



BRIAN ROBINSON

Brian Robinson is an internationally acclaimed artist who harnesses his deep knowledge of his Torres Strait Island heritage to approaches and materials that are cutting edge and aesthetically powerful. Robinson harnesses his childhood memories where traditional cosmologies of the Torres Strait merged with his fascination with comic-book super-heroes. Robinson uses the apparent conundrums of these clashing world-views to invent new ecosystems – imagery that offers new possibilities for seeking out connections with place, with cosmology and with each other. In response to the ‘water travel’ aspect of *The Partnership Project*, Robinson proposes to produce a “cartographic system as a means of producing and preserving knowledge of the traditional tenure and place of his people.”

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

I was born and bred on Thursday Island and moved to Cairns after finishing high school in 1992. I moved here to undertake the Associate Diploma of Visual Arts at the TAFE college. While I was growing up on TI, I was always artistically inclined from an early age – I’d go around the island with a sketchbook and draw bits and pieces of landscape– or I’d sit at the kitchen table drawing for hours on end. I’d pull out the closest magazine or comic with images that interested me and away I went. Growing up I didn’t connect art with the idea of an ongoing profession – I knew people who dabbled but there was no-one I knew who was really doing it as a professional career. In my primary and high school art

classes I was one of the few males taking the subject. In year 12 there were about twelve to fifteen females and I was the only male. The majority of the art classes were practically based – the historical understanding I draw from now was really driven by me when I was later at the regional gallery. I’d disappear into the library at lunchtime and spend hours looking through books on all kinds of subjects from graffiti to primitive art, to Renaissance art and that kind of knowledge slowly started to build the visual vocabulary I continue to draw from.

I travel quite a bit now and spend weeks and sometimes even several months in other locations around the country and throughout the Pacific. Over the last eight to ten years I’m often island-hopping

through the Pacific – over to places like Noumea, the Solomon Islands, New Zealand for a range of projects – and I’ve spent big periods of time in Brisbane working as a trustee at QAGOMA (Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art).

But for me the direct connection with the natural environment is what makes this place where I’m working special – at the moment the rainforest is right at the back door and the reef is right in front of the house – so it’s perfect for anyone who feels the need to stay connected to environment. I spent my childhood swimming, diving and hunting in the ocean, and this kind of familiarity and connection is still what I’m drawing from for the creation of artwork.

What might make it difficult?

I’m about ten minutes from the city – one of the southern suburbs in Whiterock, but freight is a major problem, and the need to get away to access opportunities for the sale and promotion of artwork. I don’t really create a lot of small work, so moving stuff around the country requires careful planning in terms of knowing when dedicated art shuttle runs are coming through the region – they come every couple of months, and building rapport with local freight companies (giving over a child if you need to) is high on the priorities list. Print based work is easy to move around, but now I’m working towards sculptural work that’s more easily flat-packed.

Where do the other challenges lie?

Because I’m not living in the Islands any more, I don’t have easy access to things like, for example, woven cocconut mats, cassowary feathers, cowrie shells - the traditional materials that I use as part of my work. So I guess I’m at the moment a bit of a fringe dweller in between the metropolitans and Torres Strait – which I still think of at home.

But are these challenges worthwhile? And what kind of benefits are there?

Yes I think so – going back to the Island would bring me access to traditions and materials but now I’m using contemporary materials to express these stories in other ways. And as Cairns is one of the main ports into the country I can get ready access to almost all the materials I need, and it’s only a short two-hour plane trip to get back home.

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?

I think they have, and there are a high number of arts workers who have been drawn to the region for a number of decades. The galleries have an influence over artistic practice in the region through getting touring exhibitions out, and bringing new stuff to spark interest in contemporary developments happening elsewhere.

