

## RIGHT

Printmaker Leon Stainer with fellow artist Timothy Cook.

## TEXT

Summer Goodwin

## IMAGE

Courtesy  
Leon Stainer



## Printmaker etches his mark internationally

Printmaker LEON STAINER has been a driving force in developing Indigenous printmaking in the Northern Territory. Now he's embarking on a similar effort in the art capital of Indonesia.

## BELOW

Timothy Cook  
Kulama, 2009

Etching on paper

Image size: 50 x 33 cm, Paper size

76 x 56 cm Edition of 30

Collaborating printer: Leon Stainer

## FAR BELOW

Timothy Cook  
Kulama, 2009

Etching on paper

Image size: 20 x 24.5 cm, Paper

size 38 x 50.8 cm. Edition 30

Collaborating printer: Leon Stainer

## ANTENNAE

Timothy Cook's etchings are being exhibited alongside etchings by other artists from Jilamara Arts and Crafts at the Northern Editions gallery until 30 October 2009. For viewing times, P: 08 8946 6325.



Celebrating 20 years with Charles Darwin University this year, Northern Editions founder and VET lecturer Leon Stainer is etching his mark in the art capital of Indonesia, Yogyakarta, with a major printmaking project.

The 12-week project, funded by NT Arts and the Ford Foundation, will involve Leon working with established and emerging artists from the Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI), translated as Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta.

"My role will be to work with the artists to translate their usual artwork into print, for example from a painting to a print," Leon told *Origins*. "One of the wonderful things about printmaking is that an image can be reproduced in different ways to create a continuing source of income for the artist, as opposed to a one-off painting," he said.

Yogyakarta is renowned as the centre of Javanese fine arts and culture, and ISI has more than 3000 students. Leon plans to deliver the ISI workshops in December and said he hoped to hold an exhibition of prints produced by the project, in Yogyakarta and Darwin next year.

He said the Yogyakarta project grew out of a successful project he ran in West Timor last year, funded by NT Arts, the University of Melbourne's Asialink and the Ford Foundation. Undertaken during his long-service leave, Leon collaborated with Territorian papermaker Winsome

Jobling, to work with the Baun community, in Amarasi, West Timor.

The project involved working with local artists to transfer the symbols used in traditional ikat weaving, to create prints using engraved copper plates and hand-produced paper. The resulting exhibition, entitled "Awakening: contemporary textiles and prints based on the cultural traditions of Amarasi, West Timor", was shown as part of the Darwin Festival in 2008. It was later exhibited in Melbourne and in Kupang, West Timor.

During the past 16 years Leon has been involved in collaborative print projects with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian artists, and international artists from South-East Asia, Japan, China, Europe and the USA. Today, the VET lecturer in printmaking delivers workshops in remote communities during first semester and on-campus during second semester.

Now 49 years old, Leon began printmaking when he was a 15-year-old, after his Year 10 art teacher organised for him to attend night classes at the local technical college. "Printmaking was part of the course and I enjoyed it because it was closely related to drawing and it is a very tactile process, particularly etching. It is one of the few processes left that is so tactile, and I really enjoy working like that," he said.

Printmaking is a centuries-old, hand-made practice that can encompass a wide variety of techniques to achieve a final image. In an etching artists paint, draw or scratch their designs directly on to a metal plate, aware that the final printed image will appear as a reverse (mirror) image.

With the technical assistance of printmakers, the artist selects a medium or tool to create either a positive mark (exposing the plate) or a negative mark (protecting the plate) when it is dipped into acid. The exposed areas of the plate are etched and will hold the ink while the smooth protected areas are wiped clean of ink and reveal the colour of the paper below. Generally, each plate will be linked to a single colour. Artists wanting multi-colour images make separate plates for each colour in collaboration with the printmakers.



Leon has been teaching Indigenous artists since 1993, the year he established the Northern Territory University (the predecessor institution of CDU) printmaking studio, renamed Northern Editions in 1997.

In 1993, a print symposium entitled “Getting into Prints” was co-hosted by the university’s School of Fine Arts and the Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal artists (ANKAA). Leon ran his first workshop with Indigenous artists at Manuppi Arts on Melville Island, one of the Tiwi Islands, shortly afterwards.

“The printmaking workshops really picked up in 1994. Some communities started to buy their own presses and the Department of Education and Training recognised a need for training Indigenous artists and began funding a remote printmaking training program in 2000,” Leon said.

“NTU printmaking studio was set up to provide a space for Indigenous artists to learn printmaking and promote their work, which remains the focus of Northern Editions to this day.”

Leon has since conducted workshops at Ramingining and Maningrida in Arnhem Land, the Tiwi Islands, Daly River and Wadeye. “Working in remote Indigenous communities is a challenge, but also a lot of fun. I end up learning as much about Indigenous culture as they learn about printmaking,” Leon said.

“Most of the time you’re working with people with limited English skills, but

they have an artistic background so they pick up printmaking very quickly and it’s exciting to watch them explore and develop.

“A workshop I undertook last year with Jilammarra Arts was challenging. It was November, we had no air-conditioning and no running water, and there were 19 students, so it was pretty tough, but the work produced was inspiring,” he said.

Since 1993, Northern Editions printmaking studio and gallery has grown considerably, with Leon, Franck Gohier and George Watts developing it from 1994 and Basil Hall taking over its management in 1996.

“When I was a student, I used to get tired of trying to explain what printmaking was so I’d just say I was a photographer, but Northern Editions has really put Indigenous printmaking on the map in Australia,” Leon said.

In 2005, Northern Editions gallery was provided a designated space on CDU’s Casuarina campus, which today showcases more than 300 works, all available for purchase. Northern Editions manager Emma Fowler-Thomason said the printmaking studio has worked with more than 200 artists since its inception, the majority from remote Indigenous communities.

“It is one of only a few printmaking studios in Australia that offers artists the opportunity to undertake the full range of professional services, from training and creating prints through workshops conducted both on-campus and in remote communities, to having work exhibited and promoted in the

gallery, and the opportunity to have their work published,” Emma said.

“With Leon’s VET courses, everything is available at the university, which is unique in Australia, and together we aim to provide an environment that encourages collaboration, experimentation and involvement.

“Printmaking can open up a whole different spectrum to the artists’ work and it’s exciting to see what happens, and from a retail perspective, printmaking is very democratic. The process creates multiple originals at a price much less than a painting of similar quality, so to own a limited-edition original print becomes accessible for people,” she said.

Since 1993, continuing a tradition begun by the NTU printmaking workshop, originally part of the School of Art, workshop proofs of editioned prints are donated to the CDU Art Collection by the artists and Northern Editions printmaking studio. CDU Art Collection curator Anita Angel said the University’s Art Collection currently comprised more than 1000 workshop proofs of gifted limited-edition prints that represented about half its entire holdings, now approaching 2000 items.

“Prints and works on paper are a very important part of the CDU Art Collection, as a living collection of great breadth and beauty and a record of the collaborative endeavours of university printmakers, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, over time,” Anita said.

