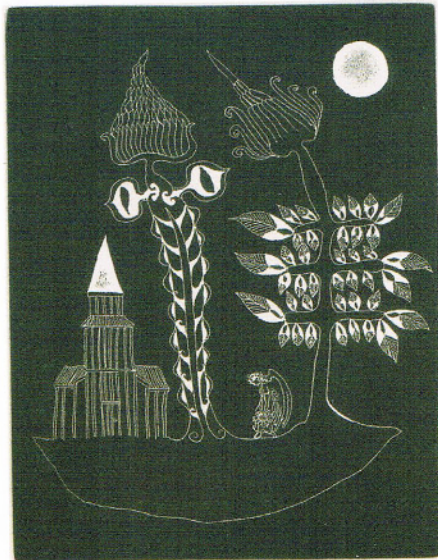


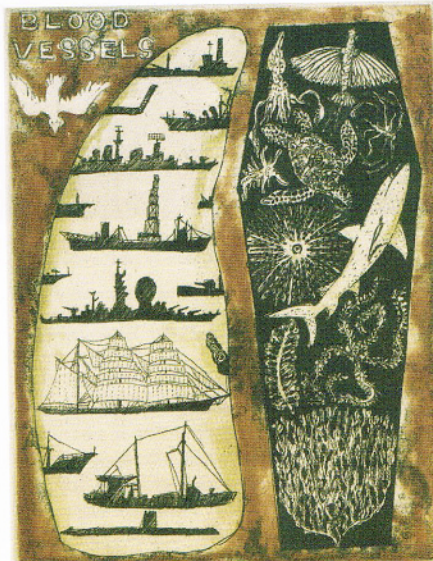
The well-travelled etching plate

Voyage to the Kermadecs

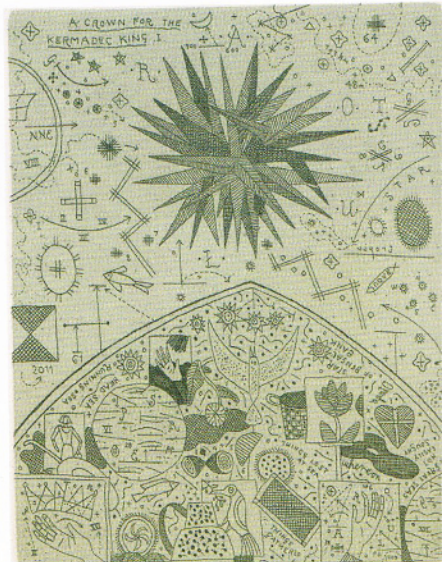
by Gregory O'Brien, artist, poet and author and Michael Kempson, Head of Printmaking and Director, Cicada Press, COFA



John Pule, *Great World Waiting, Voyage to the Kermadecs* suite, 2011, relief etching, 21.5 x 16.5 cm



Fiona Hall, *Scrimshaw, Voyage to the Kermadecs* suite, 2011 etching/aquatint, 21.5 x 16.5 cm



Gregory O'Brien, *A Crown for the Kermadec King I, Voyage to the Kermadecs* suite, 2011 etching with colour roll, 21.5 x 16.5 cm

Oceanic conservation and printmaking aren't two things you would immediately associate with each other. Yet the ongoing *Kermadec* project has brought them together in an unlikely and dynamic way.

The project began on 10 May 2011, when HMNZS Otago steamed out of Auckland harbour. On board was an unlikely group of 'seariders' (non-naval personnel) — nine artists, New Zealand's Minister of Conservation, Department of Conservation (DOC) staff and volunteers, and Bronwen Golder from the Pew Environment Group (the oceanic conservation organisation which has sponsored the *Kermadec* project).

The team was bound for the Kermadecs — an island group within a 620,000-square kilometre expanse of water which is one of the least-disturbed oceanic regions on the planet. Some — the volunteers and DOC workers — would get off at Raoul Island; the rest would depart Raoul after two days and continue on to Tonga. The artists involved were Robin White, John Reynolds, Phil Dadson, Niuean-born John Pule, Jason O'Hara, Gregory O'Brien, Bruce Foster and Elizabeth Thomson — all Kiwis — along with Australian Fiona Hall. By facilitating the creation of art in response to the voyage, the Pew Environment Group sought to draw attention to one of the world's greatest and least known maritime wilderness zones.

Central to the project was *Voyage to the Kermadecs*, a suite of nine prints — one by each artist. Six etchings included in the suite were printed from a bundle of well-travelled zinc plates taken north on HMNZS Otago and then onto Raoul Island. Conditions on the

vessel and island weren't conducive to working on the plates so it wasn't until the party arrived in Nuku'alofa that the weighty parcel of etching plates was unwrapped and work began. In the months that followed, the etchings were edited by Michael Kempson at Cicada Press, COFA UNSW. (The three remaining images in the portfolio were made using digital media.)

The day after the *Kermadec* exhibition opened at Tauranga Art Gallery — late November 2011 — Kempson accompanied some of the Kermadec artists on another sea voyage. Adding a further chapter to this ongoing story of artistic enterprise and co-operation, the group spent a day on White Island, off the coast of the Bay of Plenty. This fuming, steaming (and often dangerous) volcanic mount is, appositely, located at the southern end of the Kermadec Ridge. Artists had to contend with gas masks and helmets as they wielded pencils and cameras in this inhospitable environment. The toxic, acidic nature of the island was such that Fiona Hall found that, a few hours after kneeling to take a photograph, the knee of her new pair of jeans had disintegrated. Like the earlier trip to Raoul, it was an encounter with Nature at its most elemental and extreme.

Early in 2013, works inspired by the White Island encounter will be printed by Cicada Press and exhibited at the Tauranga Gallery — a footnote to the *Kermadec* project. In the meantime, John Pule has returned to Cicada in June to work on new etchings and lithographs. The *Kermadec* exhibition has been shown to much acclaim at Voyager New Zealand Maritime Museum in Auckland and, in October, opens at City Gallery, Wellington.

Concurrently a smaller exhibition, with the print series as a core component, is touring the Pacific Islands. It was shown at the New Zealand High Commission in Tonga in late May/early June. This touring show features, alongside the nine commissioned prints, a suite of six collaborative etchings which Pule and O'Brien have produced since the Raoul Island voyage (bringing the total number of works they have jointly created at Cicada Press to 15). As befits a pair of artist-writers, these works include phrases from the poetry of both, woven into a melee of Pacific-inflected forms, energies and associations.

An undoubted highlight of both touring exhibitions is Fiona Hall's *Lying in the Dark* — one of the largest etchings ever editioned at Cicada. A strident comment on the over-fishing of the world's oceans, Hall's image offers a bricolage of volcano names, notation from a depth sounder, and a flotilla of working ships enclosed in a 'ghost net'. Washes of aquatint evoke both oil slicks and the dark gaseous effusions of underwater volcanoes in the Kermadec region.

Currently, the *Kermadec* exhibition is showing on Rapa Nui/Easter Island. With Pule, White and O'Brien accompanying it across the Pacific, the exhibition continues to provoke discussion and forge links between different arts communities. It is hoped that this exhibition, and the cultural events associated with it, will also connect Cicada Press with artists from Tonga, Rapanui and elsewhere, giving rise to future projects in the greater Pacific region. •