

# **BLACK BAMBOO**

## **CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE DESIGN FROM MER, TORRES STRAIT**

### **ARTWORK LABELS**

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# ***Black Bamboo: Contemporary Furniture Design from Mer, Torres Strait***

In February 2019, a group of artists living and working on the island of Mer commenced work on a collection of contemporary bamboo furniture design. Mer, also known as Murray Island, is a small volcanic island in Eastern Torres Strait. It marks the start of the Great Barrier Reef and is home to a type of bamboo, known in the Meriam Mir language as marep and colloquially in English as black bamboo. The collective of artists became affectionately known as the Marep Pamle, or Bamboo Family.

Working in groups, the eighteen artists developed ideas for bamboo cabinets and seating; each object designed to tell a collectively agreed upon story informed by Meriam life and culture. The Marep Pamle worked for three weeks to produce the cabinets, seating and cushions in this exhibition with the support of Melbourne furniture designer and craftsman Damien Wright, and the workshop team, which included curators from the National Gallery of Victoria, Cairns Art Gallery and Gab Titui Cultural Centre.

Members of the Marep Pamle include James Blanco,

Kalina Day, Helen Dick, Dulcie Gibas, Bobby Kaigey Snr, Mary Kaigey, Robert Meddy Kaigey, Helen Mabo, Alick Passi, Andrew Passi Snr, Andrew Passi Jnr, Nellie Passi, Taukie Passi, Zane Sailor, Clay Sambo, John Tabo, Sabu Tabo and Reteah Tapim.

*Black Bamboo: Contemporary Furniture Design from Mer, Torres Strait*, is a shared curatorial initiative between the National Gallery of Victoria, Cairns Art Gallery and Gab Titui Cultural Centre, with the support of the Mer Gedkem Le (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation RNTBC.

# Cabinets

These four cabinets draw on traditional Meriam shapes and stories. The body of each cabinet can be read as a face, elevated on tall anthropomorphic legs and covered with an elongated mask. Each mask tells a story particular to life on Mer, which is imbued in each of the four cabinets.

A spirited energy lies at the heart of this collection of bamboo design objects. The cabinet designs have been informed by fundamental principles of Western design, such as form, material and function; symmetry and balance; and tessellation of pattern. Each creation is also informed by a distinctly Meriam way of life, drawing on principles of intertribal respect, culture and spirit, collaboration, and care for the environment.

The design process for each bamboo element – representing scales, feathers, suckers and birds – was a constantly evolving conversation between the artists and Meriam elders about history, culture, family and life. An intergenerational dialogue between men and women, often held in silence, resulted in a body of work that speaks from the head, the heart and the hand.

# Marep Pamle

## Arti cabinet

2019 Mer (Murray Island)

bamboo (*bambusa vulgaris*), Poplar plywood (*Populus sp.*), synthetic polymer paint

Gab Titui Cultural Centre, Torres Strait Regional Authority, Torres Strait Commission 2019

The face of this cabinet derives its pattern from the ventral surface of an octopus's arm, which is lined with suckers. The octopus is known in Meriam Mir language as arti and is a symbol of tribal harmony with its one head and eight limbs representing each of the eight tribes: Komet, Zagareb, Meuram, Magaram, Geuram, Peibri, Meriam-Samsep, and Piadram/Dauer. It is believed that in ancient times an ancestral shapeshifter travelled to Mer and transformed into an octopus. *Arti cabinet* traces the beginning of the special intertribal relationships that Meriam people have with one another and with the natural world.

