



## OBERY SAMBO

**Obery Sambo is a performance and visual artist who draws from his roots in Murray Island, Eastern Torres Strait. His inventive masks (Krar) capture the spirit and energy of animals, spirits and people of the region. Obery is keen to collaborate with an artist from the Northern Territory, exploring the difference between their cultures. “I’ve never eaten goanna! And they’ve never tasted dugong!” he says, “This project is going to give me a chance to do this kind of comparison!”**

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### **What makes where you live different? (to a metropolitan area/to other regions you’ve experienced)**

I was born on Thursday Island and lived in Mackay until I was twenty-one. I later left to move to Adelaide for two or three years for TAFE (Tertiary and Further Education) training; then I returned to Thursday where I met my present wife. Together we went to live on Murray Island, and then we moved to Townsville in 1995.

We made the move to Townsville so we could raise our children in a church environment and also be schooled. Our religion – The Coming of the Light – is very important to us, and there’s a big Torres Strait Island Community here in Townsville. When we first moved here I found out there was a Cultural Centre, so I started making small carvings and traditional objects that my Dad had taught me how to make, and selling them in the Cultural Centre. It was during that time

that the Cultural Centre asked me whether I could also perform ceremonial dancing and performance. I’d been schooled in all those cultural expressions through my Mum and Dad - my Dad is a cultural elder on Murray Island, who teaches at the primary school there.

### **What might make it difficult living here?**

Currently, as a TSI artist living here it’s very hard to get the promotion and marketing of our cultural expressions across to broader audiences, as the Cultural Centre is no longer in operation. It closed down to bad management, but there’s been no replacement arm through which to showcase our skills. I’m currently in the process of doing my own marketing and promotion and hope that in the future I’ll be able to establish a venue to showcase not only my own cultural practices, but also those of other TSI artists.

Townsville is an ideal location for this, as there’s no venue to showcase our work not only to Australia, but

also to overseas visitors. After all, Townsville IS the capital of North Queensland – not Cairns.

**Where do the other challenges lie? ...and are these challenges worthwhile?**

We have a beautiful strand in Townsville, but nothing is currently made of the location as a potential venue for markets, or as a meeting place, or as a showcase for traditional foods, performances and entertainment. There's not even a stage on the beach where this could happen, and yet there's a wealth of diverse cultures on offer in Townsville – Australian Aboriginal, Torres Strait Island and a range of other cultures.

The really crucial thing for my Torres Strait Island community is that so many of the elders are passing, and we urgently need a venue to celebrate and practice those traditions before they get lost.

**Do you think your galleries and the artistic communities around them (the artists, designers, arts workers, volunteers) have shaped the local community? To what extent?**

We have leading figures like Eddie Mabo who was a resident of Townsville – and his daughter Auntie Gail who is also an artist, also there Aicey Zaro who's a TSI artist who had a gallery in the small community of Ayre. These artists, along with other TSI and Aboriginal artists in the community, have significantly changed the way all Australians think about our identity. And yet, at the moment, there's no local framework for bringing their work into the public's view.

There is an Australian Aboriginal artist group in Townsville – they don't have a centre either, so they've currently converted a space underneath one of the old Queensland style homes in the suburb of Gulliver into a gallery space. The works they exhibit include Dreamtime stories that extend from the Mackay area all the way west as far as Mt. Isa and up to the Cairns area. They are the traditional owners of the land – the Birrigubba, Bindal and Wulgurukaba tribes.

**Did you ever envision yourself living and working in a place like this? And how does it feel now?**

Yes I did – it was always my dream and passion to teach TSI culture as well as continuing my own area of practice and through holding workshops with the broader community – and to involve my family and my local Aboriginal and TSI and multi-cultural communities as a core part of these enterprises.

Right now, it feels like there's hope for the region, but it's about searching for that hope and finding the means to support it that's crucial. And we need to do it soon.

**What relationship does 'your' place have to the general scene in metropolitan-focused art in Australia?**

I've been lucky enough to have been exposed to all kinds of cultural expressions throughout North Queensland as well as interstate, through traditional

dance, songs and story-telling. And I've been fortunate that my art work has been purchased by major collections like the QAGOMA (Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art) and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra as well as having been part of overseas touring exhibitions. A pinnacle to this international representation is the collection of my work by the Cambridge Anthropological College in the United Kingdom. This is where a great many of our artefacts were taken during the 1800s through anthropological collecting trips, so it's particularly appropriate that my work is there too, as an example of how our culture has continued to develop into strong contemporary expressions.

**Is it cheaper to live in the regions?**

My location in Townsville is central – in Mundingburra – I have local shops and a bus that stops outside my house, so that all helps. As a result of previous marriages and a death in the family I had an extended family of eleven children under the age of fourteen for whom I was responsible. I've worked at a number of jobs to feed my family and when the going gets tough, I go fishing. We extended meals into fish soup that we supplemented with rice and sometimes with damper and scones. Buying affordable vegetables was often a little more difficult, although we do grow cassava and banana trees. Now most of those children are grown adults with children of their own; only four of them are currently in high school, and at the moment I have nine grandchildren I'm able to teach in the ways of TSI culture.

**Do you think it's important to 'get out' and come back in again?**

The reason I like to travel and come back again is to gain a more informed idea of what's happening in the outside world – to come up with better ideas of how to have our voices heard and how to better our means of exposing our culture in the right ways.

**How important are region-to-region contacts and relationships?**

Very important – because so many of these regional areas were inhabited by TSI communities when the pearling industry closed down after the invention of plastic buttons. As a result, people moved in search of work to regional locations that were part of the cane industry and the railway industry. From that point on, TSI culture grew through region-to-region networks. We held, and continue to hold, regular festivals and celebrations and make sure that all the generations of children are always schooled in cultural matters by their families.

**Do you think place still matters...or do you just think that the importance of place has been dissolved by social media, international marketing and the onslaught of the multi-national conglomerates (Facebook; Apple; Amazon; Netflix; Google etc)?**

In a way place – this particular place - is very important for marketing, because this is the home of Grandad

Eddie Mabo – the library is named after him – but with the elections of new Councils every three or four years, all the focus has moved to issues like infrastructure and building to the point where the real importance of Townsville – as one of the TSI and Aboriginal heartlands of culture – is in danger of being forgotten. There should definitely be markers of this on the strand as celebrations of what has made this place so unique. On the other hand, in the centre of city there's a monument to Robert Towns, after whom Townsville was named – a man whose name is tied to the history of blackbirding – or indentured labour – in the area. Place – and history – always matter.

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