



GAIL MABO

Daughter of Eddie Mabo, Gail is aware of the ongoing vigilance and energy that is necessary to raise consciousness about Indigenous Land Rights. A high-profile public figure and a highly commended artist, Gail welcomed participation in the project as a means to extend her practice into installation. Gail aims to collaborate with other artists and members of community, responding to the project's core question 'Does Place Matter?' – a question that has been pivotal to her family's focus for several generations.

I came from a family of seven, and when Mum and Dad adopted three other children, we were ten in all. We lived in Cranbrook in a home Mum and Dad had bought when I was six months old – it was our family home. When they originally moved here, Dad worked at the wharves, and then took on various jobs with Indigenous organisations, then he started a school called The Black Community School.

During that time, while he worked as the bus-driver, the gardener, the principal and cultural teacher at the school, he maintained a full-time job at James Cook University as a groundsman. The school took in Indigenous kids from the Torres Strait Island and Aboriginal communities - but lots of disagreement erupted during the 1970s because families wanted their children to integrate into the greater community. But Dad's belief was that the kids needed to stand proud

within their own cultural traditions and communities in order that they could enter into the mainstream without falling through cracks. There were only two official teachers – but Mum, Dad and a couple of the Aunties and Uncles from the Community also taught there. Mum was the art teacher. The two non-Indigenous teachers came from Brisbane; they'd applied for the job when Dad had advertised it. Funding for the school came through the Department of Education and other government funding sources. Before the school had its own bus Dad would drive the kids in the family car, until the community fund-raised to get a twenty-six seater coaster bus.

I'm in the middle of the family – I've got a brother and two sisters older than me and a brother and two sisters younger than me. On the whole, my childhood was filled with more happy times than unhappy times;

we were all given a strong sense of community and culture. Dad's convictions with his culture and beliefs were strong. Mum's culture was South Sea Island and Aboriginal but because Dad was so clear in his convictions about the need to teach us his culture and beliefs from Murray Island in the Torres Strait she was happy that we kids followed Dad's cultural teachings. Mum had to come to terms with her own culture and origins during that time, so when it was her time to tell us who she was, she did. That started to happen after Dad had passed away.

My grade one and two teacher in mainstream school was Senator Margaret Reynolds. She couldn't understand why I didn't want to read the books she was giving us, so she encouraged me to draw and design my own book based on the stories Dad told us about Murray Island. So I did; she gives a vivid description of that book I made in her autobiography.

After twelve years of running successfully Dad's school was shut down on the basis of community fears that Indigenous kids were going to be taught black power. When I think about it now, so many of the students that went there have continued to maintain their strong cultural practices through a number of outputs – art, dance, story-telling. They still speak fondly of being taught by Dad in those classes when they were young.

I didn't have so many dreams and aspirations when I was young – just keeping myself going out of range of my younger and older siblings was enough. In my younger years I was an athlete – my strengths were in track running and javelin. Coming from a family of seven you had to know how to run and then you also had to know how to throw something at them when they browned you off. I competed in zones and represented the state in sprinting. One of the dark sides of being an athlete was training – I'd finish training after the sun was going down, but by the time I got home I knew I'd cop a flogging because I'd arrive home after the sun went down. But later I learned that the reason for the intensity of Dad's floggings came from the fact that he'd received death threats on the family and he was deeply fearful for those of us who might disappear at night. The intensity of the flogging came from the intensity of Dad's own fear... but none of it stopped me. I understood that I had broken the rule; I knew what the consequences were, and I was prepared to pay the price. I loved that running because it took me out of being part of the pack – the training took me to a place where I was able to just focus on myself. As a teenager everything is about you, but in a Torres Strait household, it's all about the family, and where you stand in relation to that in that family.

At fifteen I started doing contemporary Indigenous dancing with a local dance company called New Blood Dance group. You'd train in the evening and then

you'd prepare for performances that were coming up. Teachers were ex-dancers from the Aboriginal Island and Dance Theatre in Sydney who would return to teach the local communities. I danced from the age of fifteen through to twenty-one. I stopped dancing when I became pregnant with my first son Caleb. He's now thirty-one - I have seven children. My triplets will be seventeen on Sunday.

