

VIBRANT VISION

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This unique exhibition highlights the diversity of indigenous art practices from across Taiwan. It reflects the many current themes and techniques that are important to the makers.

For indigenous peoples art is inseparable from everyday life: it is how cultural memories are preserved and boundaries transcended. For over 8000 years the Aboriginal people of Taiwan have passed on their designs and stories from one generation to the next as a way of expressing their connections with land and community. This rich heritage continues to be reinforced today through ritual, dance, song, and the making of artistic objects.

People in Taiwan often ask how come a foreigner is interested in matters that seem marginal even to the locals. There are many meaningful reasons that could be given. For an Australian, unsuspected parallels can be drawn between the two countries in the way nation consciousness has developed through the difficult histories of the colonial era and its impact on indigenous peoples. In this context, perhaps something can be learned from the Australian experience. As a nation we have had the courage to say 'sorry' to the first Australians in a formal address by our Prime Minister known as the 'Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples'. Despite the obstacles of some old thinking there is a commitment to reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians at various levels of our society. Considerable efforts are made to preserve not only Aboriginal heritage but also to collect and exhibit contemporary indigenous art. The iconic Australian Aboriginal art is now instantly recognized everywhere in the world.

The situation is quite different in Taiwan. For most outsiders the nation is simply Chinese, which implies starting to count history pages from the time of Han Chinese settlement in the 17th century, while very little is known about the traditions of the indigenous custodians of the land who have been living on the island long before. Like the Australian Aborigines, the indigenous people of Taiwan have a deep spiritual connection with the land, the mountains, the ocean shores, the ecosystems and the wrath of God that brings the typhoons and earthquakes that so often shake up this tiny place. Theirs is an ancient wisdom, which is extremely valuable in 21st Century society.

The most influential and outspoken Western advocate of indigenous cultures,

Wade Davis, links the knowledge of the indigenous peoples with the ecological balance of the earth. He says that to know that other, vastly different cultures exist is to remember that our world is not created in an absolute sense—it is not a given, there is no one dominant way of thought—but that this is just one model of reality. There are, indeed, countless non-mainstream ways of seeing and interpreting the world, the wisdom of which is equally valid and valuable.

When the Taiwan Culture and Creative Platform Foundation invited me to collaborate on this project I saw it as an opportunity to serve as a bridge between people, places and progressive ideas. It has been a rare privilege to travel around the island visiting the homes and studios of the participants in the Artist-in-Residence program. This brought me closer to the environment of the indigenous spirit of Taiwan and allowed me to work in a collaborative way with many artists. The bold and vibrant vision of this exhibition is for all people to celebrate the role the Taiwanese Aborigines play in keeping the cultural richness of the island alive. We all hope that, through these wonderful art works, audiences develop a deeper appreciation and respect of indigenous knowledge, its contribution to environmental sustainability and the common heritage of all humankind.

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