

# WALKABOUT EASY EASY : A MISAPI INSPIRATION<sup>1</sup>

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## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เป็นข้อมูลที่ได้จากประสบการณ์ตรวจของผู้เขียน ซึ่งได้เข้าไปพำนักอยู่หมู่บ้านเล็กๆ แห่งหนึ่งบนที่ราบสูงของประเทศปาปัวนิวกินี ในฐานะศิลปินอาดัตตุกะ (Artist in resident) ส่วนสำคัญในบทความนี้เกิดจากการลังเกต และสื่อความหมายอุตสาหกรรมจากประสบการณ์ โดยผ่านสื่อที่ไม่ใช่ภาษา (non-Linguistic media) ที่จะแสดงให้เห็นปฏิกริยาจากประสบการณ์ของศิลปินที่มีต่อสภาพแวดล้อม ตลอดจนความสามารถในการใช้กลิ่น (Technique) แปลความหมายจากสิ่งแวดล้อมในลิ่นพำนัก สื่อความรู้สึกอุตสาหกรรมเป็นผลงานศิลปะในรูปแบบเชิงพาณิชย์

## ABSTRACT

This paper is a personal account of a painter's experiences as an artist-in-residence in a small village in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. A major thread running through the paper is that of the artist as an observer and interpreter. That is, the painter (in my case) interprets lived experience through non-linguistic media. The paper explores the interaction of the life experiences of an artist, the technical competencies of the artist, and the environment in which the artist lives and interprets.

## THE ARTIST AS OBSERVER AND INTERPRETER

Every human being is constantly engaged in a search for meaning. We take in data from the environment and we try to assimilate them into our existing intellectual structures. If the match is reasonably close we can make sense of our perceptions and we

respond accordingly. Thus a meeting with a friend usually does not require very much cognitive processing. The interaction fits easily into existing cognitive structures.

The artist is, of course, exactly like every other human being in this respect. However what seems to make the artist different is the capacity to create meaning from experiences that many people would find utterly commonplace, or just too difficult to do much with. The artist is able to interpret the ordinary and the extraordinary. This does not necessarily require one to live and work in another culture but doing so is often a salutary lesson that what is commonplace to a person in one culture is quite novel to someone from another culture.

## THE ENVIRONMENT

In 2001 I was invited by The Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery to develop an exhibition at Misapi in the Okapa District of the Eastern Highlands Province. I spent two months there as an artist in residence. Misapi is small village bordering Gimi and South Fore. There are about 250 people living in Misapi. Misapi is very remote and only accessible by foot or helicopter. Travelling around Misapi is a monumental feat for the feet. Studying sections of walking tracks, the patterns of footprints in the mud told me stories. I tried to recapture these stories in my works. The people in Misapi and the surrounding villages were very kind to me.

The Misapi village people incorporated art into their everyday lives. This was evident in their weaving, sculpture and day-to-day artifacts. Every woman for example, was expected to be able to weave and in

<sup>1</sup>This is an abridged version of my article *Walkabout Easy Easy: A Misapi Inspiration* written in 2001.

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YOUNG SMILING FACES AND VERDURE NATURE  
FROM MISAPI VILLAGE, OKAPA DISTRICT, PNG, 2001  
Photographer: Kanaid Silsat



a sense they were recognized as artists (although there did not seem to be local words for art and artist). This was difficult to determine because when art is incorporated into everyday life and not treated as something distinct from it, the concepts of art and artists do not have much meaning. This was further evident when we discussed fine art. The concept of fine art was limited to portrait painting and representational drawing. There was little concept of abstract art in the western sense. There was however, a highly decorated *haus tambaran* (spirit house). The artworks that I created helped me to communicate with people and to promote harmony and goodwill. I did this by explaining the motivation and meaning of each work. Without this, I felt that the artworks were simply novelties. The explanations helped the village people understand my perceptions and conceptions of the environment and their artistic representation. I hoped that my explanations would help establish relationships between content, form and

technique, placing no more value on one than another.

