

Celie Forbes

In Situ – Artists, Art Groups and Art Spaces

Northern Queensland 1970-1980

Abstract: Northern Queensland has a rich history of the visual arts dating from early surveys of the Far North. Historically, however, the story of the arts in Australia evolved in its telling from the southern capitals, leaving gaps in understandings of Queensland's contribution to the broader narrative.

In examining the lived experience of artists, patrons, directors and art groups based in Northern Queensland during the scope of this study, a distinctly contemporary cultural landscape emerges, informing a more nuanced understanding of Australian art history.

This paper is drawn from the work of Dr Forbes whose doctoral thesis documented the history of Northern Queensland Visual Arts from 1971 to 1981. In examining subject matter, technique and style, it was found that artists were strongly influenced by contemporary Western – as well as non-Western – techniques, challenging traditional notions of landscape painting. In addition, the need for education, cultural programmes and spaces created challenges resolved while living and working in situ. The resulting works, included in private, regional, state, national and international collections, exist as a legacy, evidencing this critical period in the region's cultural history.

This article is drawn from a doctoral thesis which explores the history of Northern Queensland Visual Arts during the decade of the 1970s. While mostly romanticised representations of the tropics by visiting landscape artists is recognised in the broader Australian landscape canon, resulting histories either excluded Northern Queensland or became reliant on notions of isolation and provincialism, reinforced by the dictates of the south, in particular Sydney and Melbourne, and even at times Brisbane. In examining art works characterised as distinctive to Northern Queensland and drawn in inspiration from urban and non-urban environments, the resulting subject matter, style, and representations of people and places evidence a distinctly northern approach to the depiction of the Australian landscape. Conducive to this was the mostly informal infrastructure of the arts in Northern Queensland, made up of artists, patrons, directors and art groups acting as professional networks through the provision of exhibiting space, education opportunities, and cultural programmes and events. This included initiatives of the Queensland Board of Education, Technical and Further Education colleges, universities, the Brisbane-based Queensland Arts Council as supported by local branches through Northern Queensland, and the activities of Art Societies which would inaugurate annual art prizes and advocate for the establishment of regional art galleries. Independent of these organisations were the small commercial galleries in Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville, and Cairns, which acted as cultural hubs connecting artists, directors, patrons, and the general public. These galleries supported artists through exposure, advice, exhibiting opportunities and links to professional artists within and beyond the region. At the interface of this infrastructure were the visual artists living and working in Northern Queensland, whose practice evidence this political, social, and cultural

environment and whose resulting body of works characterise Northern Queensland's unique contribution to the broader Australian contemporary arts narrative.

Locating Northern Queensland

"North Australia and the lifestyle of its people – the exotic being eroded by encroaching drabness. It is more rust than rustic; and differs, in its dense humidity, from the outback or inland desert already much represented in Australian art"¹

The geographic areas in this study have been categorised as Central; Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday; North and Far North regions of Queensland, all located to the north of Brisbane.² The major population centres of Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville and Cairns, located along the east coast of Queensland, were historically identified as port towns connecting the north to Brisbane and further to the south (see Fig. 1).

The geographic features relevant to the study include creek, river, coastal, island and forest eco-systems. The forest areas include evergreen and semi-deciduous rainforests, the Melaleuca woodlands and the Brigalow Belt.³ Artists associated with Northern Queensland in this paper include Gil Jamieson (1934-1992) in Monto; William (Bill) Yaxley (b. 1943) in Rockhampton; Clem Forbes (1938-1997) and Dorothy Forbes (b. 1934) in Mackay; Anneke Silver (b. 1937) in Townsville; Tom Risley (1947-2010) in Atherton and Gloria Fletcher Thancoupie [Thanakupi], (1937-2011) in Cairns.