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

As a young fella it seemed as though there was no world outside the Torres Strait and the only access off that island was by dingy. But as you start experiencing other worlds through television and the media your world starts to broaden. I didn’t have any preconceived ideas – I just thought I’d go from art school and let things unfold ... and from art school I did a year or two of consultancy work and a range of odd-jobs before starting as an intern curator at the Cairns Regional Gallery in 1997 under Alice-Anne Boylan. I spent the next fourteen years working as Exhibitions Officer, then Curator, then moved to the position of Deputy Director, Exhibitions Manager until 2010. I worked on my own art at night, on weekends and during any leave I took from the gallery. My entire life since leaving TAFE (Tertiary and Further Education) has been consumed by art, but the last eight years after leaving the gallery has been full on – especially with the demands for public art. My first public art commission was in 1998 at the Cairns Convention Centre – it was a wall-based work featuring six large wooden shield forms based on canoe-shaped vessels.

How does it feel now?

I’m currently producing a lot of relief, intaglio and lino printmaking that I work on in my studio. I etch the plate or cut the lino and give it to a local printer to do the final prints. I’m also producing sculpture – both freestanding and wall-based. And then there’s the public art, much of which is fabricated elsewhere. Lots of the early public art was produced completely in my studio, but the outdoor stuff requires strict Health and Safety requirements and it is exposed to a range of weather conditions so for that I work with fabrication companies.

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

More recently there’s definitely been an increase in metropolitan centres looking at what’s being produced in the regions. I think there’s a lot of really creative work being produced in the regions, especially in terms of Indigenous art. There’s a lot of work that connects back to the links Aboriginality has with place – and there’s also the sense that the art that comes from those links between people and place can result in a more authentic experience. Whether that’s true or not is open to question.

Is it cheaper to live in the regions?

Generally not – a lot of the large food chains transport their products come from the metropolitan areas to the regions and that trucking increases prices. However there’s a thriving local produce market every weekend both in Cairns as well as in a range of smaller regional towns around Cairns that run a lot of unique markets that are stacked with local produce - tropical fruits, potatoes, a range of stuff – the place is dotted with farms. And then you have a whole host of trawlers that sell at the local fish markets. Every so often I get an Esky



that's been sent down from family members who live in the Torres Strait; they're usually full of fish and crayfish and also include specialties like turtle and dugong that we all crave.

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

I think it's good to experience other places and have experiences that you wouldn't otherwise be able to have locally – it all becomes investment for your visual storage bank.

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

I think it's definitely important to build those frameworks across the country, although it doesn't always happen as efficiently as you might wish for. Social media makes distant relationships and contacts more accessible, and it seems to be a good way of building on those contacts and relationships for a lot of people. But I'm not social media savvy, and in fact I avoid it, because it takes away from what I'm here to do, which is create work – I'm quite a private person, but it's good to know those avenues and frameworks exist. When I get back to the studio after being out and about at exhibition openings or to oversee public art productions, I like to pull into my shell again - I like to be a hermit.

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.)?

Hmmm .. is place so important when you can access places in the world so easily through the onslaught of media images of elsewhere? The thing is, the experiences when you're actually there are different. If I had to move elsewhere to make art I can see that it would be possible - I can see myself dragging my stuff elsewhere, but I think I'd always need to re-charge with home and family and place - those cultural experiences that I grew up with. I'm a story teller – I'm interested in narrative. It's a bit like the difference between reading a book and watching a movie – a book will take you far deeper into that experience than a movie would. Although in saying that I'm already thinking that so many people might be surprised by that kind of statement coming from me, because of the kind of work I create - a lot of it is influenced is so influenced by popular culture. But in the end I'd take the book.

What do you see as the role of your work?

I guess I see it as an extension of Indigenous story telling with a slight twist... the underlying basis for a lot of the work I create comes from a range of story-telling genres .. sometimes individual works are layered with a whole host of different stories – not only from the Torres Strait but also from personal thoughts and from other mythologies and how they have parallel connections with aspects of art history. I guess I'm pretty much just telling my own story – of my own time.

As a child I read Jules Verne, Marvel comics, Phantom comics, sci-fi, Steven King and Dr. Seuss. All these stories were woven through the stories of the Bible – big epics like Adam and Eve and Noah's Ark that came along with a childhood spent attending Catholic mass within a community in the Torres Strait where I listened daily to elders recite creation myths and tales based on our very strong connections with the sea and the currents, of star patterns and clusters and language and the dance lessons that were part of that entire cultural story.

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