## **Clay Sambo**

Meriam born 1949

## **Bobby Kaigey Snr**

Meriam born 1956

## **Nellie Passi**

Meriam born 1960

## **Mary Kaigey**

Meriam born 1954

## **Zane Sailor**

Meriam born 1983

## **Taukie Passi**

Meriam born 1996

## **Gepi cabinet**

2019 Mer (Murray Island)

bamboo (*bambusa vulgaris*), Poplar plywood (*Populus sp.*),  
synthetic polymer paint

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Commission 2019

A remarkable event takes place every day on Mer, when enormous shoals of sardines merge along the shoreline. To Meriam people they are distinguishable as two distinct types, Ari Ari and Kos. Ari Ari is long and thin, while Kos is round and fat. Throughout the day the people of Mer are acutely aware of the location of the sardines. They appear in such abundance that Mer is one of the only islands in the Torres Strait where weris – bamboo sardine scoops used to scoop fish from the water – are designed and made. The door of *Gepi cabinet* features more than 250 sawn bamboo fish scales. The cabinet tells the story of the special relationship Meriam people have with sardines and the sea.

## **Andrew Passi Snr**

Meriam born 1951

## **Dulcie Gibas**

Meriam born 1956

## **Kalina Day**

Meriam born 1960

## **Sabu Tabo**

Meriam born 1989

## **Alick Passi**

Meriam born 1990

## **Andrew Passi Jnr**

Meriam born 1991

## **Reteah Tapim**

Meriam born 1991

## **Ebur peris peris cabinet**

2019 Mer (Murray Island)

bamboo (*bambusa vulgaris*), Poplar plywood  
(*Populus sp.*), synthetic polymer paint, cowrie shells,  
Hibiscus fibre (*Hibiscus sp.*)

Cairns Art Gallery, Cairns Commission 2019

The thirty-six bamboo feathers on this cabinet represent the tail feathers of the deumer, also known as the Torres Strait pigeon. For Meriam people, the feathers of the deumer are powerful cultural objects. Men wear a single black-and-white deumer feather as part of their headdress during special festivities. This feather is attached to the bone of a palm frond, which is used to identify which tribe the individual comes from. The smaller feathers on the cabinet represent a Meriam funeral tradition whereby the deceased is decorated with feathers, which mummify and preserve both the body and the spirit before passage to the afterlife.



# Robert Meddy Kaigey

Meriam born 1947

# Helen Mabo

Meriam born 1958

# Helen Dick

Meriam born 1956

# John Tabo

Meriam born 1985

# James Blanco

Meriam born 1988

# Koki cabinet

2019 Mer (Murray Island)

bamboo (*bambusa vulgaris*), Poplar plywood (*Populus sp.*), synthetic polymer paint, seeds

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Commission 2019

There are four main winds that blow through the Torres Strait: sager (the southerly), koki (the north-westerly), naiger (the north-easterly), and ziai (the westerly). Sager brings cold stormy weather, naiger brings soft breezes, ziai can turn cyclonic, and koki marks the monsoonal rain. Koki can be easily recognised by the appearance of two different birds: waumer (black frigate bird) and serar (white tern). The flock of birds that make up the facade of this cabinet incline toward the top-left corner in reference to the north-westerly direction.

# Seating

In the third week of the bamboo workshop, the artists of the Marep Pamle collaborated on two custom bamboo seats supported by more than thirty soft cushions. *Sik utem* (*Sleeping bed*) and *Amrir bau* (*Sitting chair*), both 2019, combine traditional bamboo construction techniques with pandanus weaving and soft-edge vibrancy in a utilitarian design.

The seating collection represents the future of sustainable Meriam design, combining customary and upcycled refuse materials with contemporary island aesthetics. Fusing Torres Strait Island colours, symbols and motifs with a pseudo-Rastafarian feel, the seating is both joyful and inventive.

To create these works, the artists consulted with Meriam elders to learn about traditional uses of bamboo. Until relatively recently, bamboo had been used as a primary material for housing, for example in akur meta, a type of bamboo shelter with an open-air kitchen. Bamboo was also used in objects such as weris (sardine scoops), lugup (dancing ornaments) and baur (fishing spears).