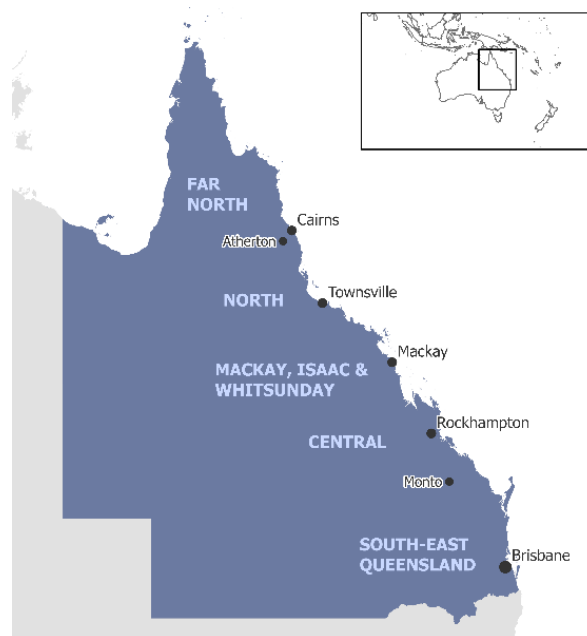


Fig. 1: Northern Queensland

A View of Queensland as Told from the South: Australian Art Histories

Early surveys seeking to document the history of Western art in Australia were through the lens of exploration, colonisation, isolation and mythology. While non-Western and Indigenous perspectives are recognised as contributing to understandings of landscape, they are, in the case of the broader study, evidenced in the historiography proceeding from the literature and discussed within the

1 Ian Smith: Tom Risley, p. 492.

2 The geographic boundaries for the regions are defined by the Queensland Government, see Queensland Government: Trade and Investment Queensland.

3 See State of Queensland: Biodiversity Assessment, Conservation and Biodiversity Strategy.

context of time and place.⁴ Early in Australia's colonial history artists visited Queensland for topographic and ethnographic purposes. Art historian Bernard Smith (1916-2011), for example, recognised the Far North in his 1960 survey 'European Vision and the South Pacific',⁵ elaborating on the theme of location in 'Australian Painting 1788-1990' (1992) looking to the earlier artists as topographers. It was not surprising therefore that it was through photography that English born geologist Richard Daintree (1832-1878), tasked with surveying north Queensland, created an early portfolio of images (c. 1871) as extensive as it was rich in its depiction of the landscape through the emphasis on natural resources.⁶ Beyond this, existing histories were told through the lens of an Australian school as reliant on depictions of southern landscapes, evidenced, for example, in the Heidelberg School, through its "depiction of subjects redolent with local history".⁷ Queensland's contribution, while limited, was told predominantly from its capital Brisbane. William Moore's 'The Story of Australian Art From the Earliest Known Art of the Continent to the Art of To-Day' (1934),⁸ for example, makes reference to the Brisbane painting 'Under the Jacaranda' (1903) by R. Godfrey Rivers (1858-1925) as a "typical outdoor subject";⁹ and artists Isaac Walter Jenner (1836-1901), William Bustard (1894-1973) and Vida Lahey (1882-1968), as important Queensland landscape painters. Herbart Badham, in 'A Study of Australian Art' (1949) further recognises Jenner as the "founder of Queensland art".¹⁰

However, Bernard Smith's subsequent condemnation of Brisbane as "provincial even by Australian standards" was in part due to his criticism of the Art Gallery of Queensland, which he described as in an "impoverished and out of date condition", which "could not be compared favourably with many of the active little galleries in Victorian country towns".¹¹ Smith did however make reference to contemporary Australian artists exhibiting in Brisbane including Sidney Nolan (1917-1992) who exhibited work at the Johnstone Gallery [Brisbane] in 1954, the contributions of London trained artist and teacher Roy Churcher (1933-2014), and critic Dr Gertrude Langer (1908-1984), as well as recognising the eastern influence on the work of artist Ian Fairweather (1891-1974). By the 1960s, Smith argued, artists in Queensland emerged to fill the "cultural vacuum", referencing Ray Croke (1922-2015) as having "created a new visual image of the tropical north" and Gil Jamieson, "who has sought to capture the spirit of the Queensland outback".¹² Further, Jon Molvig (1923-1970), Andrew Sibley (1933-2015), Gordon Shepherdson (1934-2019), and Sam Fullbrook (1922-2004) are identified as important to the emergence of figurative expressionism in Queensland, and artist John Coburn

4 For a discussion on relationality see Rex Butler's lecture 'Australian Art History and Revisionism' in Rex Butler: A Secret History of Australian Art, pp. 101-112.

5 See Bernard Smith: European Vision and the South Pacific.

6 See Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art: Richard Daintree. "Images of Queensland" c. 1870.

7 Bernard Smith: Australian Painting 1788-1990, p. 85.

8 See William Moore: The Story of Australian Art from the Earliest Known Art of the Continent to the Art of To-day in Two Volumes.

