

# JOEL SAM Exodus

8 JULY -  
3 SEP 2023



**Joel SAM**  
Clan group: Umai / Sui Baidham  
Language group: Kala Kawaw Ya

Joel Sam was born in 1977 on Thursday Island, Torres Strait, Queensland. His family lives in Bamaga, Queensland, and are originally from Saibai Island. Joel lives and works in Cairns, Queensland.

Joel creates intricate carvings and sculptures made from shell and marble. He is also a printmaker, using etching and linocut to create works that are inspired by his Torres Strait Islander culture and way of life. Joel's designs are largely based on totemic and clan markings, and often include plants and animals, creatures from the sea, and astral constellations.

Joel's work has been represented in numerous exhibitions, *Lagau Dunalaig* (2012), with Brian Robinson at Kick Contemporary Arts, the annual Cairns Indigenous Art Fair since 2016, *North by East West* (2018) and *Ritual: The Past in the Present* (2021) at Cairns Art Gallery.

The following texts provide information about works in his exhibition and have been compiled by the artist, and the exhibition curator, Brian Robinson. The information provides an important insight into aspects of cultural practices, totems and stories that are at the heart of Torres Strait islander culture and identity.

For the artist, respecting culture and seeking approvals from Elders to share cultural stories through his artworks is an important aspect of his work.



*Exodus* has been supported through a Cairns RSL Club Artist Fellowship Award

## 1. *Wamaladi Mawa* 2023

(Umai and Sui Baidham clan mask)  
wood, acrylic paint, raffia, shells, rope,  
expanding foam filler  
Collection of the artist

I wish to acknowledge the families who made the move to Muttee Heads (near Bamaga) for the betterment of their families. I especially acknowledge my uncles on Saibai Island for allowing me to create this piece of artwork.

The *Wamaladi Mawa (Wamaladi Mask)* tells a story from the Umai clan (my paternal lineage) of Saibai Island.

Wamaladi lived with his wife and daughter in a village called Waum on Saibai Island. Each day the family would tend to their garden at Waum. Wamaladi had a desire for other women. He would disguise himself, as he was not a handsome man, to attract other women, including his daughter who too fell for his charm. He would conceal his identity by changing his facial characteristics by using wax.

Once his wife found out, he left in shame and lived alone. He had visited many places and each time he would continue with his intriguing dance moves and charm the women. He would bid them and go to each one during the night.

One day his identity was revealed, and the men from the villages got together and hunted him. He quickly removed his disguises, turned into a crow, and flew north to Daudai.

Joel Sam, artist, 2023

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## 2. *Dauriti* 2023

wood, acrylic paint, cloth sails, rope,  
found objects  
Collection of the artist

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## 3. *Gaigai* 2023

vinylcut  
Collection of the artist

The *gaigai (GT)* is an important species for commercial fishing and game fishing. They can be found around coastal and offshore waters and are one of the famous species caught at Seisia wharf at the tip of Cape York Peninsula. Many tourists travel to Cape York specifically to fish off the famous Seisia wharf.

*Gaigai*, with their sharp teeth, eat just about anything but feed mainly on baitfish such as sardines. Sardines are plentiful under the Seisia wharf where you are sure to catch the *gaigai*.

In this print, I have used the seagrass, which can be found in the patterns of the waves on the sand under the water and where the sardines are feeding.

Joel Sam, artist, 2023

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## 4. *Exodus* 2023

vinylcut  
Collection of the artist

It was during World War II that young men from Saibai Island discovered fertile land with large sources of fresh water on Cape York, Far North Queensland.

The masks in this print represent men from the different clan groups having a discussion at a tribal meeting about moving their people from Saibai to Cape York Peninsula. The move was for the betterment of their people's future. Increasing hardships on Saibai Island included lack of fresh water, flooding during monsoonal tides, and the need to carry water and firewood long distances.

The border around the edge of the artist's print represents the different clans who made the journey to Muttee Heads - the *samu* (cassowary) clan, *umai* (dog) clan, *dhoeybau* (yam leaf) clan, the *thabu* (snake) clan, and *kodal* (crocodile) clan.

The four luggers in the print represent the boats which transported the Islanders to Muttee Heads. The Saibai Islanders worked hard and long hours diving for trochus and pearls to pay for the luggers - the MV Millard, Macoy, and Sania. The fourth lugger was found beached on Thursday Island and was later restored and named the SS Donna.

