



JAMIN

Jamin is a 'local legend' who works across a range of media including sound-mixing, graffiti and style-mixing, working with MONA's festivals, running youth workshops and exhibiting as an artist in traditional gallery spaces. His installation for *The Partnership Project*, offers a reflection on perception and understanding. He draws from the notion of *umwelt* (reality as experienced by a specific organism) to suggest that there are many layers to a single experience, and that our own ideas, values and knowledge differ from person to person and community to community.

My Dad was a working-class man from the New South Wales central coast. His father - my Pa - worked for fifty years as a fitter-and-turner on the railways. Pa was one of thirteen children, an avid fisherman who could turn his hands to anything. He'd work with both metal and woodwork to make beautiful cabinets and tables where he'd fashion all the fittings, hinges and sliding brackets, and he'd produce finely tuned functional objects like fishing reels. He was always working on projects and most of them were completely practical. He brewed his own beer and, as the practical demands of that project necessitated a bottle-capping machine, that's what he engineered and constructed. He'd always hold us kids enthralled – he claimed he could knit two pieces of string together in his mouth with his tongue. And he did! To this day I'm not sure whether he could actually do this trick or whether his success lay in duping us for

all these years – he had a ton of tricks up his sleeve.

Nan loved cooking and knitting and she loved Pa – they were sweethearts in kindergarten. She died at eighty-eight and Pa died at ninety-four. He'd been pushing his dinghy out through the mud onto the Hawksbury River to go fishing right through till his last years.

My dad was the third to be born after a sister and brother. Dad grew up during the depression and could well remember the family's struggle to get through the economic hardships. He recalled his years growing up as being a deep thinker; in his early teens he'd skip school to simply take long walks and think. Conscious of the family's economic struggles, he quit school at fifteen to work as a clerk at the Commonwealth Bank. Every week



he'd hand his wage over to his parents. Throughout his life this kind of selflessness was a hallmark of how he operated in the world. But he was practical and just got things done as well. During his late teens when he grew tired of the challenges of his crooked teeth; he didn't waste any time mucking around – he just took himself to the dentist, had them all ripped out and got dentures.

After his stint at the Commonwealth Bank, he joined the Reserve Bank of Australia, and was offered a managerial job in Papua New Guinea where he worked for ten years. He learned Pidgin English and immersed himself in the culture there. He made friends with the then Prime Minister of Papua, and collected a lot of art and cultural artefacts from the region, often as received gifts, and brought them back with him when he returned to Australia.

Looking back, I realise that the artefacts and objects that filled our family home were a huge influence on my later development as an artist. There were creatures with cowrie shell eyes and alligator-skin initiation drums and a walking stick with a crocodile head that had a very powerful energy surrounding it. Amidst all these objects were other objects that my mother had brought from India. It was all part of our family's sense of home. But when I'd visit the homes of other children I realized that they weren't populated with the same kind of cultural menagerie of creatures, objects and sculptures that ours was.

When Dad returned to Australia he met Mum, who was also working with the Reserve Bank. Ten years younger than him, she had migrated with her family from India some five years before they met. My Mum is of Anglo-Indian descent – one of four children born in Nagercoil in Tamil Nadu. Her mother, of mainly English descent, was a magnificent cook of whose family had lived in India for several generations - she seemed thoroughly Indian to us! Mum's father was an engineer and architect of Indian descent. He passed away before any of us grandchildren were born, but he was apparently a stern and learned man whose focus on the importance of education and knowledge was shared by his children. But in 1969, when the family made the decision to move to Sydney from India, my mother had to abandon her Bachelor of Arts degree before her third and final year. To this day there's a sense that Mum looks back on this lost opportunity with some longing.

My parents courted for six months before they married, and my older sister was born a year and a half after that. Four girls and one boy (me!) were born across a space of nine years. Over that time Dad was transferred around the country for work at the Reserve Bank. The time I remember most vividly of those childhood years was the time spent in Darwin, where

we lived for four years. I remember long hot twilight drives in the family car, the lush vegetation, the potent smells, silhouettes of the casuarina trees, and going to Berry Springs for swims. Those special times there were overlaid with an added spice - coz you just knew there were crocs submerged somewhere under that watery perfection. All of us kids were uncomfortably familiar with the terrifying spectre of *Sweetheart* – the stupendously large stuffed crocodile that holds pride of place in the Northern Territory Museum.