9 Ibid., p. 208.

10 Herbert E. Badham: A Study of Australian Art, p. 217.

11 Bernard Smith: Australian Painting 1788-1990, p. 406.

12 Ibid., p. 363.

(1925-2006), born in Ingham, Queensland, was recognised as representative of the Sydney school of Abstraction.¹³

Aside from these Queensland influences and artists, the conceptual alignment of the general narrative of Australian art history to the Melbourne figurative and landscape artists is, however, significant when reflecting on understandings of contemporary art. Modernists such as Arthur Boyd (1920-1999), Charles Blackman (1928-2018), John Perceval (1923-2000), Clifton Pugh (1924-1990) and Robert Dickerson (1924-2015) came to represent Australia's contemporary approach to landscape as described by Bernard Smith in 'The Antipodean Manifesto' (1959).¹⁴ Smith understood and championed the importance of Australian subject matter, challenging the influence of international trends of non-figurative abstraction. Typical of the Australian Modernist painters is the subject matter, colours, patterns, motifs and symbols that are evocative of the Australian landscape and people. In particular, the use of ochre reflects the approach taken by artists to Australian culture from the 1940s, when they were "beginning to appreciate the aesthetic and cultural significance of Aboriginal art".¹⁵ Jon Molvig for example, made reference to an "Australian attitude towards the country and the people",¹⁶ in work exhibited in his 'Central Australian' series at the Johnstone Gallery in 1959.¹⁷ Further examples include the 'Bride' series (c.1957) by Arthur Boyd,¹⁸ the 'Burke and Wills', and 'Leichardt' series by Albert Tucker (1914-1999), Ray Crooke's 'Three Studies for Palmer River' (1970), and 'Death of a Mining Town' (1964),¹⁹ early landscapes by Brisbane artist John Rigby (1922-2012) such as 'Bracken Pool' (1963),²⁰ portraits by Margaret Olley (1923-2011), including 'Susan with Flowers',²¹ Sidney Nolan's 'Camel Driver', and 'The Bore Keeper's Camp' by Russell Drysdale (1912-1981), both of which were exhibited at the Johnstone Gallery.²² Representative of this subject matter and ethos is the work of Northern Queensland artists referenced in this study – such as Gil Jamieson in his depiction of Monto farmers and the remote landscapes of Northern Queensland, and Clem Forbes through his 'Lasseter' and 'Merinda Farmers' series.

Curator Ross Searle however, categorically stated in 1991 that there had been "little cohesive focus for the visual arts outside Brisbane",²³ seeking to address the gap in "Artist in the Tropics: 200 Years of Art in North Queensland",²⁴ for the Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery, Townsville (1991). Further efforts to document Northern Queensland's contribution to the national art conversation have

13 For the extensive literature review, see Celie Forbes: In Defence of the North.

14 See essay in Peter Beilharz, Bernard Smith: Imagining the Antipodes.

15 Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art: Jon Molvig, p. 15.

16 Ibid., p. 15.

17 See *ibid.*, p. 16.

18 See Kendrah Morgan: Arthur Boyd.

19 See Rosemary Dobson: Focus on Ray Crooke, p. 49.

20 See John Millington, Mark Rigby: John Rigby.

21 See Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art: Susan with Flowers.

22 See Nancy Underhill, Louise Martin-Chew: Remembering Brian and Marjorie Johnstone's Galleries, pp. 24, 48.

23 Ross Searle: Artist in the Tropics, p. 10.

24 Ibid.

included the output of state, regional, and commercial galleries, universities, and through monograph publications.

Not immediately apparent throughout is the efforts of the artists, patrons, directors, and art groups living and working in Northern Queensland as a voice of the visual arts. Academic Ursula Szulakowska in 1991 referred to the challenge of Northern Queensland where “the resources are more dispersed”, noting, with reference to Townsville, that “much knowledge of the region’s art remains as a vulnerable oral history which is extremely difficult to access by scholars”.²⁵

Research Design

The research methodology for the broader project was designed to support the multifaceted description of the artistic life that was to be found in Northern Queensland during the decade of the 1970s. Historical, comparative, ethnographic and case-study research strategies supported the collection, interpretation, and analysis of data inclusive of the lived experience of artists, gallery directors and art patrons who were living and working in situ throughout the scope of this study.²⁶ Social Constructionist Grounded Theory was incorporated due to the socio-cultural, political, economic, geographic, and environmental factors, through the researcher’s consideration of the participants’ positionalities and preconceived contentions, specific to their personal experience of the arts.²⁷ The ethnographic approach acknowledged the author’s positionality as researcher while enabling access to the field.²⁸

A View of Queensland as Told from the North: Art Education, Art Spaces and Art Groups

The need for education, cultural programmes and art spaces were the motivating factors contextualising the actions of artists, patrons, art groups, and curators relevant to this study. In the absence of formalised arts infrastructure, these groups operated as informal networks that mentored, promoted and championed artists in Northern Queensland through the organisation of cultural programmes, events, and educational opportunities.

