Palm Island

looking forward
“I believe Aboriginal artwork has a significant role to play in Aboriginal communities. And that does not just mean what our talented artists do, but includes all the members of our Aboriginal community.”

Alf Lacey, Mayor, Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council
looking forward

Two new government buildings providing modern, attractive facilities will dramatically improve everyday life for people on Palm Island. The community will now be able to access a wide range of government services through the numerous government agencies housed in the new buildings, as well as an Australia Post office and courthouse.

To function successfully, it is important that buildings offering community services reflect a community’s culture and aesthetic. The Department of Public Works has worked closely alongside local community members and artists to achieve that during this project.

Indigenous art continues to grow from strength to strength and plays a vital part in underpinning the cultural, social and economic development of both the artists and the communities in which they live.

The Department of Public Works will continue to work towards reconciliation and is proud of the partnership achieved which has successfully integrated traditional and contemporary art with modern buildings on Palm Island.

Robert Schwarten
Minister for Public Works

Tropical Palm Island lies off the coast of Townsville and is home to one of the largest Aboriginal communities in Queensland.

Despite its 64 kilometres of beautiful bays, sandy beaches and forested hills, Palm Island became a place where people struggled to find a peaceful lifestyle.

Although originally inhabited by the Manbarra people, in 1914 the island was established as a penal settlement for Aboriginal people from more than 40 tribes and language groups. Today, more than 2500 people live on Palm Island.

Palm Island’s history may have been turbulent and recent events traumatic, but Elder Walter Palm Island believes with the recognition of traditional owners occurring across Australia, including Palm Island, the atmosphere on the island is positive for a brighter future and new way forward.
For the past seven years I have been a Government Champion for Palm Island and during this time I have visited Palm Island more than 20 times. I never fail to be struck by the stunning beauty of the island nor by the strength of character of its people, some of whom I have come to know very well.

The construction of two new office buildings on the island created an opportunity for the Department of Public Works to not only generate local construction related employment, but to also incorporate Palm Island culture into these buildings in unique and distinctive ways.

The artistic talent within the community has been translated into a collection of professional public artworks which are proudly showcased through both the exterior and interior of the two new government buildings. While the artworks reflect the beauty and vibrancy of Palm Island culture and ancient traditions, the involvement of the artists in the use of contemporary technical processes represents a culture that not only reveres its past, but has its sights firmly fixed on the future.

Mal Grierson
Director-General, Department of Public Works
Alf Lacey

As a community leader, I believe Aboriginal artwork has a significant role to play in Aboriginal communities. And that does not just mean what our talented artists do, but includes all the members of our Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal art is about telling the story of the Dreamtime, and a way of expressing what the old people have expressed for thousands of years.

The importance of this building project demonstrates what can be achieved when government and the community are working together. It shows reconciliation at work.

It must be acknowledged that in the past, consultation between government and the community has not always been good, but things have changed. More thought and engagement between government and Indigenous communities when planning projects is now evident. It shows we have come a long way.

I would like to congratulate everyone involved in the completion of a wonderful project for Palm Island.

Alf Lacey
Mayor, Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council
Palm Island is resilient. It has a history that encourages, warrants and demands a specific mindset. Like so many Aboriginal people in Queensland, I have strong connections to Palm Island with family through both my mother and my father. I was not born on Palm and until recently had never been to the island. But it is familiar to me. I’d seen old photographs of my aunties and grandmothers and dormitory existence; images of my uncles and grandfathers as members of the many football and boxing teams Palm has produced over the years; listened to the fascinating stories of hardship and triumph that was life on Palm Island; marvelled at the persistence and perseverance that adversity instils in people; the kind of adversity that provides people with the tools to keep fighting back.

The Public Works program which has been underway on Palm Island now for some years is a community renewal program. It proposes a renewed sense of ownership in cultural, political and social terms over spaces that have been under fire in recent years. I use the word ‘renewal’ because Palm Island has a history of renewal and rebuilding.

For those of us who do not experience day-to-day living on Palm, there is a sense of history about Palm Island and its people that we are made aware of through our families’ experiences and personal histories. But this is a history that on Palm is felt more deeply and intensely. And to be sure, it is a history evidenced in demonstrations of much pride and strength in its people; confidence in their ability to overcome adversity; to build on their successes. It is a spirit that endures.

