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The arts sector, particularly the regional arts sector is a small entity, and so interconnected, that there really is only about half a degree of separation between anyone – if that.

I was reflecting on this as I read Jonathan McBurnie’s essay for this publication. There seemed to be so many similarities in our life journey, indeed I worked in the cultural sector in Townsville and knew his dad – but we’ve never crossed paths. Until now.

Like Jonathan, I also grew up where I now work (Lismore), but spent many years away in other cities (Sydney, Townsville, Gold Coast, Newcastle). While each of those cities brought their own particular flavour, and they were great for certain times in my life, the Northern Rivers always beckoned with its sense of familiarity. This was keenly felt many years ago when I rushed from Townsville to Lismore to be with my dying grandmother. The trees, grass, rivers and ocean all felt ‘right’, like I belonged, and understood where I was at a challenging time.

I also carry Jonathan’s pertinent observation of his hometown with its “aspects of adoration, indifference and sometimes even contempt, and all of these are couched in memories, emotions and experiences”.

And while we may not be able to claim a communist for a mayor (though we can also claim Julian Assange as being a one-time resident), progressive politics have been alive and well in our area for decades, indeed Australia’s first environmental blockade happened just outside Lismore. More recently, the anti-Coal Seam Gas movement galvanised vast swathes of the community – with an ultimate win.

I read Jonathan’s essay while I was in Hobart (where *The Partnership Project* originated) and it’s where I’m sitting now as I write this.

And as I sit here, gazing up at Kunanyi/Mt Wellington, I think back to the view out the back of our Townsville house to the equally dominant (but less snow-clad) Castle Hill – and think about landscape. And what landscape means when you are living in the country,



or indeed in a small city where the landscape is very present; and how it shapes the very personality of the town and its inhabitants.

I was discussing this with an artist in Hobart the other day, about how living with a dominant landscape that you can't escape grounds you – much more than is possible in Melbourne or Sydney (well, yeah, there is the harbour, but you have to be rich to see it).

Lismore has an equally dominant aspect in our landscape, but it isn't as 'in your face' as Hobart or Townsville. It's not as visible or reaching to the sky. It doesn't act as a vantage point for distant views. The dominant part of Lismore's landscape snakes through it, and to many people it remains invisible. But when it rains, and rains heavy, people's minds turn to this weaving serpent, wondering if it will be unleashed. It is then that this part of our landscape dominates in ways we are kind of used to, but really don't want to face.

Lismore is one of the most flood-prone towns in the country. Our European forebears saw the river as great for transportation, with the confluence of two rivers being great for turning boats. It is this confluence of two rivers in the Lismore CBD that is the major cause of floods in the town. These rivers rise in the verdant hills of the Northern Rivers, cascading down to the flood plain of Lismore.

These hills to the north of Lismore are part of a landscape that beckons outsiders to the region – and was where the 1973 Aquarius Festival took place. This festival brought with it an influx of students, artists, environmentalists and activists to live here permanently. More recently the annual Tropical Fruits festival has ensured Lismore is home to one of regional Australia's most vibrant, and largest LGBTQI communities.

Many of these new arrivals in the 1970s developed a market culture to earn a living that persists to this day. Out of this developed a very strong community of ceramicists, which over the years expanded to encompass all artforms.

The result (and here Johnathan and I may beg to differ), is the Northern Rivers being one of the most creatively rich regional areas in the country.

The festival culture that was first stirred in the 1970s continues today, which much larger, and professionally organised events. We are home to Lismore Lantern Parade, Splendour in the Grass, Bluesfest, Falls Festival, Byron Writers Festival, Byron Bay Film Festival and Mullum Music Festival. This is when the world comes to our area.

And we can even claim Margaret Olley as one of our own also, but not so much as a practicing artist, but by token of Lismore being her birthplace.

More recently, the Northern Rivers has seen an upsurge in established artists moving to the region, or indeed those wanting to establish themselves as artists. They come here for the landscape, and the climate, cheaper studios, and because we are known to have such a strong creative economy and thus the support that goes with that. However, unlike North Queensland, a move to our region is a much less ambitious leap. Both Sydney and Brisbane are easily reached for day trips, so there is less of that sense of 'making it against the odds', than say, a move to Tully, would.

I could name check a number of these recent established artists, but I won't; as many, while not shying away from the fact that they live here, are keen to keep a fairly low profile.

The four local artists selected for this exhibition, Penny Evans, Hiromi Tango, Dadang Christanto and Karla Dickens have all moved here over the years. Christanto and Tango had already established themselves nationally, and internationally, before moving here; while Dickens and Evans have established very strong national practices since their arrival.

These latter two artists are clear evidence that being located in a country area is no inhibitor to establishing yourself as a professional artist.

And lest I present too glowing a picture of creative and political life here in Lismore, all these mixes of personalities, ideas and activism keeps us on our toes. There is an edge to Lismore I haven't encountered elsewhere. The Australian, 'she'll be right' attitude doesn't really seem to exist here. It's more an, 'it's not right, and we demand change'.

The schism that developed in the 1970s between those that represented the 'new arrivals' (hippies, artists, leftists, LGBTQI community, environmentalists), and those that represent the 'old timers' (everyone else), continued for decades.

For those of us at the gallery, it's a continual dance between all those groups. But I feel it's changing. In 2017, as a post-flood recovery effort to get people back in to Lismore to shop, the local chamber of commerce engaged locally renowned drag queen, and son of an ex-mayor (Maude Boate), and 'son of Murwillumbah' - Bob Downe - to create an advertisement that totally hit the spot. At once gloriously camp, creative and heartfelt, it celebrated the distinctiveness that is Lismore. And it also summarises what the floods are about. While there may be some divisiveness between camps of people, come flood time, this evaporates

with the weird excitement that comes with the pack-up of the town, and then the devastating clean-up. As gut-wrenching as it was to see our amazing town so devastated last year, the armies of locals out to support each other was truly something to behold.

For me – that’s the reason I’m working where I am. Lismore is really a ‘team effort’ – it relies on what lies at the true core of ‘partnershiping’. There are challenges, but more and more we’re working in creative ways to overcome them.

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