25 Ursula Szulakowska: *Experimental Art in Queensland, 1975-1995*, p. iv.

26 See Michael Crotty: *The Foundations of Social Research*, p. 94.

27 Charmaz states, “Assumptions are as follows: Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed under particular conditions; the research process emerges from interaction; it takes into account the researcher’s positionality, as well as that of the research participants; the researcher and researched co-construct the data; researchers are part of the research situation, and their positions, privileges, perspectives, and interactions affect it”. Kathy Charmaz: *Constructionism and the Grounded Theory Method*, p. 402. Further, Charmaz refers to the “nuanced analysis that acknowledges and analyses positionality and partiality” as a strength of the method, pp. 408f.

28 Methodology as summarised in overview of thesis, Celie Forbes: *In Defence of the North*. For research framework, see Chapter 4.

Art Education

The Schools of Art consistently played a critical role in creating cultural opportunities, evolving into the Technical And Further Education (TAFE) model that would provide art training throughout Northern Queensland. Institutions including the Townsville college of TAFE and Capricornia Queensland Institute of Technology (QIT) delivered fine art training including adult education. The Rockhampton Technical College was established in 1890, Mackay in 1892, Townsville in 1889, and Cairns in 1899. The technical education syllabus from 1919 included freehand drawing and painting. Increasingly relevant at this time was also the creation of rural programmes and repatriation opportunities for returned soldiers offering commercial, vocational, and teaching courses inclusive of arts education.²⁹

The Board of Education, established in 1944, was controlled by the Department of Public Instruction (known as the Department of Education after 1957) including the Far North, North, North-West, Mackay, Rockhampton, Wide Bay – Burnett, Moreton and Toowoomba districts. Promoting cultural activities from the 1940s, it provided the public with opportunities throughout Queensland to access lecture courses, study circles and discussion groups further providing appropriate facilities.³⁰ For example the Townsville district reported that enrolments for art classes on indoor and outdoor sketching and painting, conducted by artist James Phillips Samuel (1879-1962), art master for the Bendigo and Melbourne Technical Colleges, “were so heavy that enrolments for the classes had to be closed within a week and individual members had to be discouraged from attending more than one series of the classes”.³¹ By 1951 there is evidence in North Queensland of a strong engagement in cultural activities sponsored by the Adult Education movement.

Practically every North Queensland centre has a story on somewhat similar lines [to that of Townsville] to report [...] there is a general re-awakening of Interest in cultural activities. [...] Fortunately, the general public is beginning to realise that the soul of a nation is partly fashioned by its peoples’ cultural endeavours.³²

The university model became a focus for education after 1951 and in 1958 the University of Queensland (UQ) proposed a Multiple Regional University Centre in Townsville, “where secondary, technical, and the lower years of university education could be given. [...] with the opportunity of existing later in its own right”.³³ This was realised in 1961, becoming the University College of Townsville and later James Cook University of North Queensland (JCU) in 1970 with a campus established in Cairns in 1987. Townsville artist and teacher, Anneke Silver noted that

People from all over the world came to Townsville, from the main centres of Australia, from the UK and various countries in Europe, to take up positions at

29 See Eddie Clarke: Technical and Further Education in Queensland.

30 Board of Adult Education.

31 Townsville Daily Bulletin, 2 December 1950, p. 2 (s.n.: Adult Education).

32 Townsville Daily Bulletin, 10 April 1950, p. 2 (s.n.: Cultural Progress Has Been Rapid in North Queensland).

33 Malcolm I. Thomis: A Place of Light and Learning, p. 300.

these institutions. Accustomed to visual arts and galleries as part of daily life, and expecting as much, they contributed greatly to the development of a visual arts culture.³⁴

Townsville College of Advanced Education (TCAE) staff member and Colour Field artist Anne Willis (b.1937) was further noted by Silver as a “highly contemporary inspiration to us all”.³⁵ Other Townsville artists and academics who established careers in Townsville include Ron Kenny (1925-1987), Ron McBurnie (b.1957), Robert Preston (b.1942) and Mervyn Moriarty (1937-2021): Moriarty founded Flying Arts in 1971.³⁶ In 1967, the Capricornia QIT (Rockhampton) was also established, renamed the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education (CIAE) in 1971, later becoming Central Queensland University Australia. University culture was further supported by graduate groups such as the UQ Women’s association in Mackay.³⁷

The Queensland University of Technology (QUT), formally the Queensland Institute of Technology, JCU and CQU have established art collections inclusive of work of artists from the Northern Queensland region.