The luggers MV Millard and Macoy made the initial journey to Muttee Heads from Saibai Island taking the first group of pioneering families. The Islanders brought with them to their newfound home garden produce such as taro, cassava, sweet potatoes and yam. They also brought their culture and during their journey they sang and danced.

During the second trip, one of luggers ran into a cyclone at the back of Mabuiag Island. The Islanders spent three days there for repair before continuing on their journey to Thursday Island and then onwards to Muttee Heads.

One of the luggers was beached in front of Federal Hotel on Thursday Island. It was severely rotted and buried in mud. The men stripped the boat and worked tirelessly to have it restored and restructured. On completion the boat, named the SS Donna, sailed back and forth from Saibai Island to make the last trip to Muttee Heads.

Joel Sam, artist, 2023

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## 5. *Dhangal* 2023

vinylcut

Collection of the artist

The *dhangal* (dugong) plays an important part in my culture. As a totem, it gives one clear and distant vision and the ability to read the surrounding landscape.

When there are changes in the weather and ebb tides, *dhangal* tend to change their habits in order to survive. Some are seasonal and migrate long distances. *Dhangal* are also an important food source, and have medicinal value to my people of *Zenadth Kes* (Torres Strait).

*Dhangal* have a spiritual connection through totemic cultural practices. They are an important marine mammal and represent traditional cultural connections to the sea. For generations, specific cultural protocols have been followed when hunting the *dhangal*, and these continue today and are passed down from the Elders.

Joel Sam, artist, 2023

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## 6. *Kongasau* 2023

vinylcut

Collection of the artist

The men of Uruil Kawa, a village in the swamps of Saibai, had a favourite sport which they practised daily. It was a simple game which consisted only of throwing sticks at a target, such as a log.

One day, before they began to play, the men decided that the player who threw best should receive the girl, Adasakalaig, for his wife. She was a prize worth winning, being so beautiful that she did no work and sat all day long on a fine mat.

There was one man who had said nothing during the discussion of Adasakalaig. This man, Kongasau, did not enter the competition and presently slipped away, his going unnoticed by everyone except Adasakalaig. He spent two days at Maringulainga and then he returned to Uruil Kawa, arriving after the men had commenced target play. Again, he stayed out of the game, merely standing to one side of the men and watching them. He spoke to no one.

Adasakalaig went to him and said, 'Why did you go away? When the men missed you, they searched for you for a long time.'

Kongasau answered, 'I heard the men decide to compete for you as prize for their day's sport.'

Adasakalaig begged Kongasau to take her with him to Saibai Village. 'Wait until the men are intent on their game. We could leave then, and no one would notice our going. Take me to Saibai Village,' she pleaded. Adasakalaig and Kongasau left Uruil Kawa as the sun was setting.

As they crossed the swamp that night, they played hide-and-peek. Sometimes Kongasau hid from the girl, when she called to him and looked for him in the reeds and bushes until she found him. Sometimes it was she who hid from Kongasau. She did not know that the man whom she had chosen to be her husband was a *mari* (ghost).

Just before they reached Maringulainga, Kongasau disappeared, and try as she might, Adasakalaig could not find him. 'Kongasau! Kongasau!' she called, many times. 'Kongasau, where are you? It is nearly daylight.' The air was silent and still.

*Kongasau continued*

Then Adasakalaig heard a whistling sound. It was repeated three times. She ran towards it and saw a snake slithering away into the scrub, a yellow-bellied black snake with a thin red stripe from the tip of its head to the tip of its tail. Kongasau, the ghost whom she had believed to be a man, had changed into a snake.

Adasakalaig searched for Kongasau until day broke. But she could not find him, and she never saw him again.

Timothy Akiba, 1967  
*Myths and Legends of Torres Strait*,  
Margaret Lawrie, 1970

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**7. Saibai Dhoeri**

**8. Saibai Dhoeri**

**9. Saibai Dhoeri**

**10. Saibai Dhoeri**

2023

artificial feather, foam, acrylic paint,  
twine, cane  
Collection of the artist

I wish to acknowledge the families of the late Carolus Isua for allowing me to create these four Saibai *dhoeris*.

These four *dhoeris* represent the cultural practices that were brought by families during their relocation from Saibai to the mainland. To this day we, as Saibai Islanders living on the mainland, still maintain our cultural practices, through our language, ceremonies, stories, dances and songs.

I pay my respect to our forefathers, Elders and families.

