



ROB DOUMA

As an emerging artist whose everyday drawing practice extends from preparing work for a tertiary course in fine art to preparing images for his day-job as a well-known Townsville-based tattoo artist, Rob draws from his interaction with the local tattoo community to examine how Townsville's role as an army garrison has influenced its tattoo culture. After leaving his home town in Burnie, Tasmania,

Rob was involved in a range of military experiences in a range of international destinations. These experiences form the basis for his growing conviction that art provides a unique means of expression, a language capable of traversing cultural and social boundaries. For *The Partnership Project*, Rob's work will select images, icons and symbols many use to define their sense of self to re-present them in new contexts in order to expose new relationships and meaning.

My Mum and Dad emigrated from Holland in the late sixties. Mum was on her way to visit her older sister for a holiday and Dad was on his way to New Zealand for work when they met on the boat to Australia and hit it off. Mum suggested that Dad visit her in Tasmania after he finished his job in three months' time. When they met up again they continued the romance, married two years later, and started the adoption process.

I came along in 1973, and the adoption process for my sister took a further four years. The family settled in the Northwest coast of Tasmania where they purchased an old small timber cottage that had once been used as the local coach station and post-office. The neighbor's father and grandfather had actually built it. Dad is

always very resourceful – he taught himself the skills of carpentry from books at the local library and began the repairs to fully and carefully restore the old building. When he wasn't working on practical concerns he would sit filling his sketchbook with images of the surrounding landscape.

Hobart and Penguin has quite a few immigrants from Holland. I was keen to learn the language but my parents were hesitant at the time, thinking that it might have impacted on my English studies. My first major trip out of Australia when I was 13 was when the family visited Holland. My Dad and Mum had traveled extensively throughout Europe, and their stories of other places had already captured my imagination.



Growing up in a small town in Tasmania as a first generation Australian with Dutch parents made me feel “less Australian”; someone who was always slightly on the outskirts of Australian culture. Growing up attending small rural schools came with a range of little drawbacks – team sports don’t really happen when there are only four in the class. But you find other ways of getting around things – I was still interested in sports, but tended to be drawn to more solo sports like karate and boxing.

Both Mum and Dad were very creative. Dad made beautifully crafted wooden toys – often out of scrap wood – that he sold at markets. He made intricate doll’s houses that were replicas of Dutch colonial homes. Mum made a lot of folk art and would help Dad painting and varnishing the wooden toys. She also did a lot of stitch-work, knitting and needlework. I can remember sitting with Mum completing cross-stitch art together, listening to classical music. My love of materiality grew from that childhood. I loved working with wood, but I preferred to make wooden guns instead of dolls’ houses.

At school, I had a natural tendency towards art, and was encouraged by the school and my parents. I had a mate Richard who kept me on my toes throughout primary and secondary school; we were both keen on art and pushed each other to be better artists through a supportive competitiveness. English, Geography and History were my strengths, but art was always my main focus. When I’d completed grade twelve in the late eighties, I didn’t have a strong ambition to go to university – I’d always thought it was only for upper class rich kids rather than those from the working class. I considered going to Art College and sat in on a couple of classes, but it didn’t feel quite right. I felt there was much more to see and do in the world before I was ready to start making comments on things. I was sixteen and extremely keen to explore the world.

Throughout my childhood I’d also always been interested in the army; I applied and was accepted in 1991. I can look back now to the time I was a child and how I was influenced by soft propaganda in family programs like The Sullivan’s, that focused largely on World War 2. Mum and Dad would never let me have firearms on the property when I was growing up, but I was keen on making those wooden guns. It’s ironic how things turn out - I’d always wanted my Dutch passport but my parents relinquished their Dutch passports because they were fearful I would be drafted into the Dutch military. But in the end, I enrolled in the Australian military anyway. Ironic.

My interest in traveling was fanned by the overseas training in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the USA including Hawaii. I also completed two operational tours to East Timor. After

initial training in New South Wales, I was posted to Townsville in 1995 as an infantry soldier where I stayed for four years, then went to Melbourne for a year. When I was recognized as having a proficiency in languages, the army sent me to the Australian Defence School of Languages where I achieved a Diploma in Thai. Upon graduation, I became a Thai linguist and worked as an interpreter to the Royal Thai Army on both training and operational missions.

Upon discharge from the Army in 2004 I was interested in getting into the tattooing industry. I had by this stage acquired several large tattoos and had been commissioned to design tattoos for other soldiers. I had heard it was a tightly controlled industry where entry was difficult. When I was first asked to show my portfolio of works, all the images were fine art style drawings – so was asked to produce more typical tattoo-styled drawings. I was offered a job straight away. Unfortunately, the first two studios I worked at didn’t pan out; both collapsed and I was forced to seek alternate employment. As I already owned a house in Townsville and had a large network from my military career, I moved back to Townsville and have used it as a base ever since.

