

Wendi Choulai

"I am a citizen of Papua New Guinea. I am a descendant of the Motu Koita people. I am a female. I am an artist/textile designer. I exhibit in an art gallery."



These facts about myself cannot be prioritized. They intertwine and bounce off each other. I am caught in a process of defining myself in relation to my Papuan culture. The real artistic expression of my culture is in ritual; in dance, in song and costume and body decoration. Wendi Choulai

"Wendi Choulai" published by Melbourne Books is an important new publication for 2009. This vibrant artist's premature death in 2001 at the age of 41 "was a tragic end to an immensely creative and intelligent spirit" in the words of Jill Kinnear, who wrote the introductory essay for this beautifully designed and very colourful book from which the images shown here, and on the back cover, are reproduced.

Jill Kinnear taught at the National Arts School of Papua New Guinea in the late 1980s at the time when Wendi Choulai was its first female graduate in textile design. She notes that, "Wendi Choulai was used to inhabiting and working within different cultures.... If boundaries can be detected marking the edges of Western and Papua New Guinean cultures, then where they collide, like the occasional seepage of a multi-coloured print on fabric, there is an unintentional overprint, an uncalculated area of chaos that leaves one belatedly and rather pointlessly pondering a solution.

"And yet the areas of the design might seem strangely compatible and new... (Wendi's) belief in her traditional culture seems always to provide a constancy which makes her images sing with easy confidence, ingenuity and strength....."

"....She turned her energies to investigating how she might incorporate traditional designs into her practice without 'devaluing' their original meaning, which was bound inextricably into the ritual of her clan...."

Design preoccupations included lush foliage, the grass skirt, dance, masks, head dress, rituals and tattoo.



Wendi Choulai on the Nenehi Tattoo: In the days of the Hiri trade, when women wore grass skirts, they also wore their tattoo designs. Today the Papuan woman wears trade store clothes and the missionary introduced 'Meri Blouse'. I am making the tattoo available as a wearable item. The Nenehi tattoo is a collectively owned symbol and I have literally translated the symbol into a textile design. The white print on black fabric is the colour of my immediate family. The designs are distinctive and are identifiable, having the unique markings that depict the village, they are therefore appropriate to use in serious ceremony that requires identification of the tribe or village. Steeped in culture and significance, these printed repeating designs assume an almost sacred significance." □

The book, "Wendi Choulai" is available from Melbourne Books: www.melbournebooks.com.au or email dten@melbournebooks.com.au
The book is large format, with an 8-page gate-fold and colour throughout: \$45 plus postage.

This page above left, NIGHT DANCERS 1995, watercolour and acrylic etching on paper; above right, NENEHI TATTOO 1996, one colour design screen-printed with white opaque textile pigment on black cotton.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Wendi Choulai; UNTITLED (detail) 1995, six colour design, screen-printed on cotton; UNTITLED (detail) 1993, four colour design screen-print on cotton; PAPUWAH 1986, batik basic dyes on Habotai silk, oversewn sections; GRASS SKIRT (detail) 1996, dyed sago fibre; book cover image, RORO SHELL 1996, one colour screen-print with black textile pigment on cotton – strip[s] of plastic and screen-printed Indian cotton with a grass skirt design are stitched onto the base design.

Back cover, detail of UNTITLED 1988, six colour design, screen-print on cotton.