After I had my first four children I moved to western New South Wales. I needed something to do when my youngest went into primary school so I enrolled in a pre-school education teacher course. One of the first tasks in that role once I'd graduated was learning about how to get paint out of clothes – I knew the parents wouldn't be too happy if their kids' clothes were covered in paint after the activities, so I had to learn; that was the first time I started working with paint. My art started as a doodle – that's why I've taken on the name *doodle dreaming* as a business. I took my doodles and added colour and I just have fun with it. At first, I was frozen with the prospect of putting acrylic paint onto canvas, but once my teacher had showed me how to go about it, I was off and racing.

At the moment I'm working in a range of ways – I wear many hats – my wall is covered with hats. I have to regulate what I give out and what I am able to take on. I get so many emails with requests to dance, to create imagery, to produce written texts or seeking agreements or consultations with family and children and the work I'm doing now with juveniles who've come out of incarceration all keep me busy. I'm also trying to make a new home after having moved out of a place I've lived in since I was 6 months old. I've got Mum and Dad's history right down to my grandchildren's to sort out and deal with – I ask myself "where's the space? And "Where's the time?" – I have difficulty compartmentalising my life, but I deal with it on a daily basis.

In what way is the place you're living different to other regions you've experienced)

Being born here is one of the reasons I'm still here – I moved away for a while, but I gravitated back here. Now that I've done my child rearing, I might move away again .. but I might not, either. I like it because I know exactly where everything is – I'm familiar with it – I don't depend on Google Maps. Lots of memories are connected to places here – childhood memories that make up who you are as an individual. For me that generates a strong pool of memory and the feeling of belonging. For me Murray Island is home – that's where I feel I should be. My children are still in Townsville. Places are like shifting sands – different people come in, move out; it's the same with opinions – they change and move too – they change like the sand does when the tide comes in. But what strikes me as a key difference



is that underneath all these surface changes there has to be an acknowledgment that Indigenous People were here first Through art we can show connection to country. My mother's connection is to Ingham and on my grandmother's side I have a connection to Palm Island.

What might make it difficult?

At the moment Townsville is more sport based, but we need to have artists have more of a say in the development of the place – to change the dynamics of how people think – at the end of the day, art should play a much greater role in the direction of how this town develops.

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

Depends on whether you prefer dry and crunchy to green and lush. Green and lush has high humidity – Townsville is not as high humidity as Cairns. I prefer 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?

They have, to a point. There's an increasing push for art to be seen – now graffiti artists are working on walls around town and there's much more public works in car parks. During the Strand Festival the strand is flooded with art, but they're only fleeting moments. Umbrella is good because it's community based – and it showcases the diversity of people. Given that it's a place where we can get access to tools and space and access to other creatives, it enriches our lives. Umbrella is a place that can gather us together in terms of finding out what each other are doing. It's not a competitive arena – I feel that I'm still learning who I am as a visual artist. I work across a number of mediums – I do that because I want to show others who are willing to listen and learn that art just isn't acrylic on canvass... it can take many forms.

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

When I was growing up I wanted to get out of here. Why? Because too many members of my family live here. And what do family do? They try to keep you out of trouble. But what does trouble do? It teaches you to be a better person. We all come with a baggage of things – the more you make mistakes, the more you learn. I tell my kids I don't want to know about their mistakes when they go away – I tell them I just want each of them to return a better person.

How does it feel now?

When I was growing up there was more appreciation of people as individuals – a neighborhood was a neighbourhood where people knew who you were, and if you mucked up, they'd pull you up. But nowadays we've all become too Americanised – too afraid of

litigation – so therefore the blinds are pulled down. We turn a blind eye. We don't want to get involved.

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

Art's an individual thing – if some artists think they have to be simulated by other works, so be it. But that doesn't really worry me. If I'm in a capital city, I'll visit art galleries, but it's more important for me to follow my own path – my own ancestral ties and connections to what I need to do. It has to feel right to me. When I'm with creatives doing collaborative work, the energy is good when we're all working towards a positive outcome.

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.)?

Place matters.

Place is where you feel comfortable – where you feel at home and where you belong.

What is the role of your work?

Like all artists, to engage in conversation – to create discussion – to allow people to learn a little bit more about the beliefs of a person. My spiritual beliefs come through my work. My star maps are a connection to my Dad – and to my forebears who used those maps to guide them across water – across country. We're only inhabiting this space for a while – when your time is up you leave, or you can choose to pack your bags before then and move on.

But a place doesn't need to own you either. Unless you let it. The place that I don't own, but to which I'm connected is Murray Island. When I arrive there I know I've come home.

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