#### THE ORDINARY AND THE EXTRAORDINARY

The inspiration and ideas to create my artwork came from several sources:

- Observations and conversations with the people from the villages of Haiyaru, Paiti, Ivorato, Ketave, Amusa, Auwai and Nigibi. These visits led to the title of my exhibition and to the title of this paper. In Neo-Melanesian *wok abaut isi isi* conveys the idea of relaxed, informal, friendly visits and conversations and exchanges of views.
- Chewing *buai* (areca nut chewed with the leaf of the betel palm (*Piper betle*) and lime to release the red coloured alkaloid) and laughing together. I did not chew betel nut with them although I had done so in Thailand and in India. In Misapi chewing betel nut was mainly a male activity, but there did not seem to be any prohibition on women chewing it. Children did not chew

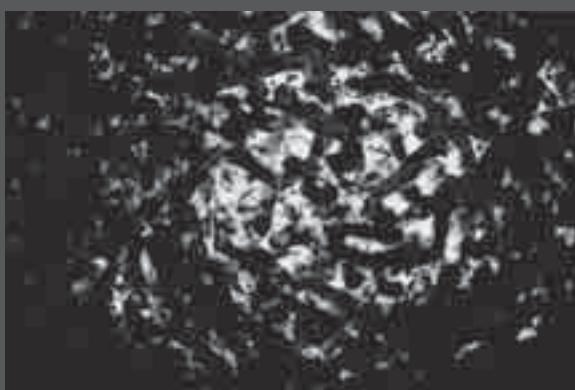
**WOKABOUT ISI ISI NUMBER 1**

Technique: footprint acrylic on paper

Size: 140x190 cm.

Collection: Artist

Photographer: Kanaid Silsat

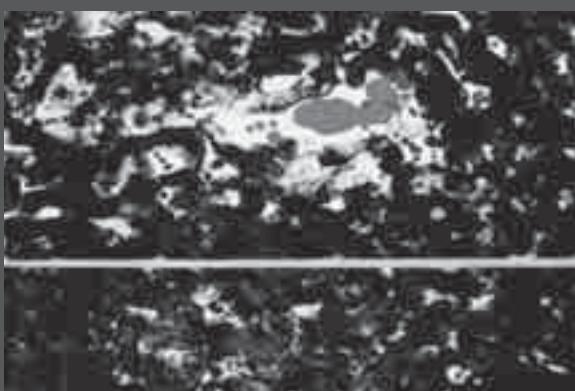
**WOKABOUT ISI ISI NUMBER 2**

Technique: footprint acrylic on paper

Size: 140x190 cm.

Collection: Artist

Photographer: Kanaid Silsat

**A BLENDING OF LIFE**

Technique: footprint acrylic on paper

Size: 100x140 cm.

Collection: Artist

Photographer: Kanaid Silsat

betel nut. *Buai* was treated as a recreational drug and not as an item of commerce. The use of *buai* in Misapi culture seemed similar to its use in Indian culture (I spent a two years in India).

• From the sound of the Yani river which flows through Misapi.

The sound of the Yani river which flows through Misapi was especially powerful. When I went down to the river, the sound of flowing water from the Yani had meaning for me, I felt refreshed and felt very active. This was like a metaphor: One should be active in doing good things to benefit the society just like the Yani river provides clean water and sustains the forest for people in Misapi.

I spent some time talking to three

groups of local people: the children, adults and the older people in the village. My friend helped with the language translations. We talked about their hopes and about things such as their favourite colours. I found their responses very interesting. For example the children expressed their need for more education. They talked about their ambitions to become businessmen and bankers, and to have coffee plantations to employ people in Misapi. The girls wanted to marry men who would not be violent towards them, who were church-goers and who would respect the rules of the church. The adults and older people would like to see an end to tribal fights with

**LIVING HOLISM**

Technique: finger print acrylic on paper

Size: 100x140 cm.