It is this rich sense of community spirit that the Public Art projects, produced in conjunction with and incorporated into the Public Works program, seek to draw from; to augment and enhance community spaces and ideas; to keep in mind the many language groups that give colour to Palm’s history; to give continued presence and meaning to words like Bwgcolman and Manbarra; to Skipjacks and Barracudas; to build on its resilience. Palm Island is all these things.

Vernon Ah Kee
Artist
columns

Children from local schools added their artistic imprint onto the columns at the front of the new buildings through painted handprints.
façade artwork panels

Toby Castors

Unlike other murals on Palm Island, the three façade panels are dynamic relief artworks reflecting the architectural design of the buildings.

“I’ve done large paintings, but I’ve never worked with so many different mediums – wood, aluminium and paint – and I get to come to Brisbane to see how everything is put together.

“I didn’t realise how much work goes on in fabricating. With painting it’s just one person who sits down, but so many people are working on a piece like this. Everyone is working together, and we can come together here to make something beautiful for the people of Palm Island.

“The Aboriginal colours are there; the black is for the colour of our skin, the red for the blood that has been spilled from our people and the yellow star shape is the sun – the giver of life.”

Toby Castors
Façade artwork panels, timber and aluminium hand painted, 2009
Panel 1: 1500 x 3000cm
Panel 2: 1300 x 3270cm
Panel 3: 1300 x 3295cm
The carpet design was integral to the interior colour scheme for the buildings, and while each design was individually created for separate areas, the artists worked closely together and formed complementary artwork designs.

“*My inspiration for this artwork is my little girl, Shenzey. Her language land is ‘Toogadoo’, meaning saltwater turtle or ‘Bungardoo’ for the freshwater turtle. I picked the freshwater turtle after her language name. This artwork shows the freshwater turtle swimming over the pebbles.*”

Noby Clay

“This painting represents a story that was told to me when I was very young. We believe that the rainbow serpent is the creator of our island. He created the land, hills, valleys, waterfall and the sea. He created Palm Island.”

Sandra Clay

“One day I was sitting there and saw rain falling down and making a puddle. I was inspired how natural it looked. I took this image and used it in my artwork for this design.”

Gerard Nuggins
Working individually but aware of a group concept, the artists’ designs were fabricated and applied to glass windows and doors.

Noby Clay produced designs for the Department of Communities’ meeting room. The designs feature animals not native to Palm Island but important to many people who now live on the island.

“The Crocodile and the Barramundi’ featured in my designs are not from Palm Island. The reason I chose these animals is that Palm Island is made up of a lot of different tribes and cultures and these animals may relate to them.”

Noby Clay

Susan Pryor developed a playful design based on the turtle for the glass doors in the Child Safety meeting room.

“Palm Island children are bestowed totems at an early age as part of their cultural identity. The turtle is my totem.”

Susan Pryor

Gerard Nuggins’ raindrop carpet design was adapted to provide screening to windows and doors in the courtroom.
Allan Palm Island, original (detail) artwork for Palm Island courtroom, 2008
Allan Palm Island

As an Elder and active member of the Social Justice Group Allan Palm Island has seen the conflicted journey between Indigenous and non-Indigenous law. He also sees the way in which reconciliation may progress – by working together as one people and by respecting each other’s cultural differences.

Allan completed five small paintings that were scanned and laser engraved onto large wooden panels integrated on the Magistrate’s bench and displayed on the walls.

“It’s about connection. Through my art I want to inspire young people to understand their background, where they came from, where their great-grandfather came from. We all came from different places here on Palm Island, so that is important.

“I want to help the young kids to learn to do things for themselves so they can grow, and know that they can do it.”

Allan Palm Island
Using digital images, Palm Island community members as young as nine were able to creatively express how they saw their island.

Over a three week period using a digital camera, community members created images ranging from the iconic – life centred around the jetty which serves as the island’s heartbeat, to the personal – a beloved grandmother’s garden. Three 18-year-olds captured images from the far side of the island not often seen by other residents, while three 16-year-old students highlighted interesting details from their surrounding town.

The photos were collaged and maps of the island were layered to form four large-scale laminated glass panels which are displayed in the foyer, conference and meeting rooms of both buildings.

