



# JONATHAN MCBURNIE

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(note: at the beginning of *The Partnership Project* Jonathan was working in the position of Director, Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts)

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## Reacquainting myself with my hometown

Summing up my relationship with my hometown, Townsville, is more difficult than I expected when I agreed to write such a thing. I suppose this makes sense - living in the place for seventeen years, living elsewhere, but still with a number of familial attachments drawing me back periodically, for another fifteen, before returning. Like any relationship, there are aspects of adoration, indifference and sometimes even contempt, but all of these are couched in memories, emotions and experiences.

When I left in 2000 for Brisbane, I found myself having to defend my hometown, and its cultural offerings, regularly to people that had never been north of the Sunshine Coast. When I moved to Sydney in 2011, I found myself having to defend Queensland and its cultural offerings to people who had never been north of Byron Bay. In both instances, I found actions

would speak louder than words, and as a proud North Queenslander, it became easier to show the naysayers what we had to offer simply by outdoing them. Bigger, better, smarter.

We emphasize the 'bigger' a lot here in Queensland. It's a big state, full of big dreams, big personalities and big fibreglass fruit and cow sculptures. It is part of what gives southerners a chuckle, but it's also the way we dream things up: always bigger.

Townsville has the strange distinction of being, historically, the 'most communist' city in the nation, so-called, due in no small measure, to noted communist Fred Paterson's servitude as Alderman on the Townsville City Council. 'Red Fred', a barrister known for defending the working class and (successfully) fighting racist employment policies, was elected in 1939 and re-elected in 1943. This was, in fact, the first and only time in Australian history a member of the Communist Party

would serve in local government. Paterson then went on to make history again, serving two terms in the State seat of Bowen. I find it strange that this controversial figure is not more widely celebrated, not necessarily for his socialist values, commendable though they may have been, but for his active fight against racism. In his way, Red Fred is an incredibly typical Townsville political mind, joining others such as Eddie Mabo and Julian Assange, figures whose politics were shaped and tempered here, culminating in actions verging on complete paradigm shift.

Similarly, the Townsville artistic community has always punched above its weight, with artists such as Judy Watson, Thierry Auriac, Ian Fairweather, Jim Cox, Margaret Olley, Ian Smith, Kim Mahood and Ray Crooke spending important periods of time in the region, not to mention the many artists who have made Townsville home. Additionally, we're part of a North Queensland contingent of artists that seem to sprout up in the humidity like mold spores. You can drive from Townsville to Cairns and see some excellent work all the way up. In fact, I consider the Townsville-Cairns axis as one of the most artistically vibrant and diverse stretches of geography in Australia. Robert Preston, James Brown, Ken Thaiday Senior, Jo Lankester, Len Cook, Ben Trupperbäumer, Marion Gaemers, David Rowe, Barbara Cheshire, Arone Meeks, Charlie Street, Hannah Murray, Brian Robinson, Roland Nancarrow, Glen O'Malley, Anneke Silver, all located nearby a four hundred kilometer stretch of highway. If you wonder what all of these artists have in common outside a vibrant, nuanced vision of life, they're prolific, hard-working. Is there a better place to avoid the heat, or at least make use of it, than the studio? I think not.

Leaving Townsville at seventeen and coming back at thirty-two has been an interesting and sometimes confronting process for me, specifically in coming to terms with my own past, and acknowledging what kind of effect it has had over me throughout the years. Smells, sights and sounds so familiar, spurring visceral reactions, from pleasant nostalgia to overwhelming despair. For the uninitiated, Townsville has an all-encompassing summer humidity (keeping in mind that 'summer' in the sense most people know it is at least six months long here) that can be overwhelming; thick, warm air and heavy masses of clouds that tease the prospect of rain for weeks at a time. Unless they have spent time up here (or further north) people really don't quite understand. Brisbane can get humid, no doubt, but it is bracketed in a nice three-month period on either side. Townsville really only has two gears: hot and very hot. I laughed in many Sydney faces when they complained of humidity; if only they knew. At any rate, the weather here punishes you for being away too long, and I arrived back on January 4, 2016. It was close to forty degrees. It was devilishly hot, even for here.

That summer I returned home was particularly brutal, with barely any rain. It's a bit like being offered a glass of water again and again, except that the glass of water is pulled back each time, and you find yourself repeatedly punched in the face with a damp, but oversized, fist. However, once realizing that I had no more ninety-minute Sydney commutes, no more entitled children of rock stars playing artist, no more 'shit-on-plinths' aesthetics of Euro-centric art magazines, I knew life could be much fuller than I had imagined. I can look back now and see that there was merit and comfort in solitude to be rediscovered after the undignified scrabble of Sydney, as well as a higher level of artistic productivity made available with space and time. Despite my uncertainty at the time, I set to work trying to capture this sense of unease, familiarity and deep summer melancholy in a series of skyscapes, heavily clouded, framed by the structures of the railway yards and South Townsville houses. I certainly enjoy Sydney more since I left it. Pretty as a picture, and twice as mean. But if Sydney is mean, it is in a knowing, bitchy way; Townsville's meanness comes from indifference. A shrug can be just as brutal as a mean word.

I have always told people, southerners specifically, that the further north you go, the crazier people get, and the more surreal day-to-day life becomes. My father has a long history of committing these colourful stories of North Queensland life to paper, and I can tell you, they're all true, every one of them. The cat with the button eye, the duckling flying lessons, the toad-shooter. All of it. This is big open sky country up here, and we tend to fill it with colours, images, dreams and stories. There are many strange and wonderful things that I see here that I don't see in the South: ice cubes in wine, deep-fried fruit bats on the powerlines, bower birds' treasures on front lawns, flat cane toads on the bitumen, bird nests on traffic lights. Clearly the muggy atmosphere is ideally fertile for dreams, just as it is for palm trees, rutting dogs and mangos. My hometown.

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