Joel Sam, artist, 2023

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**11. Malu Dhoeri Mawa 2020**  
from the *Kulba Igilinga (Old Culture)*  
series

artificial feather, emu feather, cassowary feather, starfish thorne, foam, acrylic paint, glass, cowrie shell, dowel, seashell, twine, cane, dugong bone, Matchbox Bean nuts seed pods, mother of pearl and raffia  
Cairns Art Gallery Collection  
Purchased 2021

(Blue Feathers)

Hunting Dhoeri which represents good weather, productive hunting and protection

**12. Aybodh Dhoeri Mawa 2020**  
from the *Kulba Igilinga (Old Culture)*  
series

artificial feather, emu feather, banana leaf, foam, acrylic paint, glass, dowel, seashell, twine, cane, Matchbox Bean nuts seed pods, vinyl, mother of pearl and raffia  
Cairns Art Gallery Collection  
Purchased 2021

(Brown Feathers)

Harvest Dhoeri to signify a good and generous gathering of garden food.

**13. Darbaw Dhoeri Mawa 2020**  
from the *Kulba Igilinga (Old Culture)*  
series

artificial feather, emu feather, cassowary feather, foam, acrylic paint, glass, dowel, seashell, twine, cane, dugong bone, Matchbox Bean nuts seed pods, mother of pearl and raffia  
Cairns Art Gallery Collection,  
Purchased 2021

(Green Feathers)

Garden Dhoeri which symbolises protection from evil spells upon the garden

**14. Umau Dhoeri Mawa 2020**  
from the *Kulba Igilinga (Old Culture)*  
series

artificial feather, foam, acrylic paint, glass, cowrie shell, dowel, seashell, twine, cane, dugong bone, Matchbox Bean nuts, seed pods, shell, mother of pearl and raffia  
Cairns Art Gallery Collection  
Purchased 2021

(Black Feathers)

Death Dhoeri this signifies the death ritual process.

*Zenadth Kes* (Torres Strait) is a region made up of five island groups - Top Western, Western, Eastern, Central, and Inner islands. These societies have practiced traditional rituals from time immemorial as a way of maintaining cultural beliefs and managing rights to sea and land through tribal lores, long before contact with outside societies. These values have been passed on from generation to generation.

The Coming of the Light (Christianity) to the Torres Straits by the LMS (London Missionary Society) began on the 1st of July 1871 when the Reverend Samuel MacFarlane of the LMS anchored at Erub Island and was welcomed on the island. It brought many changes to the way we could live and how we could practice our spiritual beliefs.

Joel Sam has designed and produced four feathered Torres Strait *dhoeris* (headdresses) each including a mask. Each *dhoeri* and mask is painted according to the feather's colour and is decorated with shells, seeds and fibres to symbolise charms.

Brian Robinson, curator

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## **15. *Dhoeybau* (Yam leaves) 2010**

etching, chine collé

NorthSite Contemporary Art Collection

The *dhoeybau* (wild yam) is one of a number of totems for different clan groups of Saibai Island. In the late 1940s, some families from this clan group made the journey from Saibai Island to Muttee Head, Cape York. Their new settlement was later named Bamaga and is one of the five communities that comprise the Northern Peninsula Area at the tip of Cape York Peninsula.

Along with the *dhoeybau*, different totems can identify Torres Strait Islander people and the islands where they come from. They are an important part of our cultural identity.

Joel Sam, artist

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## **16. *Thabu Ganaw* (Snake skin)**

2010

etching, chine collé

NorthSite Contemporary Art Collection

This etching is called *Thabu Ganaw* and identifies a particular snakeskin pattern. While working outside I came across a snakeskin which inspired me to create this etching. *Thabu* (snake) is a totem for one of the clan groups of Saibai Island.

Our totems can identify Torres Strait Islanders and are an important part of our cultural identity.

Joel Sam, artist

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## **17. *Thabu Tutuwam***

**(Snake scales) 2010**

etching, chine collé

NorthSite Contemporary Art Collection

This etching is called *Thabu Tutuwam* and represents snake scale patterns. The snake scale is an impressive pattern. *Thabu* (snake) is a totem for one of the clan groups of Saibai Island.

Families from the *Thabu* clan were amongst those who journeyed from Saibai to the mainland in the late 1940s.