Art Spaces

During the late 19th century the Schools of Arts in regional towns were seen as “bastions of culture, providing not only libraries, but also venues for educational lectures” playing a role in the establishment of Technical Colleges.³⁸ Regional galleries, however, came late to the north. The Rockhampton Art Gallery officially opened in 1967 in the auditorium of the Rockhampton City Hall. Director Glenn C. Webb wrote that “an agreement was completed between the City of Rockhampton and the Queensland Art Gallery for the establishment here of The Queensland Art Gallery, City of Rockhampton Branch”.³⁹ In 1976, the Pilbeam and Art Acquisition Committee (Rockhampton) accessed the Australian Contemporary Art Acquisition Programme (Australia Council for the Arts 1973)⁴⁰ to purchase works for the Rockhampton Art Gallery, emphasising a national focus on Australian artists.⁴¹ In 1978, the Rockhampton Art Gallery relocated to its own building in Victoria Parade on the Fitzroy River, moving again to a purpose-built space renamed the Rockhampton Museum of Art in 2022. The

34 Ralph Martin, Shane Fitzgerald, Anneke Silver: *Images of an Era*, p. 19. The importance of Willis as a contemporary artist of this period was also reiterated by directors Ralph Martin (interviewed by the author on 23 March 2018) and Dorothy Forbes (interviewed by the author on 22 April 2019). Willis judged the Mackay Caltex Art Prize in 1973.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

36 See Marilyn Irene England: *From River Banks to Shearing Sheds*.

37 Information collected from the author’s interview with Geneveive and Jim Gall on 27 February 2021.

38 Eddie Clarke: *Technical and Further Education in Queensland*, pp. 17f.

39 Rockhampton Art Gallery File.

40 Note: The Australia Council for the Arts was established 1967-1968 by Prime Minister Harold Holt and Prime Minister John Gorton. From 1975 it became known as the Australia Council under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.

41 See Rockhampton Art Gallery: *Cream*.

Gallery's permanent collection includes Australian artists Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and Russell Drysdale. Foundational works prior included the work of Clem Forbes.⁴²

The Perc Tucker Regional Gallery opened in 1981 with the exhibition 'Nine Queensland Artists' curated in partnership with the Ray Hughes gallery, Brisbane (Director Ray Hughes 1946-2017), and included artists William Yaxley, William Robinson (b. 1936), and Davida Allen (b. 1951),⁴³ with the Clem Forbes work Range (1975) presented by the Tucker family at the opening.⁴⁴ Later, director Ross Searle would focus strongly on local and regional narratives, further promoting links to Aboriginal and Islander and Pacific groups in the region.⁴⁵ Significant was Searle's 1991 exhibition 'Artist in the Tropics', which demonstrated the history of Western art in Queensland as distinct to the north. The Cairns Regional Gallery opened in 1995 and Artspace Mackay in 2003. Prior to this, the Mackay Regional Council established an art collection, including works by Clem Forbes. The Mackay City Library, opened in 1980, was designed to include an exhibition space and in 1982 Mackay established the Mackay/Pioneer Cultural Advisory committee to access Visual Arts Board funding to support a regional collection, with Clem Forbes, Dorothy Forbes, and patrons Simon McConnell and Lorraine Gray-McConnell acting in an advisory capacity regarding acquisition proposals.⁴⁶

Acting as what the broader study characterised as 'cultural hubs', commercial galleries in the major towns would centralise patronage through engagement with education, art spaces and cultural events. Artists included in this study exhibited in multiple galleries along this network, and patrons understood the galleries as important in exhibiting the works of non-traditional, modern and contemporary Australian artists.⁴⁷ Galleries identified in this study include Gallery Up Top in Rockhampton (Director: Lal Lanyon); The Bakehouse Art Gallery in Mackay (Director: Dorothy Forbes); the Martin Gallery in Townsville; (Director: Ralph Martin), and the Trinity Gallery in Cairns (Directors: Jim Macfarlane and Rosemary Macfarlane).⁴⁸

The Australian Heritage Gallery established in 1976 in Cairns by Jim Macfarlane, in consultation with artist Percy Trezise (1923-2005), was the initiative of the newly formed Federal Government Indigenous Aboriginal Arts Board, under the

42 In 1972, 'Northern Landscape' was acquired for the Rockhampton Art Gallery's (now the Rockhampton Museum of Art) permanent collection.