I can recall the occasion we had to tape up all the windows of the house prior to the onslaught of Cyclone Max - how we had to drive slowly through the sheets of horizontal gusts of rain to the bank, where we took shelter while the cyclone raged outside. And when we came home, I can remember being astonished about the fact that the huge tree in our backyard we always climbed on had been completely flattened. Our childhood in Darwin meant playing in the rain, sailing paper boats down rushing gutters, attacking a swollen banana bunch with a makeshift sword – and being amazed and terrified when the banana wasps swarmed in protest. The force of place and nature appeared in all kinds of forms during that magical time.

I was turning eleven by the time our family moved to Hobart. I loved school – especially art. I'd put a lot of energy into illustrating whatever I could – even if we had writing assignments. I can vividly remember Grade four. The 'class artist' was a kid who had a talent that everyone celebrated. I can remember looking hard at how he did things and when there was a class competition to draw an Australian bird, I put all my energy into the visuals and won with a drawing of a kookaburra. Looking back, I can see that subconsciously I would imitate and steal bits and pieces of ideas and recombine them in new ways. I'd been an altar boy for a time as we were educated at Christian schools, and so for some time I had considered joining the priesthood. That was all overturned when I won that Grade four competition with the kookaburra drawing.

But during grade twelve, a prolonged bout of glandular fever had affected my study badly. In the end, I'd had to drop nearly every subject but art. I'd wanted to go to art school but had been warned against it by an older friend. Instead, I continued into a year thirteen optional year at Rosny College concentrating on a variety of art subjects, and was doing well. But six months into it, I was offered an apprenticeship at a local printing press in graphic design. I ended up working there for five years, where I developed a good cross-range of skills in the pre-press area of the print industry.

But by 1999 I was tired with the industry. I resigned and my application to art school was accepted. 1999 was a big year. At the age of sixty, my father died of a

sudden aneurism. He had lain suspended in a coma for two weeks until the family finally had to make the decision to switch off life support. I was twenty-four at the time. On the same year I broke off with my sweetheart of four years. The millennium – with all the gloomy predictions of the time - was on its way.

I loved my time at art school but the energy of dealing with grief took its toll. The joy of inquisitiveness that had characterized my experiences during the first year turned inwards towards a focus on death and grief and a kind of spiritual search. I was only half-way through the course when I decided to quit after second year – but even so, a lot of rich material had emerged for me. I set off on a driving trip with no destination. I lived in my van here and there around the island. After a few months living near Port Arthur, I met some people who'd been living in Mullumbimby. I moved up there to live for a year. I wasn't earning a living during this time – I was just focused on working through this grieving process – it was something I had to do. I'd always been lucky to have such a strong father figure; I felt like I'd lost my rudder.

I met my now-past but then-future wife, Sally, in Mullumbimby – she'd made her way to the region from Tamworth. I hadn't seen my mother for a about a year and I felt strongly the desire to go home to see her again. I felt like I'd reached some kind of inner peace and that I was ready to make the return trip, and Sally was keen to come with me. Whilst we were in Tasmania, Sally fell pregnant with our son. River was born in 2003. The period of pregnancy and the arrival of my son was a turning point for me. I was able to think with more retrospect, and it came to me that I had had difficulties in actually completing things – I hadn't completed my TCE, or my trade, or art school. I knew that this predisposition was going to have to change, so I reapplied for art school and completed my degree.

And everything *had* changed – I had developed a completely different attitude – I felt I'd turned things around. I was offered Honours in 2005, and when I graduated with a first class Honours, I took on a Masters degree in 2006. While I was still enrolled in Honours, Criterion Gallery approached me to consider being represented by them. I was super-productive over that time – I also became immersed in street art and stencilling and protest art, and there was plenty of subject-matter to focus on in terms of the global wars and tensions that were erupting, as well as surfacing corruption of politics in Tasmania - and beyond. I became heavily involved in the early Australian street art scene, as well as the Artist Run Initiative (ARI) scene in Tasmania, as well as Melbourne and Sydney.

I also took on a raft of management and board responsibilities: I got involved as a board member

and chair for *INFLIGHT* ARI over a five year period, during which time we took the exhibition schedule from twelve shows to almost thirty shows a year; we argued for and were successful in achieving increased funding – it was a time of energy and expansion. After that I helped kick-start *Redwall Gallery* with Clair Field, where we showcased emerging artists. My main responsibilities lay in the advertising and promotions for the gallery but we were both involved in curatorial decisions. Later on, I joined the board of Contemporary Art Tasmania (CAT) from about 2008 – 2010.

I started teaching at University while I was still undertaking my Masters; I was heading up second year graphic design as well as tutoring and lecturing across a number of other subject areas. I'm still in touch with a number of the students I taught during that time – many of them ended up getting jobs at MONA (the Museum of Old and New Art) later on.

