

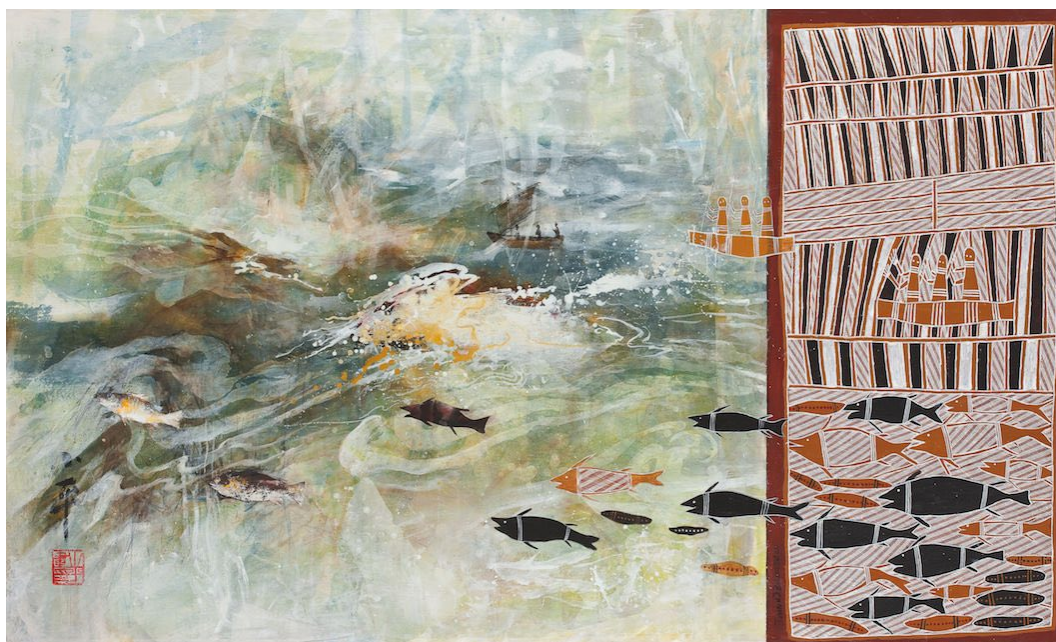
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## LAURAINÉ · DIGGINS · FINE · ART

### A Closer Look At.... the art of collaboration

Our current exhibition *Zhou Xiaoping : The Cross-Cultural Influence of Chinese and Indigenous Art* includes a number of works which have been created collaboratively. Through Zhou's travels in Australia he established a number of relationships with important indigenous artists, particularly Jimmy Pike and Johnny Bulunbulun. The depth of friendship and their mutual respect as artists is clearly evident and speaks of their shared experiences.

“Through changing places, transformation, exchanges and communication, the two peoples have made contact and communicated, they have cooperated and faced each other, they have traded and shared cultures, but even more they have created art and history.”<sup>1</sup>



Zhou Xiaoping (1960 - ) and Johnny Bulunbulun (1948 – 2010) *From Art to Life* 2009  
ink, synthetic polymer and ochre on rice paper and canvas 170 x 285 cm

The collaborative paintings with Johnny Bulunbulun occurred as a natural organic process of each artist's curiosity in learning about the other's painting techniques. Zhou's time spent in Arnhem Land saw him inducted into the process of preparing bark for painting and watching Bulunbulun apply his meticulous cross-hatching rarrk. Language barriers were overcome through the common interest and understanding of painting and technique. Despite the novelty of his situation, being in a remote Australian indigenous community, Zhou was struck by the parallels – assisting Bulunbulun by grinding the ochres reminiscent of grinding pigment for ink as he had been trained in China.

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<sup>1</sup> Zhou Xiaoping quoted in *Trepang: China & the Story of Macassan-Aboriginal Trade*, Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, The University of Melbourne, 2011, p. 118

The two artists worked together towards the exhibition *Trepang: China & the Story of Macassan-Aboriginal Trade*, curated by Professor Marcia Langton, inaugural Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, which showed in 2011 at the Capital Museum, Beijing and Museum Victoria, Melbourne. The exhibition explored the remarkable links between Australia and China through the historic trade of trepang (sea cucumber) through the Macassan people (now Indonesia).

This is celebrated in the painting *Discovery of Trading*, the formal cross-hatching by Johnny Bulunbulun contrasting with the sweeping space by Zhou, representative of the open seas. The intertwining of the cultures is embodied in the weaving together of the sinuous dragon and rainbow serpent. The painting outlines the historical exchange, from the gathering of sea cucumber in Arnhem Land, which was traded for items such as knives with the Macassan people. From the ports of South-East Asia, the trepang found its way to China.