Joel Sam, artist

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**18. *Dibi dibi* 2018**

twine, mother of pearl, emu feathers, dye,  
recycled boar tusk, recycled shark bone  
Cairns Art Gallery Collection, purchased 2018

**19. *Dibi dibi* 2018**

mother of pearl, raffia, cassowary feathers,  
emu feathers, shells, dye, twine  
Cairns Art Gallery Collection, purchased 2018

**20. *Dibi dibi* 2018**

natural twine, mother of pearl, raffia, dye,  
shells, cassowary feathers, emu feathers,  
recycled shark bone  
Cairns Art Gallery Collection, purchased 2018

**21. *Dhangalau Gi* 2018**

natural twine, mother of pearl, spray paint,  
raffia  
Cairns Art Gallery Collection, purchased 2018

**22. *Dibi dibi 13* 2018**

natural twine, black-lip mother of pearl  
Collection of the artist

**23. *Dibi dibi 14* 2018**

natural twine, black-lip mother of pearl  
Collection of the artist

**24. *Dibi dibi 6* 2018**

natural twine, mother of pearl, raffia, dye,  
shells, cassowary feathers, recycled shark  
bone  
Collection of the artist

**25. *Dibi dibi 5* 2018**

natural twine, mother of pearl, raffia,  
dye, shells  
Collection of the artist

**26. *Dibi dibi* 2018**

carved shell, natural twine, mother of pearl,  
raffia, dye, shells, cassowary feathers,  
emu feathers  
Cairns Art Gallery Collection, purchased 2018

**27. *Dibi dibi 8* 2018**

natural twine, mother of pearl, raffia, dye,  
shells, cassowary feathers, spray paint  
Collection of the artist

*Dibi dibi*, or pearl shell pendants, are a cultural symbol of Torres Strait identity. During traditional times, the *dibi dibi* were worn during battle against intruders from Papua New Guinea and other nearby islands.

As the artist explains, '*The dibi dibi* were used as a power source, for protection in war. By wearing the *dibi dibi*, it shielded the warrior from harm, deflected oncoming spears and arrows, and gave them spiritual powers during travel.'

In more recent times, the *dibi dibi* is worn during cultural ceremonies and as a form of contemporary jewellery. Joel Sam's *dibi dibi* incorporates ancient motifs and patterns with a flair that is uniquely Saibai in style - a combination of traditional and contemporary.

The *dibi dibi* that the artist has created consists of a braided raffia and pearl shell pendant, which is then embellished with emu and cassowary feathers, shells, boar tusks and recycled shark and dugong bones.

Brian Robinson, curator

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Joel SAM  
Clan group: Umai / Sui Baidham  
Language group: Kala Kawaw Ya

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## PRICE LIST

Purchase enquiries: Annie Wacando  
0437 267 783

**1. Wamaladi Mawa** 2023  
(Umai and Sui Baidham clan mask)  
wood, acrylic paint, raffia, shells, rope,  
expanding foam filler  
Collection of the artist  
**\$21,000**

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**2. Dauariti** 2023  
wood, acrylic paint, cloth sails, rope,  
found objects  
Collection of the artist  
**\$65,000**

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**3. Gaigai** 2023  
vinylcut  
Collection of the artist  
(limited editioned print) **\$1,500**

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**4. Exodus** 2023  
vinylcut  
Collection of the artist  
(limited editioned print) **\$2,200**

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**5. Dhangal** 2023  
vinylcut  
Collection of the artist  
(limited editioned print) **\$1,500**

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**6. Kongasau** 2023  
vinylcut  
Collection of the artist  
(limited editioned print) **\$2,200**

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**7-10. Saibai Dhoeris** 2023  
artificial feather, foam, acrylic paint,  
twine, cane  
Collection of the artist  
**(each) \$3,500**

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**22. Dibi dibi 13** 2018  
natural twine, mother of pearl, raffia,  
dye, shells  
Collection of the artist  
**\$1,000**

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**23. Dibi dibi 14** 2018  
natural twine, mother of pearl, raffia, dye,  
shells, cassowary feathers  
Collection of the artist  
**\$1,000**

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**24. Dibi dibi 7** 2018  
natural twine, mother of pearl, raffia, dye,  
shells, emu feathers, cassowary feathers  
Collection of the artist  
**\$1,000**

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**25. Dibi dibi 8** 2018  
natural twine, mother of pearl, raffia, dye,  
shells, cassowary feathers, shark bone,  
spray paint  
Collection of the artist  
**\$1,000**

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**27. Dibi dibi 8** 2018  
natural twine, mother of pearl, raffia, dye,  
shells, cassowary feathers, shark bone  
Collection of the artist  
**\$1,000**

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Joel Sam, *Exodus*  
8 July - 3 September 2023  
All work sold unframed.  
Purchase directly supports the artist.

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