

## TWENTY PAST RAFT

RAFT has been going for over twenty years since 2001 - two decades of exhibitions - but the story begins a decade before.

In 1991 chef and burgeoning artist Dallas Gold moved from Newcastle to Darwin in pursuit of love and Lorna Murakami. There, Gold continued a BA in Fine Arts begun in Newcastle and in Darwin, met New Zealand born artist, Peter Adsett who was teaching Painting at Northern Territory University (NTU later CDU). The friendship between Adsett and Gold grew, and their affinity fruited in the studio at NTU. The Gold - Adsett running conversation about art and what they were seeing all around them took place in the cafes and restaurants and verandahs around town.

24HR Art, the Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art had recently opened in a disused petrol station in Fannie Bay and soon after moved to Parap. Based in Darwin, 24HR Art exchanged exhibitions and residencies with Watch This Space, an artist run venture in Alice Springs and engaged with Indonesian contemporary art by hosting artists and exhibitions. I was on the Board of 24HR Art and met Gold in 1992 at the Gimbat Artist Camp in Kakadu, where he cooked and drew, and I ate and looked. We were all entranced with what we saw and what we ate.

Gold lived in Parap and Fannie Bay and sometimes at our house. Soon I began to hear about Peter Adsett, who was living at Humpty Doo in the rural hinterland with his young family. He was showing in galleries in Indonesia and with The Australian Print Project working in collaboration with Indigenous, Indonesian, and Filipino artists, and from 1993 he painted an annual series exhibited in Melbourne.

Gold and Adsett made strong connections to the Country around them. Adsett's friendship with Nganyinytja, a Pitjantjatara Elder, tied him to the desert, while Gold got to know Arnhemland and the Tiwi islands and through Murakami's family, he had a privileged entry to Broome, where they lived for a while. Gold worked both as a chef and on painting commissions at the Lindsay St café and gallery and Cornucopia at the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT (MAGNT). He had solo exhibitions in Broome about the history of pearling and in Darwin about the alchemy of food.

Darwin was then as always, a meeting point where culture and geographies crossed over and became entangled. Every year in August the Telstra Art Award or NATSIIA was exhibited at MAGNT and artists from remote art communities poured in for the carnival of art, while around town temporary exhibitions spung up. Percolating through these shared sites of cultural production - NTU, MAGNT, 24Hr Art - was a gathering stream of art and ideas, a constant flow of new work from the surrounding Indigenous communities.

It was a decade of great foment, broiling and bubbling and full of initiatives that put cross-cultural art firmly on the agenda. In 1993 *Getting Into Prints: A symposium on Aboriginal Printmaking*, a conference, workshop and an exhibition, *Collaboration* was held at the NTU Fine Arts School in conjunction with the Association of Northern and Central Australian Aboriginal Artists (ANCAAAA) and had an immediate effect. Northern Editions, a printmaking studio was established at NTU, to introduce and facilitate printmaking to Indigenous communities in the Top End, Desert and the Kimberley and Gold worked there as a printer and with art framer, Don Whyte.

In 1994 *Contemporary Territory*, a biennial exhibition was inaugurated at MAGNT and curator Danae Murray acknowledged in the catalogue “the existence of Western art practice alongside the substantial achievement of Territory Aboriginal art”. In 1996 both Adsett and Gold’s work featured.

1996 was a big year. Firstly, an initiative between the NTU Fine Art School and the Indigenous Studies department, *Kaltja Busines: Indigenous art culture or Industry* a conference and art workshop involving over one hundred artists and art centres. A collaborative project created The Meeting Place Mural, instigated and overseen by Adsett. Later in the year, *Wijay Na? Which Way Now*, originally titled, ‘Representation on the Cultural interface’ was an interrogation of art making and the vexed question of cross-cultural collaboration prompted by the Indigenous Studies Department at NTU in conjunction with 24 HR Art. It consisted of an exhibition in Parap and a robust conference at MAGNT - I recall that there was a lot of talk about “the hegemony of the dot”. Adsett was a featured panellist.

The distillation of this ferment was the Artist Camp at Crocodile Hole in the East Kimberley in 1999. Adsett brought current and former NTU students including Gold. Tony Oliver brought the Jirrawun Artists- Freddie Timms, Rusty Peters, Paddy Bedford, Phyllis Thomas, Hector Jandany, Goodie Barret and Peggy Patrick. For both Adsett and Gold this was turning point.

In 2000 Adsett and Gija artist Rusty Peters decided to paint a series alongside each other – fourteen works, seven each - separately executed but in response to one another, a dialogue in paint that became ‘Two Laws One Big Spirit’. While looking for a venue to present this exhibition the idea for a new gallery began to form. The paintings were hung at 24HR Art but the momentum for a new sort of gallery that fitted and served such new work erupted and would not be suppressed. Gold and Adsett had the bit between their teeth.

