

Lines of Connection

With a poignant blend of traditional culture and contemporary aesthetics that's seen his printmaking in the 2022 Biennale of Sydney and Tarnanthi Festival, Teho Ropeyarn's latest work looks at his mother's story—and is showing for *The National*.

WRITER
Briony Downes

Within Teho Ropeyarn's recent vinyl-cut prints, you'll find the Cape York Lily—a native turmeric plant belonging to the ginger family. Growing prolifically in the tropics of Far North Queensland, it's known for possessing glossy elongated leaves and blooming purple bracts dotted with delicate yellow flowers nestled in the centre. For Ropeyarn, the Cape York Lily "reminds me of family, especially out camping on Country around Injinoo. It represents my family and lifestyle, camp sites on Country, weather and the wet season."

Injinoo is a remote coastal community in the Northern Peninsula Area (NPA) of Cape York and it is there Ropeyarn spent most of his childhood learning from his Elders and being on Country. Injinoo culture and language, alongside Ropeyarn's family and their interconnecting stories, are integral to the artist's practice, in particular his ancestral lineage on his father's side. But recently, in works like *Them lily grow everywhere collecting rainwater*, 2022, and *Wintinganhu (sister-in-law)*, 2023, it is Ropeyarn's mother's story that is the focus.

In *Wintinganhu*, a large-scale sculpture of a floral wreath, Ropeyarn embodies his mother's experience of marrying into his father's family in northern Cape York, and her taking on an important cultural role relating to Torres Strait funerary practices, reserved specifically for in-laws.

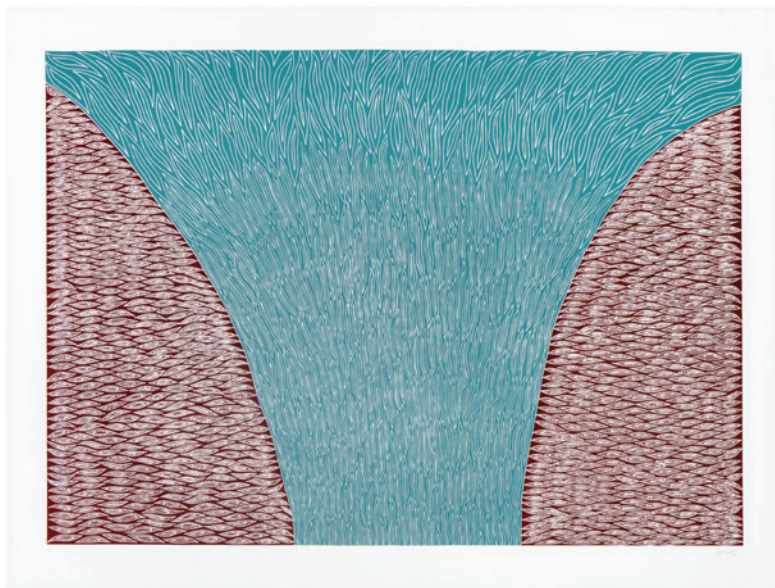
"In-laws take a leading role each time there is a passing, from handling the deceased and organising the logistics while the family mourn," Ropeyarn explains. "The idea of the wreath is about healing, celebrating my mum and the role she has played over the years. The wreath is accompanied by individual up-side-down Cape York Lily flowers in red—a conceptual reference to Country and tears—and an audio projection with my mum telling her story."

Wintinganhu is part of Ropeyarn's contribution to *The National 4: Australian Art Now* at Carriageworks in Sydney, joining work by 53 artists and collectives across four venues, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Campbelltown Arts Centre and the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

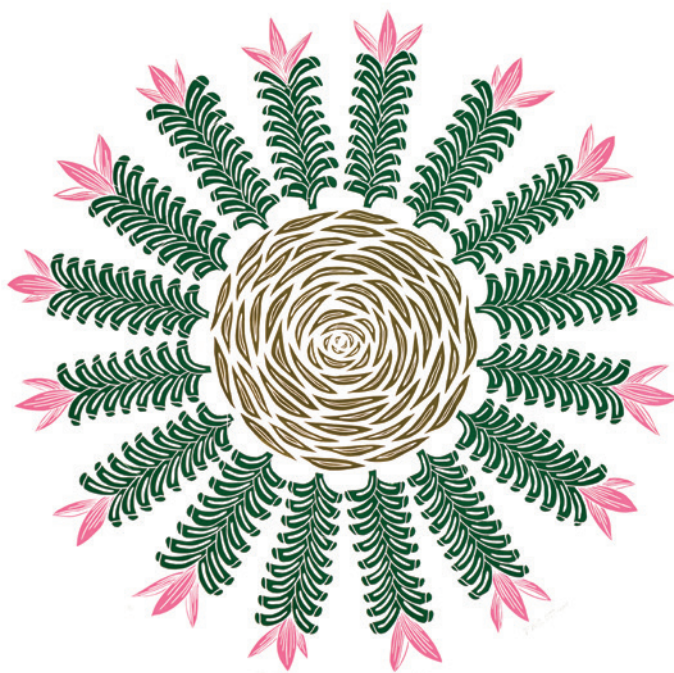
With intergenerational communication a central theme, Ropeyarn brings together his contemporary experience of everyday life with traditional oral histories passed down from his Elders and written history from colonial archives. Possessing both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestry—his clan groups are Angkamuthi and Yadhaykana and he maintains connections to Badu, Moa and Murray Island in the