A bodyguard and medical course was completed in Cape Town, South Africa in 2005 and for the next two years I worked locally as a security guard, hoping to secure employment overseas in the lucrative security contractor industry on the circuit in Iraq, Afghanistan or Africa. In 2007, I commenced work on a Mines Rescue team and had made plans to commence tattooing again, this time in Cairns. However out of the blue I was offered employment as a Security Consultant in Afghanistan in Kabul, the country’s capital city.

I worked as an independent security consultant in Afghanistan from 2008 to 2011. The last three years were on a US Defence contract. It was a place I was surprisingly sad to leave, but it came down to lifestyle choices – the work I was engaged in started paying less and the conditions were getting worse, and more dangerous. I did a lot of photography in Afghanistan but I knew I needed a way of life that allowed me more time to make art.

The opportunity to work in the offshore oil and gas industry would mean better financial returns and more time at home. After spending three months in Scotland getting the necessary qualifications to work on oil rigs, I was hired in Houston, Texas as a ROV (Remote Operated Vehicle). Pilot /Technician where I would control and ‘fly’ the vehicle, conducting tasks such as subsea construction, salvage or repair operations. I worked in the industry from 2011 to 2015 on a month on/ month off roster system. Although trained in Scotland and hired in Texas, I was happy to work anywhere in the world and consequently worked around South East



Asia for about a year, including a month in China, then spent the last couple of years working around Australia, mostly off the Great Western Shelf, west of Dampier in Western Australia, and making side trips to the Bass Strait and the East Timor Sea.

By 2012, I had identified my real need to 'catch-up' on my art, and in time-off from the oil rigs I began painting and drawing in earnest, participating in local shows and competitions where my work received awards. Even when I was at work, I would bring materials to draw with whilst I was off duty. In 2015 I was approached to participate in a major national touring exhibition, titled A Permanent Mark, that focused on the impact of tattooing on contemporary art. At the opening, I met the Lead Vocational Teacher from the local TAFE (Tertiary and Further Education) campus, Donna Foley. When I mentioned that I was interested in developing my arts practice, Donna encouraged me to enroll into a Diploma program where I focused on drawing and printmaking. After the Diploma, I completed the Advanced Diploma and rolled it into a degree program when the University of Canberra began a Bachelor of Visual Arts program at the TAFE campus. I am currently about to commence the final semester of that degree, focusing more on 3D works.

In January 2016, I had successfully applied for a Life drawing Marathon course at the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture. On return I bumped into a local tattoo studio owner who had previously bought some of my art and he offered me a start into tattooing again, which I took up. Since then I have been tattooing virtually non-stop for the past two years. I see tattooing as different to my art practice. In the trade, there's a kind of running joke where I always reiterate that my tattooing is separate to my 'real art'. I view it in a similar way to how graphic design can be different from 'fine art'; the client on the whole, generally dictates the design of the tattoo. My role is to bring that client's vision to life as best I can. At times, there is scope for my own design or style, but it's generally always tied to following a specific brief. Fine art might be produced on commission as well, but it comes much closer to expressing my own viewpoint. I see the physical and material aspects of tattooing as being more akin to a craft.

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

Townsville has the largest military community in Australia and it's in a small regional city. Lavarack Barracks grows continuously, as does the Air force base and Naval facilities. I think approximately thirty thousand people in Townsville are directly related to the military in some way. The mood and energy of the

town has changed; prior to 1999 the military in general were not really liked by the locals, who openly referred to army personnel as 'AJ's' – an acronym for Army Jerks. A lot of the level of contempt and jealousy stemmed from the fact that the army men had a disposable income, and were interested in spending it going out and having fun. The other large sector in Townsville was comprised of the university students, who were generally much less cashed up. Townsville had a big drinking culture back then – I guess it still does – and the locals weren't very enamored of the typical Alpha male army types with a disposable income. However, all that changed in 1999 when the Australian Army was sent to help East Timor regain their independence from Indonesia. From then on they were viewed in a much more positive light. There were signs posted all over the town – and particularly in the car yards – reading "Welcome back Heroes". Part of that supportive, positive change was driven by the fact that local businesses were keen to collect part of the forty-fifty thousand tax-free dollars that each guy would come back with.

What might make it difficult?

Opportunities for artists are minimal – there are two main galleries – Perc Tucker and Umbrella – and getting exhibition space is can be at times lengthy and challenging. Also, I feel the community doesn't embrace art as much as other small communities might: the new football stadium will be embraced more by locals than artistic ventures. This is in spite of a recent report that art and cultural activities bring three to five times the revenue to Townsville that sport does. The live music performances, the sculpture competitions, the exhibitions and a range of other cultural events bring in big audiences. But even so, Council opts to support a Super stadium and a V8 track over a new cultural premise in spite of the fact that it is arts and culture that bring real opportunities and advancements to local businesses.