43 See Perc Tucker Regional Gallery: Journey through Images 40 Years of Perc Tucker Regional Gallery.

44 "Clem Forbes is already represented in the gallery with an earlier work presented at the opening by Mrs Perc Tucker". Painting Goes to Townsville. (Note: The Clem Forbes work, Bright Forest was purchased in 1985. Accession no.: 1985.0001.000.)

45 See Urszula Szulakowska: Experimental Art in Queensland, 1975-1995, p. 100.

46 Recommendations to Mackay/Pioneer Advisory Committee on the Visual Arts Board Art Acquisition Scheme, Prepared by Miss S. Outridge (Community Arts Officer) and Mrs L. Gray-McConnell (President, Mackay Arts Council), June 1982.

47 Evidenced in the works of Australian contemporary artists in the collections of patrons exhibited in these galleries including Sidney Nolan, Gil Jamieson; Clem Forbes; Robert Preston; John Rigby, Ray Crooke; Robert Dickerson; Pro Hart (1928-2006); Anneke Silver; Brett Whiteley (1939-1992); William Yaxley; Tom Risley; William Robinson, and David Rose (1936-2006).

48 See exhibition listings in appendix to Celie Forbes: In Defence of the North.

Whitlam Government's Australia Council, of which artist and author Dick (Goolbalthaldin) Roughsey (1920-1985) was the chair. Managed through the Australia Council Subsidiary company, Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd, the gallery was described by Rosemary Macfarlane as

a Federal Government initiative to expose the value and tradition of Indigenous work to the Australian and international world. In addition the aim was to bring a livelihood to worthy crafts people and lift their work into a gallery and out of the souvenir and craft shop level where it had to compete with gaudy factory imitation with no respect for copyright. The gallery stopped exploitation of these artists and paid professional reward.⁴⁹

All commercial galleries in the study were closing throughout the 1980s due to the adverse financial impact experienced by their directors, who had had a largely altruistic commitment to the arts. The establishment of regional galleries and the Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF) would bring with it a more structured approach to the arts in Northern Queensland, with arts courses and education programmes becoming formalised. Many of the patrons in the study had also moved away, citing professional commitments.⁵⁰

Art Groups

In addition to the exhibition programme of commercial galleries, cultural activities throughout Queensland allowed artists to exhibit, access prizes and interact with artists, art groups and societies, while engaging the public in the arts.⁵¹ While the Queensland Art Gallery's (QAGOMA) touring programme was designed to bring works in the collection to regional Queensland,⁵² it was the actions of the local branches of the Queensland Arts Council and Art Societies that would have an impact throughout the state.

The Queensland Division of the Arts Council of Australia, later to become the Queensland Arts Council (QAC) formed in 1950, sought to highlight the importance of the arts to Australian culture, provide exhibition opportunities for artists, and broaden public access to the arts.⁵³ In 1964 Gertrude Langer, as

49 Information collected from the author's email communication with Rosemary Macfarlane on 10 April 2020.

50 For further reference to commercial gallery case studies, see Celie Forbes, Stephen Naylor: Taking Northern Queensland into Account.

51 Note: While the focus on the visual arts was strongly privileged by art societies, artist groups and through the work of the LACs, the Community Arts (CA) movement from the 1970s, was established to "democratise the arts by providing access to people otherwise excluded by economic, social or geographic disadvantage". Michael John Richards: *Grow the Arts, Reap the Harvest*, p. 76.

52 The 1951 Jubilee Art train, for example, was significant in its reach to regional centres, including Northern Queensland.

53 The Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) was formed by Dorothy Helmrich in 1943 to tour performance programmes to regional areas. The Queensland Division was formed in 1944 under the presidency of Dr J. V. Duhig. CEMA was renamed the Arts Council of Australia in 1947. The Queensland Division of CEMA would instigate the annual exhibition *Artists of Fame and Promise*. In 1961 Karl and Gertrude Langer oversaw the transition of the organisation, renamed the Queensland Arts Council. Michael John Richards: *Grow the Arts, Reap the Harvest*, p. 45.

president, introduced the Queensland touring programme and vacation schools ensuring their reach throughout the state. The QAC's local branches [referred to



Fig. 2: Newspaper advertisement, Daily Mercury, 8 July 1971

in this article as LACs] were grouped as Central (including Rockhampton and Mackay) and Northern (including Townsville and Cairns).⁵⁴ The Vacation Schools, held at UQ from 1962, focussed specifically on supporting arts practice.⁵⁵ Teachers included John Rigby and Stanislaus Rapotec (1913-1997). The LACs supported regional centres through annual touring programmes and project funding.