RIGHT: Teho Ropeyarn, *This one Cape York lily flower*, 2022, vinyl-cut print on paper, 100 x 62 cm, 2AP + Edition of 20. PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL MARZIK. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ONESPACE.





Teho Ropeyarn, *Ipi (water, rain)*, 2021, vinyl-cut print on paper, 150 x 203 cm, 2AP + Edition of 5. PHOTOGRAPH: LOUIS LIM. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ONESPACE.



Teho Ropeyarn, *Them lily grow everywhere collecting rainwater*, 2022, vinyl-cut print on paper, 100 x 100 cm, 2AP + Edition of 20. PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL MARZIK. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ONESPACE.

“I had to fuse contemporary interpretations of two cultures to create a style that celebrates my heritage and at the same time, establish an artistic identity for my practice.” – TEHO ROPEYARN

Torres Strait; Woppaburra people (Great Keppel Island) and Badtjala people (Fraser Island)—Ropeyarn has spent much of his artistic career blending his knowledge of both cultures to preserve important elements of his heritage for future generations.

Ropeyarn’s interest in art began in childhood with a love for drawing. At school in Bamaga near Injinoo, he branched out into printmaking and ceramics. It was at art school at Sydney’s COFA (now UNSW Art & Design) that Ropeyarn began to develop his current way of working. “I had to fuse contemporary interpretations of two cultures to create a style that celebrates my heritage and, at the same time, establish an artistic identity for my practice,” he says. Influenced by Torres Strait carving techniques, printmaking became a good fit for Ropeyarn, easily adapting to the tropical climate of Far North Queensland and connecting to his early love for drawing.

He cites the work of Torres Strait artists Laurie Nona, Dennis Nona and Alick Tipoti as key inspirations. “With printmaking you have precise clean lines, sharpness and composition. I enjoy the process. It is structured, technical and methodical, and I like the stages of creating a work. Paper, I believe, has this nature of absorbing the image and holds it in a way where painting doesn’t.”

The movement of water features heavily in Ropeyarn’s carved designs with bodies of fresh and salt water represented by juxtapositions of flowing and angular patterns. As a descendent of the Seven Rivers people of Angkamuthi, among Ropeyarn’s subjects are the Jardine, MacDonald, Skardon, Doughboy, Ducie and Jackson Rivers and Crystal Creek, all of which flow into the Gulf of Carpentaria and Arafura Sea. His totems are uyinthayn (fresh-water turtle), ikamba (crocodile) and akaymu (dingo),

and references to these can be found in earlier works like *Athumu Paypa Adthinuunamu (my birth certificate)*, 2022, which was included in the 23rd Biennale of Sydney: *rivus*.

Also in *rivus* (and again in Tarnanthi 2022 at the Art Gallery of South Australia) was *Ayarra (rainy season)*, 2021, a vinyl-cut print depicting a circular red river, curling its way across the paper while a dark cloud hovers above. Within each form are detailed linear patterns influenced by ceremonial body markings, dreaming sites and a deep connection to Country. Coursing through the red river are endlessly flowing currents filled with visual references to termite mounds, beach palms and tropical pitcher plants, while the cloud above undulates with a mass of vertical feather-like patterns to represent impending rain. As Ropeyarn illustrates, from the wet season rains to the rivers and the coastlines, water is an essential part of Injinoo life.

Aiming to bridge the gap between traditional knowledge, language and contemporary life, Ropeyarn concludes, “I hope my work evokes a great sense of healing through scale, colour, and presentation and that viewers take away a small understanding of one aspect of our culture from Northern Cape York and the Torres Strait. An understanding of cultural practices that are alive and well today that no one would know about, and the deeper respect for cultural protocols that play a major part in our lives.”

The National 4: Australian Art Now Carriageworks (*The National* is also showing at Museum of Contemporary Art, Campbelltown Arts Centre and Art Gallery of New South Wales) (Sydney NSW)
30 March—25 June