Collection: Artist

Photographer: Kanaid Silsat

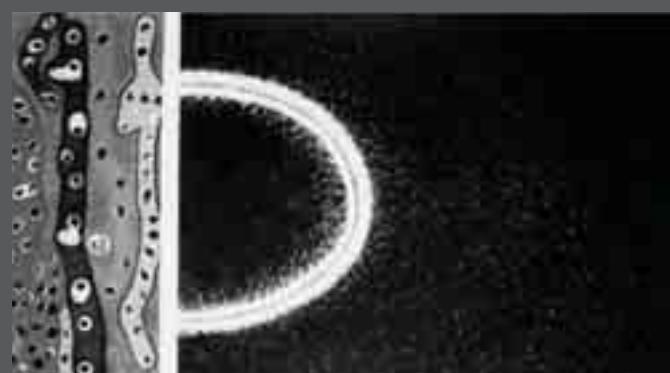
**OLD PEOPLE IMAGE**

Technique: fingerprint

Size: 46x63 cm.

Collection: Artist

Photographer: Kanaid Silsat



people from other villagers. They wanted to see improvements to existing roads and to see better roads being built. They wanted to have an air strip, and see more people work and taking care of community facilities such as schools, the church, and hospital. I also asked about their favourite colours and what the colour means to them. Some of their responses were:

- yellow denoted the colour of flowers around their own village;
- green is like looking at coffee trees;
- blue is like the policemen's uniform;
- white is like the colour of the clouds etc.

In my art I used all of the colours that the people mentioned and to a considerable extent I had artistic control of the work. Although I did work with some children, much of the work was done with older people.

The use of handprints and footprints is a very basic and direct technique that has been used by artists to develop ideas since pre-historical times. I experimented with several techniques in my studio and developed some interesting forms and textures. I chose fingerprints and footprints because they were an immediate and direct link between self and art. The footprints were particularly interesting

because of the differences in shape and texture across Misapi, Australian and Thai feet. This was in part genetic and in part environmental – the Misapi people did not normally wear shoes. At a more abstract level I felt that the physical marks made by our feet on the ground had parallels with the marks that our lives made on each other and on the world at large. If we made a 'harmonious' artwork combining our footprints it would be a metaphor for making an artwork of our lives and living in harmony.

**FOOTPRINTS AND BLACK ACRYLIC PAINT**

I found the shapes of people's feet very interesting. The shapes of the Misapi people were quite different from the shapes of my Thai feet and my Australian friends' feet. I had used Thai and Australian footprints in earlier work when I was experimenting with a footprint technique on paper. In Misapi we layered our footprints in accord with my general plan for the work. The paint was mixed on plastic packaging and on pinewood. I invited people with interesting foot shapes to follow my contours. I used acrylic paint for the print works mainly because it dries quickly and is easy to obtain. The footprints were for me a

metaphor that people around the world should be able to walk together and should be friends doing things for a better world and without fighting. My impression was that the people who participated in this activity were pleased with both the process and the outcome. Furthermore they appreciated the metaphor. This suggested to me that metaphorical thinking is probably universal, as is the desire for peace and a good life. As an aside: Walking *isi isi* with people, chewing buai and laughing, showed me that people literally do walk *isi isi* around their village when the road is muddy.

### REFLECTIONS

Artworks are all representations. However, there are artists who seem to have no conscious reason or concept before creating their works. It may be that artwork represents itself, without explanation from the artist. But it may be (as is basic to art education) – that a good artist can explain the meaning of their artwork to an audience. It is very difficult to decide what is 'good' or 'bad'. In my case I could have tried describe the changes that I saw in terms of the transition from a 'developing' nation to a 'developed' nation, but my experience in Thai society has been that this change is culturally difficult to critique in terms of right or wrong or good and bad.

I feel that it is important to represent my artwork to people from other societies or culture. It is important to help them understand my concepts of mind and body as an artist and art educator. Both parts are beneficial to each other, art for art's sake and art for life. It is important for me, in visiting a different culture, to display my artwork and explain the particular meanings of my artwork. I hope through this that Papua New Guinea people especially my Misapi friends who live in the bush will come to understand contemporary art more than they have in the past through exhibition such as *Walk about Easy Easy*.

To conclude, Artwork should first of all

represent a country's artistic creativity and the visions of the people in its society. Is it not better that people learn to appreciate art and use art to communicate with people of different cultures than simply using art to make money for a few?

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