Zhou Xiaoping (1960 - ) and Johnny Bulunbulun (1948 – 2010) *Discovery of Trading* 2009  
synthetic polymer and ochre on canvas 232 x 168 cm

“The *Discovery of Trading* reminds us that ancient cultures are also alike in enshrining certain values and practices. On the right of this composition, Bulunbulun depicts the collecting and exchange of trepang in Arnhem Land using designs from traditional clan paintings, while Zhou’s section on the trade suggests the similarities between the cultures, ranging from the continuity of symbolic forms (such as the archaic inscriptions on seals set alongside rrank designs) to the parallels in belief systems (with a mythical Chinese dragon partially entwined with a rainbow serpent). To reinforce this idea of human connection across distant cultures, one of Bulunbulun’s trepang figures is shown within Zhou’s side of the composition carrying traditional Chinese hand-held scales, from which dried sea cucumbers are being weighed.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Alison Inglis, *Affinity and Collaboration: Zhou Xiaoping and the art of cultural exchange*, Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, Melbourne, exhibition catalogue Download the catalogue on our website [www.diggins.com.au](http://www.diggins.com.au)



The intimacy of Zhou's collaboration with Bulunbulun is most apparent in *Portrait of Johnny Bulunbulun* (2007) where Zhou's portrait of his friend and fellow artist is set against a background painted by Bulunbulun.

This affection is also found in *Back to Back: Portrait of Jimmy and Xiaoping*. Whilst not a collaborative painting in itself, as it is the work of Zhou's hand alone, such a painting could not have been created without their journey together as artists and friends. Their joint exhibition in 1996 resulted in the first exhibition of Aboriginal artwork in China and saw Jimmy travel to China resulting in the charming book, *Jimmy and Pat go to China*.



Zhou Xiaoping (1960 –) *Back to Back, Portrait of Jimmy and Xiaoping* 1999  
synthetic polymer on rice paper laid down on canvas 207 x 154 cm

As Zhou recalls, “I travelled many places in the wilderness under Jimmy’s guidance. Whenever we got tired from walking, we would rest back-to-back, take out our sketch books and draw... Every night we lit a fire and, again back-to-back, shared our innermost thoughts. Our silhouettes and experiences were laid bare on paper in each line and every colour, revealing the preoccupations of two artists in the middle of the outback.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Read further about Jimmy Pike and Zhou Xiaoping in *Dialogues of the Dreaming: The Art of Zhou Xiaoping*, Australian Conservation of Asian cultural materials, 2017, pp. 107-111 Copies of this publication are available to purchase at Lauraine Diggins Fine Art

The collaborative relationships with indigenous artists which Zhou has experienced, has profoundly impacted his artistic oeuvre. His most recent work looks to the landscape and retains a cross-cultural element, continuing to be influenced by indigenous culture, speaking of Zhou's resounding connection.

These intricate paintings use ink and acrylic on rice paper which is then laid on canvas and repainted to create a whorl of colour and a multi-layered texture, complementing the layering of perspective, meaning and narrative in his work.



*Cultural Introductions I* 2017

*Red Country* 2017

*Landscape* 2017

ink, oil, synthetic polymer on rice paper laid down on canvas

100 x 68 cm

120 x 69 cm

137 x 135 cm

The interest Zhou has in indigenous culture is self-evident in his work, from portraits of indigenous Australians to his use of commonly found motifs in Aboriginal art, such as the concentric circle. His referencing of indigenous culture has come from his own experience and immersion in the Australian indigenous landscape, through his relationships with Aboriginal people, and his genuine interest in indigenous culture and art - it is a celebration of his own experiences and journeys, the friendships he has made and his desire to share his understanding of this culture with an audience through his own art. Zhou's work is not derivative, rather it is a unique fusion of a myriad of influences, including his early training in China; his experiences of indigenous Australia and his life now in Melbourne.

***Zhou Xiaoping The Cross-Cultural Influences of Chinese and Indigenous Art***  
**is showing at Lauraine Diggins Fine Art until 21 April 2018.**

**Visit our website [www.diggins.com.au](http://www.diggins.com.au)**

- View the exhibition
- Download the catalogue with essay by Professor Alison Inglis
- Listen to artist Zhou Xiaoping speak about his work
- Watch the video of the exhibition opening with official proceedings by Senator The Hon Mitch Fifield, Minister for the Arts and Minister for Communications

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Gallery Hours: Tues – Fri 10am -6pm, Sat 1pm – 5pm during exhibitions