Originally I was quite antagonistic to, or critical of MONA – I was cynical about the presence of such a large fish emerging from such a small pond – and I was sceptical about the impact it would make on the cultural ecology of Tasmania. I made an animation for the Plimsoll Gallery in 2013 that tracked the funding of galleries and art institutions in Hobart, tracing a process in which the arrival of MONA absorbed so much of the oxygen bubbles from the 'pond'. And whilst this has played out in such a way, MONA has brought many benefits as well, and stimulated the release of some new 'oxygen'.

The next significant turning point for me was in 2008 when my daughter Mia was born. I'd been teaching at the university for three or four years, and the workload had been steadily increasing. I was carrying the responsibilities associated with course writing as well as lecturing in a range of subjects with long hours of preparation as well as teaching and marking, but with no sense of ever being offered tenure. I was becoming increasingly exhausted – and aware of the fact that I was spending most of my time developing other people's ideas. The time I was able to spend on my own work was becoming increasingly cramped; I had begun to say no to lots of opportunities that were arising for my own practice as an artist. By 2011 my sense of disillusionment was reaching a pitch - I felt like so many of the things I valued most in terms of what I loved about art were slipping through my fingers as a result of the dedication required to teaching at the university.

But during the later half of 2011 all that changed, after receiving a studio residency in Paris through the University. I'd spent the first months there with my family, and later alone, and I realized how much my practice was appreciated and supported by the other artists from other countries who were working alongside me. I felt acknowledged as an artist. I'd



gone there with a subliminal sense that Tasmania was so small and that therefore my experience as an artist was insignificant, but in Paris I felt equal to my peers – on a par with all the other artists who were working there. That's what kicked off the strength of conviction I needed to resign from teaching in 2012. It was a big step to take, and it was a scary one too. I haven't gone back to teaching. I also backed off the ARI commitments, the board commitments, the networking commitments that demand so much energy and time. And that's what I've been doing since – working full-time as an artist, whilst concurrently completing on a PhD.

What makes where you live and work different? (to a metropolitan area/to other regions you've experienced)

I've been living and working in Hobart most of my adult life – I think of it as home, and while I was living in northern New South Wales during that crucial time of re-thinking, the fact that Hobart was home grew increasingly stronger, and so when I drove back, the community that I'd left behind was uppermost in my mind. That was the driver that pushed me towards becoming so immersed in the community work with Inflight and ARI's and in other areas. You give up a lot for these kinds of commitments, so the motivation has to go beyond self-interest. In fact, self-interest isn't going to provide you with the energy to push you through the fatigue that kind of work inevitably entails. All aspects of art have to be self-driven – not just the work in the studio, but also the promotion, the distribution etc. – whether you are with a commercial gallery or not.

Along with the gallery work, I've been involved with a very broad spread of community projects – from school groups, to groups over sixty five, to migrant groups. It takes a lot of energy encouraging techniques and conceptual ideas, but the benefits lie in the fact that some aspects of what you forge are lasting I started doing this kind of engagement fourteen years ago, and now some of those kids I took in workshops have gone on to make a life through their art.

I undertook a number of exchanges with Sydney and Melbourne during the mid to late 2000's, and the main difference I noted lay in how close everything is in Hobart; as an artist you're much closer in proximity to all other sectors of the community - from government officials to gallerists and to your fellow artists. As a result, you end up forming these relationships, bonds and links that seem to take much longer to form in the bigger metropolitan cities simply on the basis that they're further apart. In the music scene you can't really have a genre existing in isolation down here. If people just gravitated to their own particular scene in Hobart, it would be too small to support individual gigs, so a guy who might be an industrial techno fan would also go to a punk venue or a reggae gig. This creates

a vibrant mix of style and interests, and that's one of the real strengths of the place. In my own work, that mix of styles and techniques is apparent and it's been productive. When I first started out doing the political stencil work I could have continued by focusing on that alone, but I was aware that it only appealed to a small part of my community, so I always feel motivated to have a 'broader palette' in my art practice – one that reaches other members of the public.

What might make it difficult?

Probably exactly the same thing – that closeness creates something I call a kind of 'held-ness' – as if something is holding you very closely and wants you to remain in a state of what it recognizes you to be. You have to keep breaking out of this – to keep becoming. I've been doing abstract work for gallery exhibitions for some five years, but last year when I exhibited another development on that line of work, a newspaper review focused on my 'change in direction. There's an unstated expectation perception that we should continue to produce art in a recognizable form ... so that we're containable.

And where do the other challenges lie? But are these challenges worthwhile? And what kind of benefits are there?

Tasmania is like a microcosm within Australia – one where the small size of the population brings you into direct encounter with situations and experiences, rather than able to play the role of observer. For example, from time to time my own practice has often been politically critical, and the audiences to those exhibitions have more often than not included individuals who are directly connected with those things that I'm critical of.