# Marep Pamle

## Sik utem (Sleeping bed)

2019 Mer (Murray Island)

bamboo (*bambusa vulgaris*), nylon, copper, jute, synthetic polymer paint, corn fibre, thread

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Commission 2019

*Sik utem (Sleeping bed)*, also known as *Peimpeim sik (Dreaming bed)*, was made using a common joinery technique called post and rail that is also used in traditional Meriam bamboo construction. The rope lashing around each join on the frame is based on a traditional method of vine fastening used to secure prongs on fishing spears. This technique is also used in the construction of bamboo houses, turtle fences and wind breaks. Traditionally, Meriam women and men would plait and coil a vine known as boz to create a wall by connecting individual bamboo poles.

## **Kalina Day**

Meriam born 1960

## **Helen Dick**

Meriam born 1956

## **Dulcie Gibas**

Meriam born 1956

## **Mary Kaigey**

Meriam born 1954

## **Helen Mabo**

Meriam born 1958

## **Nellie Passi**

Meriam born 1960

## **Reteah Tapim**

Meriam born 1991

## **Mas (Cushions)**

2019 Mer (Murray Island)

jute, synthetic polymer paint, corn fibre (*Zea sp.*), thread

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Commission 2019

Gab Titui Cultural Centre, Torres Strait Regional Authority, Torres Strait

Commission 2019

This collection of cushions is made from recycled hessian bags that once carried coffee, potatoes and onions. The bags speak to the traditional trade relationships between Torres Strait Islanders and Papua New Guineans. Hessian bags are valued objects on Mer, predominately saved for use in cooking. The motifs, symbols and bold geometry on the cushions were painted, sewn and embroidered by female artists of the Marep Pamle. In piling the cushions on top of each other, the artists reference the stone fence fish traps of Mer, which are made by stacking and unstacking stones to trap fish close to shore at low tide.

# Marep Pamle

## Amrir bau (Sitting chair)

2019 Mer, (Murray Island)

bamboo (*bambusa vulgaris*), Pandanus (*Pandanus sp.*), nylon, jute, synthetic polymer paint, Corn fibre (*Zea sp.*), thread

Gab Titui Cultural Centre, Torres Strait Regional Authority, Torres Strait Commission 2019

*Amrir bau (Sitting chair)* combines traditional bamboo joinery with rope lashing and pandanus weaving. The pandanus in the woven mats has been boiled with carbon paper to deliver a vivid purple colour. The transformation of gerer (pandanus leaf) into nati nati (coiled strips) and papek (woven mats) is a collaborative practice between women of all generations and from many different tribes. The transfer of matrilineal knowledge through weaving, from lugiz (great-grandmothers) to kaied (grandmothers) to apu (mothers) and finally to neur werem (daughters), speaks of the close bonds that exist between generations of Meriam women.

# **Marep Pamle, cinematic portrait of *Black Bamboo: Contemporary Furniture Design From Mer, Torres Strait***

This documentary film shows the Black Bamboo workshop held in February 2019 on the island of Mer in the Torres Strait. Participants included women and men, both young and old, from various Meriam tribes. Each brought a unique skill set and their own knowledge of materials. The collective of artists became affectionately known as the Marep Pamle, or Bamboo Family. The community-led initiative energised the artists to reconnect with the traditional Meriam practice of working with bamboo. This joyful video portrait shares unique insight into life on Mer and includes footage of the workshop, the artists, and bamboo designs in progress.

# Marep Pamle portraits

2019

These portraits depict the artists in the Marep Pamle (Bamboo Family), who together explored the future of sustainable, contemporary Meriam bamboo craft and design. They include (from left to right, top to bottom) James Blanco, Kalina Day, Helen Dick, Dulcie Gibas, Bobby Kaigey Snr, Mary Kaigey, Robert Meddy Kaigey, Helen Mabo, Alick Passi, Andrew Passi Snr, Andrew Passi Jnr, Nellie Passi, Taukie Passi, Zane Sailor, Clay Sambo, John Tabo, Sabu Tabo, Reteah Tapim and workshop founder Aven Noah.