea International Art Fair.

QIAMEA is proud to partner the Australian Art Print Network in Sydney, Australia, and Arts d’Australie•Stéphane Jacob in Paris to exhibit the work of another Queensland Indigenous artist, Dennis Nona. He is a prominent leader of the Torres Strait Islander art movement, who is respectful of maintaining integrity in the contemporary depiction of his region’s rich Indigenous cultures. This exhibition at the Australian Embassy from 26th January 2011, comes at an important time when Queensland’s unique Indigenous fine art is beginning to receive the global recognition it deserves.
The department of the Rhône is entering the 21st century thanks to the unique Musée des Confluences. Unique in its modern approach and high expectations, in its subject matter combining science and sociology in order to understand the world and its evolution, in its exceptional, even magical location at the confluence of two rivers and unique in its architecture, where passing clouds are reflected in the purity of its glass surfaces.

Open to everyone, this museum combines education and enjoyment, learning and fun, culture and civics. The museum is also the symbol of a region known for its curiosity, its desire to learn and its willingness to innovate. From the very beginning, the museum has brought together representatives from industry, the economy and science making this place the fruit of a collective dynamic of diverse skills and energies. This synergy will ensure that the museum will be a first-class venue promoting knowledge and learning, and a venue proud to welcome both local inhabitants and international visitors.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art in the Musée des Confluences Collection
The Musée des Confluences, due to open soon in Lyon, has inherited numerous collections from the Natural History Museum, built up since the 19th century thanks to the work of those humanists and ethnographers who devoted their lives to the study of other cultures and societies. Today, these societies have changed and it is the role of museums to recognize and show the changes of these indigenous societies all over the world. In order to be better able to appreciate their transformation and evolution, the Musée des Confluences has acquired numerous contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art works reflecting the current state of Australian art: paintings on canvas and on bark, engravings and sculptures.

Gapu Au Dhangal, monumental sculpture project planned for the forecourt of the Musée des Confluences
© Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdustralie.com

Dennis Nona: a monumental sculpture project for the forecourt of the Musée des Confluences
The Musée des Confluences is planning to erect a monumental work (8.5m x 6m x 2.4m) by the artist Dennis Nona, in bronze and mother-of-pearl, entitled Gapu Au Dhangal in the museum forecourt. This work which will complement the futuristic architecture of the museum is attractive for a number of reasons. Firstly, this internationally renowned artist is already included in the museum’s collection. Furthermore, the theme of the sculpture in relation to a maritime legend and representative of elements of the Torres Strait mythology is particularly suited to this spot on the museum forecourt, overlooking the confluence of the Rhône and Saône rivers. With the help of public and private partners, both in France and Australia, the creation of this work provides the public with the largest indigenous sculpture ever displayed outside Australian territory.

Information: www.museedesconfluences.fr
28, boulevard des Belges - 69006 Lyon, France
+33 4 78 37 30 00
www.museedesconfluences.fr
Open to the public since the end of 2006, the Hotel Hèbre de Saint-Clément has been home to the collections of the Art and History museum and the Architecture and Heritage Interpretive Centre. Thanks to a modern and innovative museum design and lay-out, the collections from the Art and History Museum (with the Musée de France/ Museum of France label) are presented to the public in a journey blending the history of the city, fine art and ethnographic objects.

The third floor of the museum is devoted entirely to non-European collections, and particularly to art from the Pacific regions. For the past number of years, this Rochefort Art and History museum has been building up a collection of contemporary Pacific art, by focusing on highlights such as the Arnhem Land bark paintings, rather poorly represented in French collections apart from the Musée du Quai Branly and the Musée des Confluences, Lyon, paintings from the Moresby school and contemporary tapa cloth, as well as etchings by Dennis Nona. This collection of contemporary Pacific art is a major focus in the policy of temporary exhibitions open to the public since 2006.

Note: From 3 June to 30 September 2011, select pieces from this exhibition, including some of the earliest and most emblematic of Nona’s work, will be shown at the Rochefort Art and History Museum at the Hôtel Hèbre de Saint-Clement.
O.G.E. supports Dennis Nona’s exhibition

Established in 1990, O.G.E. (Ecological Engineering Agency) is a consulting firm specializing in the observation and knowledge of wildlife, flora and natural environments. O.G.E. responds to the needs of environmental engineering, regional authorities and public and private companies.

O.G.E.’s team includes experienced engineers, multi-skilled project managers and researchers. The expertise of the team is based on their proven and recognized field experience. The team carries out inventories of flora and fauna, as well as environmental assessments destined for general contractors so that their project design and construction can take into careful consideration both the environment and the natural landscape.

O.G.E. is involved in complex projects with a team of twenty people whose energy and commitment are particularly appreciated. The team works both in France and overseas, with a specific interest in desert regions.

Due to the particular interest that the O.G.E. team attaches to the Indigenous art of Australia, the team officials decided to lend their support to this exhibition, as a partner. The works shown here are mostly inspired by a map of the different elements such as the sky, springs, sacred mountains… With each project, the team takes care to observe and analyze the terrain in great detail, in order to better assess the implications this may have on engineering or construction projects.