The challenges are totally worthwhile – they're always what make us who we are. The unique challenges of a particular place encourage adaptation, and that in turn builds strengths.

The benefits of living in Tasmania are immediately obvious - proximity to nature, the high quality of air, of food and of life in general – and once again, that sense of a shared community with supportive colleagues and great opportunities are also wonderful aspects of living here.

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

Yes I think they have a huge effect. It's a curious one – 'local community' is such a broad term – there are so many different communities involved in what could be described as 'local'. And there's different effects on different communities. On a personal level, for example, I've been involved in the fit-outs of five or six local restaurants and so those aesthetics and perceptions that have become closely linked with



those environments have influence a sector of the community who visit them regularly, and who may not be aware of my role as an artist per se. But the work is shaping their world in some way. And then there are the communities that are extensions of the exhibiting world – they're totally different again. As are the kinds of communities I work with in workshop situations.

In terms of the Green Movement and the protests surrounding old growth forests and other threatened ecological zones, many artists have turned their energies towards those agendas rather than promoting their own role as isolated artists. This kind of commitment to causes beyond the world of art is very self-sacrificing, but has resulted in an enormous influence on Tasmanian issues.

Did you ever envision yourself living and working in a place like this?

The answer to that question might have more poignancy if I'd come from somewhere else – coz the response is a definite 'yes'. Because Tasmania is an island, it involves a boat or a plane to get out, and if you're considering a move, it's a bit more difficult. Plus it has so many things that keep you here. It's a hard place to get out of once you're here. My father used to talk about the importance of getting off the island at least once a year.

How does it feel now?

Since I returned from Paris in 2011 I've had a really strong desire to see other places and to work in other communities overseas. Having a young family, there's a limit to how long I'm able to spend overseas at the moment, but as my kids are getting older, new possibilities for traveling are growing. I'm committed to Hobart as a base, though – there's comfort and support that comes from having your community around you.

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

I feel like I've had a good run with opportunities in other states – I don't feel disadvantaged in any way from operating from a regional base. When we first started out in (2004/05) we had a street art collective called *Die Laughing* made up of Tom O'Hern, Mick Pace and myself. When we were invited to the Melbourne Stencil Festival it seemed as though our work had a particular style and aesthetic that stood out – being different did us a favour – in that sense the experience of working away in Hobart was advantageous.

In other ways – such as finding gallery representation in other states, things are more difficult. Because you're not living there, you're seen as somewhat of an unknown, so there are positives and negatives. In general we don't see as much representation of Tasmanian artists in the metropolitan centres, and that's the same for music... for about thirty years our biggest contemporary music exports was Wild Pumpkins at Midnight. We have very few emerging or mid-career visual artists who have had that kind

of national recognition – mind you, we only have five hundred thousand in the entire state, so statistically that might work out fine.

Is it cheaper to live in the regions?

There would be multiple schools of thought on that – my sister pays what seems to me to be a huge amount for rental for her flat in Sydney but a recent report found that Hobart is now the most expensive place to rent in Australia on a per capita basis.

There's an island tax that's applied to all goods that come into the state – including fuel. However in the last ten years we've had some stores moving in that have maintained a flatter pricing structure. But Australia is not a cheap place to live any more, post GFC.

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

Like my Dad said – it's super-important. This place is like a bubble – you could easily live your entire life here and not realise that it's a very odd and distinct microcosm.

How important are region-to-region contact and relationships?

That's where a lot of the glue is – and possibly a lot of the solvent. When I was working with galleries and organisations I really enjoyed doing exchanges with places like Alice Springs and the touring programs that linked exhibitions to other galleries around the country. For me personally Ballarat has been an important regional town. The gallery purchased some of my work and as a result has involved me in workshops there. One of the benefits of Hobart is that it can be both a capital and a regional area – it can play the part of each

Do you think place is important...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.)?

Place remains one of the most important things affecting one's life and career. We're indelibly linked to place in so many ways. Global marketing has created a 'global village' and might have gone a long way towards bringing down of some of those artificial boundaries. Yet if social media was as efficacious as it's claimed to be, then we wouldn't have that feeling of each being in our own little bubble. That being said, my recent invitation to Russia was made possible through my presence on Instagram.

What is the role of your work?

I think the role of my work is possibly the same as the work of the kind of art that's focused on challenging perceptions, hierarchies and the status quo. Art that performs those functions in any society can often be the first thing that's suppressed or even prohibited or controlled.

I see myself as a provocateur who's somewhat chameleonic, so the role of what I do and what I

produce will probably continue to change.

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