

Words by **Andrew Stephens**

# Meditations from the edge



Artist's studio, 2006.  
Photography: Benjamin Armstrong

Port Essington, on what is now the Cobourg Peninsula in West Arnhem Land, was visited by Europeans in 1838. These men and women wanted to make Port Essington a new Singapore—or at least a new trading port big enough to rival that bustling city-state. They also wanted to claim it before the French or the Dutch arrived, fearing the top end of Australia would be purloined from the consuming dominion of the British Empire.

It wasn't a place for the buttoned-up English, though, with all their things and their clothes and their colonising desires; they must have looked ridiculous to the local indigenous people. The venture was, unsurprisingly, doomed to fail—and it did within about a decade.

Mark McKenna tells the story of Port Essington in his 2016 book *From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories*. Despite their sincere attempts to understand the local people, the British experienced a deep gulf. 'The longer the British remained coexisting on relatively peaceful terms,' he writes, 'their failure to found their new Singapore and prove their superiority appeared all the more galling.' The more they clung to their coastal patch of cleared forest, the more they appeared to lose the fabric of their 'civilised' culture.

Artist Benjamin Armstrong, who has spent much time in Arnhem Land (but has not visited the Cobourg Peninsula) became intrigued by the story when

he started working with McKenna on a project associated with a different chapter in *From the Edge*. Images began to be conjured in his mind: vignettes and episodes that asserted themselves in masses of drawings, always his starting point for any project.

Armstrong is represented in many significant Australian collections, most recently in the new Buxton Contemporary museum where his set of nine prints, *The Shape of Things to Come* (2006-07), gave its name as the title of the inaugural exhibition, opened in March. While his undergraduate study was in painting at the Victorian College of the Arts, Armstrong is best known for his sculptures—but his printmaking

has become an increasingly strong component of his oeuvre in recent years.

With no formal training in the technical processes of printmaking, Armstrong finds himself free of ideas about what should and shouldn't be done. 'Printmaking is always an inventive, alchemical thing for me; despite using the sharp relief of lino cut I aim for an end result that can be read as its opposite,' he says. When he was producing *The Shape of Things to Come*, Monash University Museum of Art curator Kirrily Hammond visited to join in the printing in progress. She was rather taken aback. In an essay about that experience, she writes how Armstrong's 'unorthodox methods of printing' allow him to recreate the soft

edges of ink-wash drawings, with a black intensity formulated in his linocuts. His lack of formal training removes the limitations of 'correct' procedure, she writes, and this is what surprises her: the way Armstrong uses dripping wet paper and huge amounts of ink. 'The squelching of the roller would have made any printmaker squirm with its excess.'

Here in his new studio, he is halfway through preparing for his next solo exhibition at Tolarno Gallery, titled *Invisible Stories: Meditations on Port Essington*. Dozens of drawings and test prints line the walls, the tables and the floors. While all of Armstrong's work begins with drawings, in this instance there are hundreds of them, all

percolating up through his reading and thinking about the ideas canvassed in McKenna's book. Eventually they make their way from drawings to prints, the latter sometimes cut into sections and re-assembled like woodblocks, or printed up and discarded, or re-worked: Armstrong's method is very flexible, adaptive and intuitive.

Armstrong says that while he is drawing there is a consciousness of how these works might become a print or a sculpture. Even so, he was averse to his Tolarno solo show being sculpture-based, having recently spent two years building his own studio—which involved everything from collaboration with architects, to steel work, to making windows and





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**above**  
Benjamin Armstrong:  
'Printmaking is always an  
inventive, alchemical thing  
for me.' Photography:  
Moya McKenna

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**left**  
Benjamin Armstrong,  
*Embedded*, 2018, linocut,  
ink and pigment,  
76 x 56 cm.

doors, to plumbing and welding—every day for eleven hours 'with our son born in the middle of it'. It was exhausting manual labour. 'I really didn't want to make sculpture; my mind required an engagement with an imagined space, one that can travel deep in many ways whilst remaining flat.' The closest we will get to the three-dimensional will be the way he presents the matrices for the prints—probably in one or more sets, mounted on the walls in such a way that they assume an independent relationship to the works on paper they spawned.

While his new body of printed work for the Tolarno show has its roots in the McKenna text, the images do not specifically narrate anything in a literal way from the book, even though there are snippets that readers of *From the Edge* might recognise, such as the explorer Leichardt arriving at the settlement on horseback, or references to the extant ruins of the settlers' half-submerged storehouse and the ruined chimneys of the 'marriage quarters'.

The storehouse is an extraordinary structure that, for Armstrong, is a wonderful metaphor for the balance of power that would have been at play in the settlement—the visible and the invisible, with the idea of the land itself being a sort of skin. In a similar way, the image of a termite-mound he is experimenting with seems symbolic of Indigenous presence:

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**right top and middle**  
Drawings and proofs for the  
Tolarno exhibition *Invisible  
Stories: Meditations on Port  
Essington*.

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**bottom**  
Benjamin Armstrong,  
*Sorcery*, 2008,  
linocuts printed with carbon  
and metallic pigments,  
seven parts:  
40 x 30 cm image size,  
48 x 38 cm paper size.  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne



embedded very deeply in the ground with an extraordinary amount of connection and activity going on beneath the surface, compared with the ruined chimney of the married quarters that has only a shallow portion below the soil.

McKenna observes these tensions with clarity in *From the Edge*, remarking on how the settlers typically would see Indigenous people as 'savage', with no capacity for reasoning or abstract ideas—yet the longer these intruders remained at the Cobourg Peninsula, the more some of them saw their own dismissiveness transform into a fascination with cultural practices. 'To truly understand and admire Aboriginal culture was also to risk undermining European cultural assumptions,' McKenna writes. 'The experience was both immensely rich and deeply unsettling for both parties.'

Likewise, looking at the intense, complex and highly nuanced imagery that Armstrong has produced, we might find our consciousness wavering across similar divides—yet invited to explore that gap with both the wisdom of hindsight for history, as well as a generosity of spirit.

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**Benjamin Armstrong's *Invisible Stories: Meditations on Port Essington* is at Tolarno Galleries 12 July–18 August [Tolarnogalleries.com](http://Tolarnogalleries.com)**

