

## Art Stret News

### Jefry Feeger & Ratoos Haopa Gary

#### CONTENDING CHANGE

The Steamship Hardware [Compound](#) is an unlikely address for the hub of the Papua New Guinea (PNG) contemporary art scene. Yet it is inside an industrial warehouse on the outskirts of the sprawling capital of Port Moresby where one will find Art Stret, the nation's first and only commercial art space. Here, director Amanda Adams aims to nurture a greater national and international audience for PNG contemporary artists, who, since the 1960s, have sustained a dynamic art scene with limited public and private arts infrastructure. Art Stret's recent joint exhibition of new work by Ratoos Haopa Gary and Jefry Feeger provided an insight into the unique collaborative work of artists who represent two generations in that lineage.

Gary, a descendant of the Aroaro people in the Gulf Province of PNG, is a respected veteran artist and teacher. He has traveled extensively in PNG and Australia, where he spent years working with Australian Aboriginal artists and theater groups. As a traditional storyteller, he employs a rich iconography of line, pattern, color and dots in his canvas works to portray the animist cosmology that connects him to ancestral culture and land.

Feeger was born in Kerema and lives and works in Port Moresby, while exhibiting regionally in Australia and New Zealand. In contrast to Gary, Feeger's work addresses the interface between traditional culture and the globalized world. His portrait paintings are executed in his own style of magic realism, through which he conveys both the physical and spiritual character of his subjects.

A shared desire to explore contemporary issues facing rural PNG communities culminated in both artists' recent weeklong visit to the Aroaro people in the village of Mailava and in the body of work in this exhibition. Living with the villagers, the artists gained insight into the impact on traditional culture and society wrought by early 20th-century colonial exploration and economic globalization evident in the expanding logging industry, which has been active in the Gulf Province and a cause of serious deforestation for the past 20 years.

Colonial introduction of Western culture in this area dispossessed the Aroaro people of their culture, and Gary is one of their last descendants. Committed to the preservation of his history, the artist's journey became a revisiting of land, memory, loss and kinship. In a painting entitled *Anuma Aitari* (2011), he recalls the story of a *haus tambaran*, or traditional ancestral worship house, which was destroyed in the wake of Australian expeditions to develop the region in the 1930s. The land on which the house was built belongs to the family of Gary's wife, and this familial connection is portrayed through swirling lines—a visual reference to the turtle, which in Aroaro culture symbolizes woman, and the wife or mother.

*Marsden Matting* (2011) features a seamless pattern of color and dots painted across the surface of a sheet of perforated metal—a fragment of larger sheets that were used to create aircraft landing strips in the Gulf Province during World War II. The work is a concrete second reclamation, with the harsh metal's intended use camouflaged and transformed by imagery representative of the artist and his heritage.

While Gary focused on memory and tradition, Feeger sought to highlight pressing social issues within the community, such as the lack of public services and educational opportunities for the younger generation. *My Baby Child* (2011) is a tender rendering of a young mother. A chiaroscuro use of light effectively illuminates her face against a shadow-filled background, accentuating the expression of will, determination and suffering in her eyes. The exhibition marked a move, for both artists toward community engagement as a way to explore political and social issues within the reality of everyday lives. The artists aim not only to raise public awareness of the countless challenges facing local communities, especially those affected by 21st-century globalization, but also to catalyze change in the minds and spirits of those they encounter. As artists, they see a vital public role for themselves in influencing a future in which their nation's land and resources become the blessings for prosperous and sustainable lives for all PNG citizens, rather than a curse.



**Credits to: Catherine Wilson and ArtAsiaPacific**