

Elastic/Borracha/Elástico



ELASTIC BORRACHA ELÁSTICO

Timor-Leste/Australia Mobile Contemporary Artists' Residency

Edited by Jo Holder

Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin
The Cross Art Projects, Sydney

Dedicated to the memory of Jennifer Phipps

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**EAST TIMOR
FIGHTS ON....**



**INDONESIAN
TROOPS
OUT NOW!!**

Preface / Petroleum Blues



From its modest beginnings in a disused petrol station, hence its former '24HR Art' moniker, the Northern Centre for Contemporary Art (NCCA) has embraced the unique cultural fabric and outlook of its home base in Darwin, Australia's northernmost capital city. From the outset this has involved at times concerted engagement with East Timor – both with the sizeable East Timorese community who have settled in Darwin, particularly since the Indonesian invasion of Timor-Leste in 1975, and with the pre- and post-independent nation which lies just over the Timor Sea, little more than an hour's flight from Darwin.

NCCA's first significant East Timor-related event came in the very first year of its operation, in 1990, with the exhibition *East Timor 1974–1990: A photographic perspective of the continuing struggle for independence*. This exhibition was largely the brainchild of then Darwin-based artist Jenny Groves, who had travelled to East Timor in January of that year after the country had reopened to tourists following Pope John Paul II's visit there in October 1989.¹ During her stay Groves witnessed a peaceful student demonstration in Dili, outside the Hotel Turismo, which was met with brutal retaliation by the Indonesian military police. Groves recorded the protest and its aftermath with her camera. Thirty-two of these black-and-white photographs were included in the NCCA exhibition, along with a smaller selection documenting buildings and memorials in Dili and along the road to West Timor.²

Also included were black-and-white photographs taken in 1974 by the celebrated photojournalist Elaine Brière, who ran the East Timor Alert Network in Canada. These photos record everyday life in Baucau, Lautem, Dili, and the mountain region between Dili and the frontier with Indonesia. Photographs from Mel Sylvester and Major Samuel Kruger were also exhibited, both taken in 1975, along with related posters (1974 to 1990) from the collection of Darwin-based humanitarian Rob Wesley-Smith, well known for his active involvement with the Darwin-based Australians For A Free East Timor (AFFET) and the political party Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor / Frente Revolucionária do Timor Leste Independente (FRETILIN).

The exhibition attracted financial support from groups such as Amnesty International, Christian Movement for Peace, and Midnight Oil, as well as the Australia Council for the Arts. There was interest from the Institute of Modern Art and Artspace to host the exhibition in Brisbane or Sydney, but it didn't end up touring. In its appraisal, gallery director at

the time Judy Kean noted a review by Margot Rosser which challenged its underlying politic, of non-Timorese voices speaking for Timorese people. Kean also noted the upshot in the exhibition's involvement of members from Darwin's East Timorese community.³

NCCA's next significant East Timor-related exhibition, *Against the wind* (1999), was an Artback NT touring show billed as 'An Exhibition of Banners facilitated by Joanna Barrkman with Communities in the Northern Territory', premiering at Batchelor College, Batchelor (NT) then at NCCA.⁴ Timorese communities in Darwin were involved in two of the exhibition's banner-making projects (1996–97), with three banners from The NT Portuguese & Timorese Social Club, and seven from the Lafaek East Timorese Association of the NT. Their making involved over 40 community members, with Barrkman assisted in each project by a community-based coordinator.

Darwin-based Jose Casimiro was the coordinator for Lafaek's banners. Almost a decade later, he also came to play a key coordinating role for Darwin's staging of the *Elastic/Borracha/Elástico* exhibition and related public program. Casimiro was instrumental in facilitating the involvement of master weaver Veronica Periera Maia in the exhibition, through the loan of her monumental *Tais Don* work and participation in the opening night, *Naha Biti* (Timorese welcome), and artist talk programs. His involvement was made possible with assistance from Darwin City Council through their Community Grants program and in recognition of Darwin's Sister City relationship with Dili. Council officiated at *Elastic's* Darwin opening, through acting Lord Mayor Gary Haslett, and gratefully received a gift from the artists of an edition of the impressive *Elastic/Borracha/Elástico* print suite which featured in the exhibition. Council wasted no time in having the edition's ten prints framed and proudly put on display outside the Lord Mayor's office.

NCCA cannot claim to be the instigator of any of these exhibition projects. It has simply been a willing host and partner which has, however, helped to bring additional support, particularly for *Elastic* and its first realisation in Darwin's Chan Contemporary Art Space, and on its panoramic windows – reinscribing Jude Conway's history of AFFET.⁵

Elastic has become a catalyst for NCCA to instigate new projects involving East Timorese artists. The Darwin exhibition and public program powerfully reignited the spirit and struggle of pre-independence activism while drawing attention to the independent nation's current crises, including access to Timor Sea oil and gas. NCCA is humbled by the exhibition's aesthetic and political tour-de-force, courtesy of its artists – Maria Madeira, Victor De Sousa, Narelle Jubelin, Fiona MacDonald, and Veronica Pereira Maia – and curator Jo Holder, who in tandem with the artists is also responsible for this catalogue, which continues to build an archive and appreciation for Timor-Leste contemporary arts.

Maurice O'Riordan, Director, Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin

NOTES

1. The exhibition showed from 30 September to 14 October 1990. Groves's original plan was to include a display outlining the injustice of the Timor Gap treaty.

2. Groves's photographs of the demonstration (17 January 1990) had already found publication in Japan, Portugal, and England as well as by the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva (March 1990). Groves travelled with Andrew McMillan, author of *Death in Dili* (1992).

3. Kean's appraisal was part of the acquittal of Australia Council funds towards the exhibition. The exhibition was re-worked as *East Timor 1942–92* (curators Jenny Groves, Oliver Strewe), Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, October 1994. This coincided with the publication of *Telling: East Timor, Personal Testimonies, 1942–1992* by Michele Turner, a collection of Timorese and non-Timorese oral histories to supplement and document broader political histories. The foreword is by Justice Michael Kirby.

4. Dancers and speakers from the Lafaek East Timorese Association opened *Against the wind* at NCCA. Barrkman would later become a specialist researcher into Timorese weaving (*tais*); as Curator of Southeast Asian Art and Material Culture at the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, she curated the major exhibition *Husi Bei Ala Timor Sira Nia Liman/From the Hands of Our Ancestors* (2009).

5. Jude Conway, 'Australians For A Free East Timor (AFFET) Story'. AFFET was active from 1991 to 2003 in Darwin.

pages 6–7: Chips Mackinoltz, *East Timor fights on*, 1978. Offset-lithograph, printed in colour from multiple plates. Image courtesy National Gallery of Australia. Exhibited: *East Timor 1974–1990, A photographic perspective of the continuing struggle for independence*, 24 Hour Art (now NCCA). The exhibition included posters (1974 to 1990) from Rob Wesley-

Smith's collection, including works from Australians For A Free East Timor (AFFET), Darwin

page 8: Street artist, Dili, now Timor Sea Justice campaign logo. Photographer unknown