It's also a very conservative town – anything off-center can seem quite challenging out here. Obviously any critical responses I might make in my work about the commercialization of war may not be popular with some of my clients.

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

Living here and trying to make a living, as well as trying to make art, forces you to be more aware of your environment – there's no safety blanket here. You have to ask yourself about the extent you're prepared to conform – or otherwise – in order to make ends meet. Or do you stick to your ethics and beliefs at all costs? You have to be realistic in assessing how it might be possible to make a financially viable future in the arts. And in turn, you have to ask yourself whether you'll be able to maintain a practice here or whether you'll only really be able to make the kind of statements you want to make somewhere else, sometime else. But



answering those kinds of questions can drive a stronger rationale for your work.

It's forced me to look hard at opportunities beyond the bubble of Townsville. In 2016 I enrolled in a drawing workshop New York and will attend printmaking workshop in Mildura later this year. Or from time to time I'll fly down to Melbourne or Brisbane to visit an exhibition. The fact that this place makes you aware that you have to get out to look around has a strong benefit.

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?

The Perc Tucker Regional Gallery has fostered a great deal of community engagement and involvement. Umbrella too, but most of my tattooing clients seem to only know about the Regional Gallery, and it's been working very hard over the years to bring people in. To a large degree you could argue that on the whole its cultural outreach could be described as preaching to the converted. Every two years we have the Strand Ephemera, a sculpture exhibition and competition held on the Strand, which really pulls the community. In recent years council has commissioned large street art murals and public art works that increase the profile of the CBD. I'm not entirely sure about how they've been received, but the response and support definitely seem to have been growing, even though very slowly.

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

No, although I did imagine I'd be an artist. Growing up on a rural farm, I always felt the pull to the cities, but I hate living in suburbs. When I first went to Bangkok, I loved living there – I can envisage myself living in a bigger city rather than a regional city.

How does it feel now?

Convenient – I live in a converted warehouse in an industrial estate but it's very central. The university is a few minutes down the road, and work is a few minutes in the other direction. Right now, it suits me fine. If I could replicate all this and move to Bangkok it might be actually be heaven ... but...

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

I'm not too sure ... there are a few fairly major artists who live up here, many of whom are associated with the teaching institutions, but Townsville itself is not really a place that I think people across Australia are aware of for its culture. If people think of north Queensland culture in Australia, Cairns promotes itself more as an artistic community – they have a stronger 'arts footprint' – especially through their involvement with Indigenous artists.

National competitions like the Percival Portrait Prize, that offers a first prize of fifty thousand dollars, raise

the profile of the city, as does the Strand Ephemera. These events also offer great opportunities to network with other interstate artists.

Is it cheaper to live in the regions?

Yes – rent is cheaper; I couldn't achieve this proximity to the CBD in Brisbane for what I pay here – plus I don't have to spend much driving around town. Also, the limitations in terms of entertainment mean you're not spending so much money; in big cities you spend money going out on taxis, food and drinks to endless exhibition openings. Here there may be only one or two gallery events a month. But up here you pay for it in other ways through art supplies, where you're always adding on extra for freight.

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

Absolutely – you can educate yourself well through the internet, but it's not like actually spending time in those places. A broad comment about Australians is that it can be quite insular – many people grow up living in their own little regional bubble – it can tend to be quite territorial, and as a consequence you can easily become quite close-minded. I recommend travel to everyone; it's enlightening to see how people do things differently. You have to get out and explore the world to get the best out of it. I tattoo a lot of people who've never left Townsville, when I speak with them I try to be encouraging rather than condescending, hoping that they will travel and experience for themselves.

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

They can be very important – I guess that ties into the concept of being open-minded - the way others do things can present new ways of resolving issues that can help preventing that insular mind-set. It's also important to share understanding about living in regional contexts. For example, we have a large issue with crime here at the moment, and it would be interesting to see what other regional towns are doing to combat similar problems.

Do you think that where you work is still 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.)?

I think it can be – but it depends largely on personal agendas. For me the opportunity of spending time in Townsville – especially with the military context – has been very important to my development. But with social media and the ability to experience the world via the Internet you can see repetitive patterns all over the world. Sometimes we're not as unique as we think we are – it could be a bit of both.

What is the role of your work?

Ultimately I am drawn to make the kind of art that makes people think – art that works as an agent of



change. I'd love to make art that makes positive change; art that challenges people – not in a confrontational way, but to appreciate different opinions. If I make art that does that, I'm pretty happy. I'm not interested in making, for example, anti-army statements per-se, but more the profiteering behind it. In my tattooing practice I like the conversational aspect of the process; I like the way communication can form bridges or give insights. When I tattoo I often have science or history programs on in the background, and people concentrate on them when they're being tattooed. Sometimes it's surprising and somewhat confirming how exposure to more information can help people change their opinions, in a positive way.

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