

THE SAVAGE SEA

Working from her island home of Erub in the Torres Strait, Indigenous artist **Ellarose Savage** has a deep personal connection to the sea, the life-giving force in Meuram culture. **Jane Raffan** writes.

A practising artist since 2003, **Ellarose Savage's** oeuvre is innovative, exhibiting a diverse approach to medium and message. Her sculptural forms range in scale and scope: from commanding ceramic totem poles to contemporary abstract clay transformations of spirits. They include a striking array of figuration, from spirits and siblings, to marine animals formed in clay or woven using fishing nets and other at-hand recycled materials. Working in two-dimensional forms, she has produced finely detailed and patterned monochrome linocuts, as well as velvety charcoal drawings, which have recently inspired a contemporary fashion range.

Savage's art does, however, have a potent common denominator – the artist's relationship with the sea, the life-giving force in Meuram culture and an important personal inspiration. As one of a group of artists working at Erub Erwer Meta Artists on Erub (Darnley Island), in the Torres Strait, which works to revitalise traditional Meuram culture, Savage often refers to her father's influence in this regard. "My father always tells us about the importance of life on land and sea: 'respect things around you, when you are out in the dinghy you have to respect the sea ... the sea has life in itself, when you litter ... Spirit of the sea will get angry, it will make you suffer'."

Savage's ancestral totemic animal is nam (turtle). In 2013, The Australian Museum acquired a magnificent ghost net turtle by the artist, which also features in the new Australia Post release, *Collections Australia*. Ghost nets are discarded or lost fishing nets that wash up on our northernmost coastlines in frightening quantities and turtles are amongst a host of sea life trapped and killed in their drift. Savage's ghost net turtle is stitched with recycled industrial twines that echo the turtle's patination and colouration, awash with the jewel-like iridescence of the sea.

Savage's artistic practice is highly celebrated. Since 2007, the artist has earned four commendations from the Gab Titui Art Awards (runner up 2011, highly commended

2013, commended 2012 and 2008), which attract entrants from around 18 communities across the Torres Strait and Northern Peninsula area. In 2010 she made history at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards with a ceramic sculptural work, the first for a resident Torres Strait Islander woman, which also received a highly commended.

Since then she hasn't looked back. Savage has been a finalist in the Shepparton Art Museum's *Indigenous Ceramic Art Award* twice (in 2011 and 2014), and in 2014 she again made the NATSIAA finals with the highly commended *Tiri Sisters*, a group of three (tiri) small, highly embellished figures representing childhood memories swimming with her sisters in the waters off Erub – a charming and highly evocative physical rendition of the sea washing over the girls and watching over their spirits. In 2014, the Torres Shire Council awarded her Torres Strait NAIDOC Artist of the Year.

Savage is represented in the collections of the National Museum of Australia and the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, where she was commissioned along with other Erub Erwer Meta artists to produce work for the important 2011 exhibition, *Land, Sea and Sky: Contemporary Art of the Torres Strait Islands*, the largest exhibition of contemporary art from the Torres Strait ever mounted.

Her coming show at Alcaston gallery in Melbourne features Savage's new sculptural works built from wood-fired ceramics and ghost nets. **Beverly Knight** describes the work as "colourful and joyful ceramic objects which celebrate connection to country and culture". Their physical potency reflects this life force, wrought with unique character through Savage's technical prowess, tireless innovation and Torres Strait imagination.

Jane Raffan

» NEW WORK BY ELLAROSE SAVAGE EXHIBITS AT
ALCASTON GALLERY IN MELBOURNE FROM 14 JULY TO
14 AUGUST 2015.





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1 // Ellarose Savage, *Zeuber*
2, 2015, detail, ceramic and
ghostnet fibre, each 45 x
27cm.

2 // Ellarose Savage, *Neis
Neur A Kebi Neur*, 2015,
detail, ceramic and ghostnet
fibre, each 58 x 19cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST, LYNNETTE
GRIFFITHS, ERUB ERWER META, QLD AND
ALCASTON GALLERY, MELBOURNE

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BEVERLY KNIGHT
Director, Alcaston Gallery

“Alcaston has been developing a client base of ceramic collectors since 1990, so exhibiting the ceramic objects of **Ellarose Savage** is exciting for us, but is also an opportunity for our clients to view, contextualise and develop an interest in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ceramicists who we represent. Technically skilled and demonstrating a love for the medium, Ellarose Savage continues to push boundaries in her ceramics and in this exhibition she has included found material from the Torres Strait seas that continue to impact on her environment.

“The market for this work will be tested in today’s climate but drawing on our extensive networks we are confident we can show and do justice to her work. Pricing will be carefully developed with the artist and this is where Alcaston plays a major role in assisting the artist to have a wall price that is just right. We do not exhibit any artwork that we feel is over- or under-priced, as after 25 years our clients know and trust our pricing and quality control and of course (most importantly), artistic merit.

“Costs involved do come into play as freight from the Torres Strait Islands, in addition to the supply of the artistic medium (clay), is generally quite costly. We have always encouraged dedicated ceramicists to continue to pursue their craft regardless of cost, which can be challenging, as artists working in other mediums (such as painters) often encounter an easier situation and can achieve greater financial reward than ceramicists.”

Jane Raffan



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3. // Ellarose Savage, *Erub Dabor*, 2012. Ceramic and ghostnet fibre, 150 x 40 x 13cm.

4. // Ellarose Savage, *Three sisters*, 2013. Ceramic and ghostnet fibre, 83 x 50 x 23cm.

5. // Ellarose Savage, *Coral Stack 1*, 2015, detail, ceramic and ghostnet fibre, dimensions vary.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST, LYNNETTE GRIFFITHS, ERUB ERWER META, QLD AND ALCASTON GALLERY, MELBOURNE

PENNY SMITH
Ceramic artist, curator and writer

In a forthcoming article, *Woodfiring at the Top End*, for the journal *Ceramics: Art & Perception*, **Penny Smith**, ceramic artist, curator, writer and former Head of the Ceramics Studio at the University of Tasmania, reflects on Ellarose Savage’s practice: “Savage’s wood-fired work exudes a strong sense of expressive narrative. Rich in texture, history and cultural significance, Savage is one of a number of Torres Strait Islander artists who are making significant contributions to the international art scene.

“Whilst Australian wood-firers appear to be preoccupied with their materials and firing mediums; with locally sourced clays, shales and home-grown timbers; with forms influenced by Japanese or European traditions and concerned primarily with function, the work of artists like Savage are based more on story.

“The sea looms large in the lives of all Torres Strait Islanders. Savage recounts how she (particularly as the eldest child) and her sisters would help out their father after their mother died, by diving for trochus shells to sell. She often features the Susu shell (Torres Strait creole for the trochus shell meaning breast) in her work. In her ceramics, these abstracted breast forms appear on many of her little people.”

Jane Raffan



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