From 1968 'on demand' workshops, facilitated through the LACs as aligned to the QAC Vacation Schools, brought artists such as Moriarty, Rigby and Rapotec to Northern Queensland to deliver workshops (see Fig. 2).⁵⁶

Regional art societies in Northern Queensland were active in connecting artists and patrons throughout the north and further south, to Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne, through exhibition programmes, art prizes and art workshops. Their goals were consistent in challenging traditional approaches to the arts as supported by what was seen as conservative government bodies and institutions.

The Cairns Art Society initiated art prizes and exhibitions including the contribution towards the 1976 City of Cairns Centenary Art Purchase exhibition. In addition, 'Purchase Awards' supported the development of regional art collections.⁵⁷ The Townsville Art Society (TAS) from 1962 created opportunities for artists, including advocating for art courses through the TAFE education model and lobbying the Townsville City Council in 1969 for what would become the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery in 1980.⁵⁸ The establishment of the Caltex Art Prize (sponsored by Caltex Oil) by the Rockhampton Rotary Club in 1965, presented the opportunity for a concerted development of the arts in the North and Central regions of Queensland,⁵⁹ and the Mackay Art Society also created exhibition opportunities for artists including art prizes, hosting the annual 'Artists and Art' competition and actively campaigned for a regional art gallery and collection.⁶⁰

Significant in the opportunities they provided to artists, patrons and the general public, the education, cultural and exhibiting programmes generated by these informal networks therefore evidence a remarkable commitment to the promotion of contemporary art in the region. Further, they became the context that informed the practices of artists, patrons and directors at this time, in providing

54 See *ibid.*, p. 111.

55 See Philipp Strobl: *But the Main Thing Is I Had the Knowledge*, p. 27.

56 See Gertrude Langer Papers.

57 See Cairns Art Society: *Art in North Queensland. Selected Works from the Cairns City Collection*.

58 See Helen Kenny: *History of the Townsville Art Society*.

59 See Keith Bradbury, Glenn R. Cooke: *Thorns & Petals*, pp. 175 f.

60 See Daily Mercury, 1972 (s.n.: *Art Work for City*). This article is referenced in the broader thesis as held in the 'Dorothy Forbes Archive. Unpublished Manuscript', 1967-1977.

the conditions for emerging artists to be mentored, promoted and financially rewarded. The consequent body of works distinguished through subject matter and style, is further reflective of an ethos understood as distinct to Northern Queensland.⁶¹

A View of Queensland from the North: Artists and Art Works

Whilst many of these artists in this study have been considered more broadly as significant to Australian art history, it is in the context of artists painting from the experience in particular of living and working in Northern Queensland that they can be more fully understood and interpreted – not only through their landscapes and imagery of the north, but as a Northern Queensland school of art.

Gil Jamieson: Monto

Gil Jamieson, raised on his family's cattle property in Monto, was an artist "inspired by country life".⁶² Studying briefly at the Central Technical College (CTC) in Brisbane under Melville Haysom (1900-1967) in the 1950s, he was largely self-taught.⁶³ This is in part because the CTC at that time delivered a somewhat traditional curriculum.⁶⁴ As a result many of the emerging Queensland artists in this study including Jamieson, would experiment with their own techniques, media and subject matter. Jamieson's approach to landscape has been aligned to Jon Molvig,⁶⁵ and the Queensland group of figurative expressionists.⁶⁶ It was Jamieson's move to Melbourne that would be the catalyst for his critical success becoming recognised as one of Australia's important exhibiting painters from the 1960s.⁶⁷ At this time it was typical of Queensland artists to seek recognition by relocating to Sydney or Melbourne. This was the case for Jamieson who would base his studio in Melbourne, finding friendships with artists such as Fred Williams (1927-1982)⁶⁸ and gaining the patronage of John Reed (1901-1981) of the Heide Museum of Modern Art. He would come under the umbrella of art dealer

61 Separate to the infrastructure discussed, but worth noting as a significant in its contribution, is the Dunk Island group, active from the 1940s into the 1950s, based in Northern Queensland including the Bedarra and Timana islands. Artists Noel Wood (1912-2001), Roy Dalgarno (1910-2001), Deanna Conti (n.d.), Yvonne Cohen (1912-2004), and Valerie Cohen (Albiston 1911-2008), formed "one of Australia's first island-based artistic communities", with Noel Wood one of the "first artists in Australia to establish a national profile from a regional base. Ross Searle: *To the Islands*, p. 11.