New ventures like this - need good meaningful names and a well-designed symbol to represent them. They come first and require thinking and dreaming but if they are right, they last. They endure and acquire meaning and like the child, they become the name bestowed upon them and look right with that name. It is can never be a matter of mere branding and simply finding a logo that merely looks good.

Adsett and Gold were tossing around names to suggest the enterprise they envisaged, situated at crossing point between cultures and geographies, North and South, Black and White, Australia and Asia. I was not happy with the name they came up with and suggested RAFT, which we all fell upon immediately. It referenced a hero of ours, painter Ian Fairweather who had lived at Frances Bay, where the planned gallery was to be situated.

Gold was drawing and sketching out ideas for the logo and a few weeks later Adsett came in with a painting of the very idea and that became the RAFT symbol. A white square angled off centre suspended in a black background. The delicate balance of the black pushing forward the white receding, the white a concavity, the black a high bank surrounding it, a dynamic dance of figure and ground, of Black and White; a luminous raft floating in dark sea.

RAFT Artspace opened in 2001 with '4 Men 4 Paintings' from Jirrawun; Paddy Bedford, Freddie Timms, Rusty Peters, and Rammey Ramsey. RAFT's name was a tribute to Fairweather, who fifty years earlier built a 'Lit-Bateau' for his fabled raft journey from Darwin to Roti. For Fairweather the journey, which almost saw him perish, led to a great breakthrough in his painting practice.

At the Raft Opening, the great Arnhemland singer and all around rockstar, George Burarrwanga from Warumpi Band arrived and took over the room and sang the 1985 classic-

"Blackfella, Whitefella/ It doesn't matter what your colour/  
As long as you a real fella/As long as you a true fella"

Rusty Peters and Freddie Timms had met him earlier in the day at the pub and told him what was about to happen. There could be no show without George as the headline act.

When RAFT began, Gold and Adsett boldly declared that "We believe one of the great movements in art, and painting in particular are from this region, and is affecting art within the region and beyond". The first version of the RAFT Mission statement mentions "exhibiting art from Northern Australia and South East Asia", encouraging "a visual language emphasising cultural difference" and "locating Contemporary work in the context in which it was made".

The following year RAFT moved to Parap around the corner from 24 HR Art seeding an arts precinct around the famed Saturday morning market, which would soon encompass two RAFT galleries, upstairs and downstairs 1 and 11, Nomad Art and Tiwi Art., and when

RAFT decamped, Outstation gallery would occupy the original upstairs RAFT space At some point Adsett withdrew to focus exclusively on his painting practice and Gold accepted the gallery had to be his sole focus and put his painting on hold and embraced the business of steering RAFT.

RAFT was a response to a need to represent the unique and important new work being made in the region. From the get-go, RAFT had a clear mandate; to exhibit art from the region in the context in which it was made. Before RAFT existed, there was no local exhibition space with the capacity to curate and present the work of the artists from the region at the level the work demanded. Ground-breaking solo and group shows from the community Art Centres and local Other artists invariably took place outside the Territory in an export value add model of cultural practice. After RAFT that all changed. RAFT shows broke the ground and introduced new artists and startling bodies of work to local, National, and International audiences.

RAFT has gone through various iterations moving between places- beginning in the North at Frances Bay and Parap, travelling South, to Sydney and Melbourne for art fairs and special exhibitions in conjunction with other venues and dealers, venturing Extreme South to Hobart, and settling in 2010 in the Centre in Alice Springs in the belly of the beast.

The final show at Desert Mob in Alice Springs in September 2022 took as its theme, 'Living Water' and featured art from the desert, the centre, the Kimberley and the Top End. In his opening remarks at the closing, Dallas Gold acknowledged that water is everywhere at the heart of Country and recalled an early show at Raft, when Nyilpirr Spider Snell danced his paintings into the gallery and they all referred to kurtal jila, the living water he was responsible for in Wangkajunga Country west of Fitzroy Crossing.

RAFT dealt only in the primary market working with Art Centres and individual artists. It was a commercial gallery and a business informed by cultural awareness and social responsibility making for an ethical best practice. Over more than two decades RAFT earned an enviable place as one of the longest lasting and best regarded of all the galleries across Australia that show Indigenous art and it showed the work of over seven hundred Indigenous artists in some three hundred exhibitions during its long journey.

## **SUZANNE SPUNNER**

**Suzanne Spinner** has been the archivist, dramaturg at a distance and ghost writer at large for RAFT since its inception. For RAFT, she has written and edited - mission statements, press releases and catalogue essays. She has never written *about* RAFT rather always *with* RAFT.