Dennis Nona’s artwork depicts the most iconic animals of the indigenous cosmogony: sea turtles, dugongs, sea birds… These animals are always treated with respect, even if they are sometimes a source of food for men. With the utmost respect for his ancestral traditions, Dennis Nona’s works highlight the ties that unite man and nature.

We share the artist’s respect for mankind and his traditions, as well as for the natural world that surrounds us.

OFFICE DE GÉNIE ÉCOLOGIQUE (O.G.E.):
www.oge.fr
5, Boulevard de Créteil
94100 Saint-Maur-des-Fossés
+33 1 42 83 21 21 – www.oge.fr
**VISUALS FOR PRESS**

**Dennis Nona**  
Born: 1973  
Community: Badu Island (Torres Strait, Queensland)

Download visuals and description of artworks on:  
www.artsdaustralie.com/dennis-nona-visuels-presse.php3  
and on www.heymann-renoult.com

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**Monumental work.** Dennis Nona, ‘Yawarr’, linocut, ed. 6/20, 1.22m x 6.10m, 2007,  
Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney © Dennis Nona / AAPN -  
www.artsdaustralie.com

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**Monumental work.** Dennis Nona, ‘Mutuk’, etching, ed. TP/15, 2.16m x 5.13m,  
2008, Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney  
© Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com

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**Monumental work 1st prize, Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award 2007).** Dennis Nona, ‘Ubirikubiri’, bronze and pearlshell, ed. 2/6,  
1.10m x 1.20m x 3.60m, 2007, Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney  
© Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com

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**1st prize, Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award 2010 – Works on Paper.** Dennis Nona, ‘Saulal’, etching, ed. 11/45, 80 x 120 cm, 2010,  
Collection Arts d’Australie•Stéphane Jacob, Paris © Dennis

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**1st prize, Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award 2008 – Works on Paper.** Dennis Nona, ‘Dugal’, etching, ed. 36/45, 165 x 100 cm, 2008,  
Collection Arts d’Australie•Stéphane Jacob, Paris © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com
Dennis Nona, 'Gaigai Pakai', sculpture, bronze, ed. 5/12, 67 x 220 x 157 cm, 2007, Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com

Loan of Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France
Dennis Nona, 'Dadu Minaral', bronze, ed. 10/12, 120 x 65 x 65 cm, 2007, collection of the Musée des Confluences, Lyon (inv.2009.23.1) © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com

Dennis Nona, 'Gubuka', aluminium & bronze with pearlshell, ed. 5/12, 106 x 88 x 82 cm, 2008, Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com

Dennis Nona, 'Neitau Dhangal', Bronze, ed. 8/12, 34 x 27 x 13 cm, 2006, Collection Bouchetell-Duban, Paris © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com

Dennis Nona, 'Kobu Gul', bronze, ed. 1/6, 97 x 59 x 116 cm, 2010, Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com

Dennis Nona, 'Yatai Kuik', bronze, pearlshell and feathers, ed. 1/12, 28 x 23 x 30 cm, 2010, Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com

Dennis Nona, 'Byerb Ibaik', White Brass, Pearlshell and Fibre, ed. 7/12, 16 x 15 x 24 cm, 2009, Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsdaustralie.com
Dennis Nona, ‘Baidam Aw Kuik’, Bronze, Pearlshell and Fibre, ed. 8/12, 16 x 15 x 24 cm, 2009, Collection The Australian Art Print Network, Sydney © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsaustralie.com


Dennis Nona, portrait

Dennis Nona, in his studio, creating the flying foxes for his monumental work ‘Mutuk’. Photograph © Andrew Baker

Poster

Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsaustralie.com

Project for the forecourt of the Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France

‘Gapu Au Dhangal’, project for the forecourt of the Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsaustralie.com

‘Gapu Au Dhangal’, (detail) project for the forecourt of the Musée des Confluences, Lyon, France © Dennis Nona / AAPN - www.artsaustralie.com
EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Dennis Nona
Between sky, land and sea.
Legends Revisited
Torres Strait Islands, Australia
Recent works: engravings & sculptures

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INFORMATION

DENNIS NONA
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January 27 to May 20, 2011
Press opening in presence of the artist
Thursday 27 January 2011 10am - 12noon
Public Opening Thursday 27 January at 12noon
Dennis Nona will create a site specific sand installation at the Australian Embassy from 12noon to 2pm.
The public is warmly invited to attend this exceptional event.

Australian Embassy Paris 4, rue Jean Rey 75015 Paris
Access Bir Hakeim / RER C Champ de Mars-Tour Eiffel
Information +33 (0)1 46 22 23 20
www.artsdaustralie.com/dennis-nona.htm
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Treasure Hunt (with educational booklet) age 7 - 13

PRESS RELATIONS :
Heymann Renoult Associées, Sarah Heymann and Annabelle Floriant
+33 (0)1 44 61 76 76 / www.heymann-renoult.com / a.floriant@heymann-renoult.com

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