

An Invitation to Dream: The Art of Davina Stephens

by Richard Horstman, Images courtesy of Davina Stephens

Palm-fringed white sandy beaches border remote coral isles engulfed by aquamarine seas. Lush, verdant landscapes merge with mountain skylines inhabited by age-old traditional cultures far from the Western gaze. Foreign artists have long been inspired by the allure of the tropics and the exotic East. However, few portray the cultural distinctions complemented by beauty as acutely as Davina Stephens.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Austronesian Languages, you and I woodblock acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm; Seaweed Farmer 2024, Davina Stephens. Marine chart, acrylic, wood block print, rice paper on canvas, 92 x 100 cm; The Living Archipelago, Sumba 2024 Davina Stephens. 33x32CM Linoleum Cut, Monoprint; Paradise Dynasty Pot 60 x 60cm

Born in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1968, Davina resides between Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. A nomadic spirit with relentless curiosity, she visits isolated villages, meeting and conversing with the locals, listening to their stories and folklore while noting cultural distinctions, including languages.

‘Vessels and Voyages’ was inspired by my sailing trips around East Indonesia, undertaken in 2020 during the onset of the pandemic. The themes, interwoven with threads of cultural exchange and historical intrigue, reflect the rich tapestry of oceanic cultures past and present,” Davina told NOW! Jakarta Magazine. “Images of traditional fishing boats, maps, animals, flora, fauna and people evoke a discrete and serene atmosphere that’s layered and deep, revealing a compelling narrative.”

Showcasing paintings, prints, video and sound installations and travel journals, ‘Yoyages’ accentuates three themes: Austronesian Languages depicted in paintings, The Journey within prints and a video installation and The Vessel in paintings and her sound installation. Davina’s practice is influenced by her love of hand-made textiles and design, printing, collage, cartography and painting. Captivating and diverse aesthetics are enriched by layered, textured surfaces and surreal-like imagery conjuring magical stories, dreams and ancestral spirits.

“My objective is to trigger the imagination. Images come to mind and wander off again, randomly switching between past and present. The idea of the voyage forges fascinating connections of land and seas, people and culture,” said the artist who grew up immersed in the magnificence of Balinese culture during the pre-digital era.

‘Where We Lay Between’ highlights Davina’s prowess. A canoe with villagers seemingly floats upon the translucent waters. Equatorial flora, rich in colour and form, distinguishes

Having spent countless hours investigating equatorial “forgotten islands”, seemingly excluded from the outside world—beginning in Bali, Davina has travelled into the Eastern Indonesian

archipelago, the Pacific, Northern Australia, as far east as Fiji, and south to New Zealand. Her journeys inform her artistic practice. ‘Vessels and Voyages’, Davina’s exhibition of contemporary artworks, opens on 20 November 2024 at Orbitalago, Bandung, West Java.



Where We Lay Between 2024 Davina Stephens, acrylic on canvas 130 x 190cm

the painting's foreground. A majestic volcano in the background links heaven and earth. Abstract qualities within the water and sky enhance the sublime ambience, merging the real and the ethereal. The Western eye is captivated by this splendor yet separated by culture, conditioning and distance. Our imagination is the bridge.

'Seaweed Farmers—Sumbawa,' a woodblock print on rice paper with acrylic on canvas, fuses cartography, anthropology, and botanical-like illustrations to describe a seaweed farming culture on Sumbawa. A collage of maps anchors the background, while corals, seaweed, and a canoe with three figures engaged in farming describes the composition's focal points.

Pottery, is perhaps the most significant archaeological material left behind by the oceanic peoples, is the subject of Davina's small mono-print collages adorned with cultural reflections. 'Sound Vessels', her sound installation, comprising pots, sand and speakers radiating spoken words of diverse

dialects making up Austronesian Languages, contributes an intriguing human element to the exhibition, igniting images of far-away people and places. "I have always been fascinated with the study of Austronesian peoples and how linguists discovered commonalities within their languages," she said.

"Davina's exploration and interactions with the islanders make her works invaluable and rich in meaning related to aspects of maritime and Nusantara (Indonesian archipelago) culture. This form of investigation is rarely done by artists, especially in Indonesia," 'Vessels and Voyages' curator Rifky Effendy praised. "Davina describes a different reality: maritime communities have been connected for centuries and exchanged culture, languages, and objects. This reveals cultural narratives beyond today's modern national or geopolitical boundaries where the barriers have become so tight and limiting. A form of "Globalization" without "Capitalism" spread widely among Asia-Pacific islands centuries before European colonisation."

"The beauty of the Balinese culture has had a massive impact on my awareness and practice. Beauty is an essential essence that helps uplift humanity, transcending our darkness, uniting and elevating us to higher states of being. My creative process is a deeply personal experience of self-realisation and creating greater states of beauty."

Primarily a self-taught artist, Davina studied textile design and screen printing at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. She has exhibited extensively nationally and abroad, including in Australia, France, New Zealand, Singapore, India, Thailand and Brazil. Gifted with a sensitivity attuned to the transient, Davina distinguishes unique oceanic traditions in the age of rapid cultural disintegration and loss.

'Vessels and Voyages' – Davina Stephens
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Orbitalago Gallery, Jalan Rancakendal
Luhur 7, Bandung

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