

We Refuse to Become Victims

The Imagery

The images are deeply entrenched in the socio-political realities that all of the individuals and collectives experience every day. The maps of the Indonesian archipelago, East Timor and West Papua are featured on all of the prints. The other major points of consistency are the woodcut figure of a man with his hands covering his ears, telling of a culture of apathy within Australia, leading to widespread ignorance of important social issues relevant to the region. Screen printed television screens show Alexander Downer as a pirate, suggestive handshakes between Australia and Indonesia above the Timor Sea (without consultation with the East Timorese), SIEV X and East Timorese militias and violent images of 1999 and pre-1999 violence. The inspiration for these prints by Australian artists, Julian Laffan and Bernie Slater was based on initial discussion with Jon Priadi and Angie Bexley about East Timor's painful history in which Australia became an accomplice.

'We Refuse to become Victims 1' – Human Rights

(woodcut, screenprint and acrylic on cotton)

The first banner or 'map' is a response to various social and political conflicts faced by the respective countries.

The Timorese artists responded to the realities they face in terms of ongoing conflict, fighting and political sabotage. Most are still living in refugee camps. The images are as strong as the messages, 'Don't try to split us, we are the little people. Let's build a future'. 'It's our oil, it's our future'. In working on the maps, **Gembel** held an initial discussion about the range of issues they wanted to cover: one person could draw the image, another would cut and another team of youngsters would print the image on the map. When it came to printing on the map, further discussion took place such as the preference for East Timor gas and oil issues, symbolised by a Kangaroo sipping from a pipe from a Timor Gas barrel, to be located on Northern Australia.

Although it is important to note the artists' wish to retain a collective identity on the nature of the prints as a whole, there are a number of points of reference raised by individual artists that reflect their contextuality in the works as a whole.

Images of a sinking refugee boat greeted by a heavily armed naval ship evoke a response from Jon Priadi, an Indonesian artist living in Canberra, Australia, who over the past two years has found national discourses on security, refugees and asylum seekers an imperative starting point to interrogate the links between national issues and a global culture of fear experienced by citizens of Indonesia, East Timor and Australia.

Taring Padi artist Doddi Irwandi's print of a distressed grieving girl cradling her face in her hands is deliberately positioned on the conflict areas of Indonesia: Aceh, Moluccas, Poso in Sulawesi, and East Timor. This is also a response to the television sets by Bernie Slater and Julian Laffan with images evoking Australia's complicity in the Timor issue. The two images work together as a joint statement in rejecting the overwhelming sense of apathy, from governments and citizens alike, towards such disasters.

The skeletal figures printed on Java are a reference to the socially buried memory of the 1965 communist killings that began on Java. To this day, there has been no public apology for this state-induced violence. The skeletal figures also float above waves and are a grave prediction of the future of an earth swamped by conflict and all that remains are floating corpses.

The corpses are also suggestive of corporate and government ineptitude. On the top left and right sides of the banner are two aeroplanes. One is flying up, the other is flying down, referencing an Adam Air (Indonesian domestic airline) recent crash, which occurred in early January, 2007. The bodies of almost 100 passengers and six crew have not been recovered. It was suggested by some in Indonesia that the aircraft was carrying explosives (delivered by the Indonesian military) to fuel the conflict in Poso, north Sulawesi.

Another striking image is peasants with bloated bellies dragging their feet. The message is simple: 'food' is printed above it. Budi Santoso's haunting image of a skeletal face figure is the plea, 'Refuse to Become Victims' (*menolak jadi korban*). Finally, at the top of the banner are menacing birds of prey hovering over the dismal scene of human suffering and self destruction.

'We refuse to become Victims 2' – Resources

(stencil, woodcut and screenprint on cotton)

The second banner or 'map' in the series presents another bleak picture of regional resource degradation. It's about Oil. This large scale image is the only banner not worked on by the East Timorese artists because of the timings in departure dates of Angie and Jon to East Timor.

The centre point of this print locates stencils of tiny humans spiralling inward and being drawn into an oil pipe located in the Timor Sea. Aris Prabawa, an Indonesian artist living in Lismore, Australia, is making a statement on how East Timor, Australia and Indonesia have become embroiled over this one issue in a pursuit of wealth, power and greed on the one hand and justice and economic equality on the other. Oil drums and uranium signs also dot the 'map'.

Issues of resources and military power are intricately linked on this 'map'. Military planes and tanks are seen from the corners hedging towards the oil and uranium points. Following the eye from the left hand side of the banner, menacing looking waves and barbed wire wrapped in an angry fist lick the tip of Aceh, symbolising the 2005 tsunami and conflict that continues to affect the lives of the people in resource-rich Aceh.

However, in a final statement of hope and in contrast to the first banner in the sequence, the birds flying overhead are not birds of prey, but doves.

'We Refuse to Become Victims 3' – Environment

(stencil, woodcut and screenprint on cotton)

The third banner continues the theme of environmental destruction through the medium of stencilling. The main stencil on the map is a female scales of justice figure whose right hand is tied to her body with rope; her left hand holds up a wad of cash. The stencilled text reads 'greed, economy, power' and the ropes tie her to the power centres of Jakarta and Canberra, through East Timor.

Stumps of trees cover the islands of Kalimantan, Java and Sumatra signalling illegal logging and burning. Tiny stencils of cities dotting the map on Java, Bali and Sumatra pump out polluting smoke.

The only faces visible to the audience are those of the power brokers: the TV set features Alexander Downer the pirate, and a stencil of the greedy overweight character holding the ropes. The faceless characters are the sad silhouettes of the 'Victims' who are being offered a flower as a memorial. Ghostly figures remain in Kalimantan among the burned down stumps of their forests.

'We Refuse to Become Victims 4' – Together

(woodcut and screenprint on cotton)

The fourth and final banner uses multi-media of woodcuts and screen printing. The 'map' is bordered by small woodcuts sewn onto colourful fabric symbolising flags. The message is one of hope and offers peaceful solutions to the various political, economic and social conflicts that link the three countries.

Text by Angie Bexley