“I am passionate about photography and this is my way to store memories, tell stories, to mark history and to remember important events. I want to continue to learn how to use my photography to speak out for issues that affect not only Indigenous Australia and the world around us, but more importantly, my community.”

Tanya Haines

Artists:
Selena Solomon
Gerard Nuggins
Janine Nuggins
Tanya Haines
Stephen Fraser
Steven Watson
Roddy Shortjoe
Loyliitta O’Neill
Yolanda Kerr
John Sibley
Jill Chism

Panel 1: 2000 x 1000cm
Panel 2: 1500 x 3000cm
Panel 3: 1500 x 3000cm
Panel 4: 2000 x 2000cm
mall

A place where the community gathers, the space of the refurbished mall has been incorporated into the overall design concept of both buildings, with creative input from school children. The construction work was completed by local Palm Island Indigenous construction trainees who worked together with tradesmen and local school children.

Seating

Mosaics translate children’s and Noby Clay’s artwork into four bench seats.

Several students from the Bwgcolman and St Michael’s schools completed designs, with Sharmika Curley and Billy Clarke’s designs featured. Billy’s artwork represents the much loved turtle motif as well as Aboriginal flag colours.

Cubes

Children of different ages from Bwgcolman and St Michael’s schools completed designs which were translated into relief features on two sides of 21 concrete cubes scattered across the mall.

Artists:

Kenny Baira
Ronella Cummins
Vernon Geia
Kearhla Walsh
Sharna Cannon
Kahlani Pearson
Neil Baira
David Fulford
Jimeka Richardson
Maurice Baira
Billy Clarke
Sharmika Curley

Designs by children translated into relief concrete, 2009
Designs by children ready for mosaic tile manufacture, 2009
Allan Palm Island

Respected Elder and well-known local artist, Allan Palm Island lives on the island that bears his name. His family are recognised as original inhabitants of the island.

As a child Allan was influenced by early memories of his father painting traditional boomerangs for tourists, and as a young man he went on to study pottery, painting and batik at the Aboriginal Arts Unit of Cairns TAFE College. He later completed a Diploma in Fine Arts at the Northern Territory University, and is a graduate of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). Linocut printing was to become his passion and remains so today. Allan’s paintings of Palm Island’s marine life are in the permanent collection of the Queensland Museum.

Toby Castors

Toby Castors’ father lived on the old leper colony of Fantom Island off Palm Island until he was 16. It was run by Toby’s grandparents who found his father abandoned on the beach at Palm as a baby. The importance of Toby’s family story can be seen in the images he produces, but he looks to the modern world for his inspiration and sees himself as a contemporary artist. Toby has worked in Brisbane, has been involved in dance troupes, worked with children and has produced and sold many paintings and artefacts.

Noby Clay

Noby Clay was born in Townsville and grew up on Palm Island. She is a mother of three and an accomplished boxer. “Everyone has a lot of issues and problems, but I say to everyone – good or bad, it doesn’t matter what happens in life, it just gets you to where you’re going. No time for regrets.”

Sandra Clay

Sandra’s painting represents a story that was told to her when she was very young. She says Palm Islanders believe the rainbow serpent is the creator of their island, creating the land, hills, valleys, waterfall and the sea.

Gerard Nuggins

Gerard is inspired by nature and is particularly interested in leaf and wave patterns and textures. He believes that the artwork he does should be relevant to people’s lives on Palm Island today.

Susan Pryor

Susan is currently a teacher and tutor at the Palm Island TAFE college. A mother of six and grandmother of eight, Susan was born on Palm Island. Encouraged by her art teacher at TAFE where she was a student, she produced a “painting of my life” in the 80s but says her interest in art has never “gone anywhere” until now. Susan considers art to be her passion.
Community photographic project, laminated glass, 2009
Acknowledgements and thanks to all who have been involved in the publication of this catalogue, especially the Palm Island community.

Cover: Gerard Nuggins
Raindrops (detail), 2008

Visit: www.publicworks.qld.gov.au/community/Pages/PalmIsland.aspx

This project was initiated under the Queensland Government’s former public art program, Art Built-in, administered by Arts Queensland. It successfully demonstrates both the principle of integrated public art through collaboration among Palm Island artists, architects, designers and builders and how public art contributes effectively to community development.