62 Glenn R. Cooke: *A Time Remembered*, p. 28.

63 See Mervyn Horton: *Present Day Art in Australia*, p. 102.

64 See Glenn R. Cooke: *A Time Remembered*, p. 35.

65 Cooke stated that "Shepherdson and Jamieson are regarded as Jon Molvig's most significant followers", *ibid.*, p. 28.

66 See Bernard Smith: *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, p. 406.

67 See Kym Bonython: *Modern Australian Painting, 1960/1970*.

68 See National Gallery of Victoria: *Gil Jamieson Painting at Lysterfield, 1965*. Estate of Fred Williams.

and gallerist Rudy Komon (1908-1982) from 1960, winning the John McCaughey Memorial Prize (Melbourne) in 1965 for 'The Pigs'.

Returning to Monto, Jamieson worked in the field, painting pictures that told the story of where he came from.⁶⁹ Art historian Elwyn Lynn, in his introduction to *Modern Australian Painting, 1970-1975* in which Jamieson was included, stated "in almost all Australian painting of note there is an urgency, a sense of frontal impact, a feeling of pressure and, at times, of anxiety".⁷⁰ This is relevant to Jamieson's work where figurative imagery expresses his storytelling through the use of red, green, black and ochre, evocative of the landscape, people and places of the region as far north as Cape York, including local stories related by Aboriginal and Islander peoples.⁷¹ It was therefore Jamieson's experience of Northern



Fig. 3: Gil Jamieson: Skull Tree at Rawbelle.

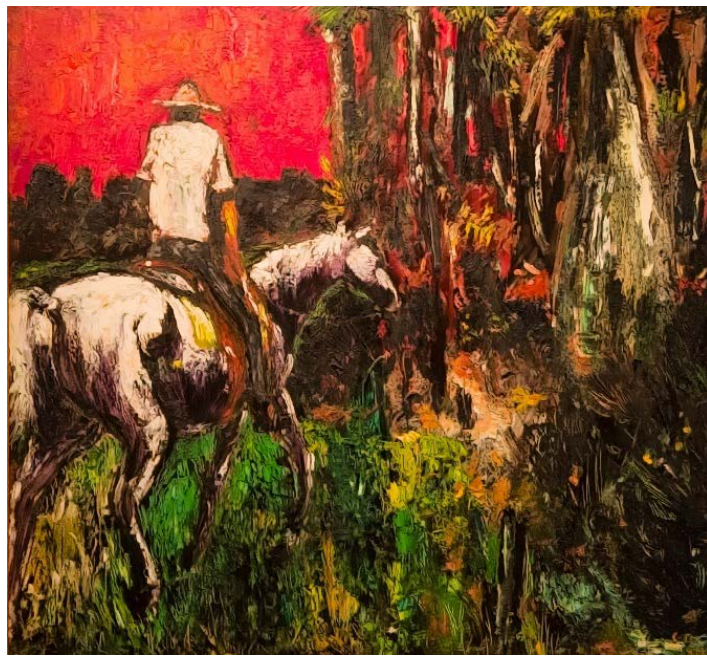


Fig. 4: Gil Jamieson: Scrub Dodgers at Three Moon

Queensland that provided the provocative imagery that presented a challenge to the more traditional Australian school of art (see Fig. 3 and 4).

Bill Yaxley: Rockhampton

Born in Melbourne in 1943, Yaxley's development as a self-taught artist continued after moving to the Rockhampton region in the 1960s. Yaxley developed an agricultural theme in the work of this period while living and working in Byfield, depicting the landscape in the style resonant of Naïve and Folk art (see Fig. 5).

⁶⁹ Information collected from author's interview with Matthew Jamieson on 14 March 2021 (topic: Gil Jamieson).

⁷⁰ Kym Bonython: *Modern Australian Painting, 1970/1975*, p. 10.

⁷¹ Information collected from author's email communication with Matthew Jamieson on 17 June 2025. Provenance and references to people and place were recorded for the Gil Jamieson exhibition at the Birrunnga Gallery in 2020.

Yaxley is understood as strongly local, deliberately removed from the influence of other artists. He would reference artist Gil Jamieson in the shared understanding that there is “no reason why you can’t create in the area you are living in”.⁷² This was reiterated by Queensland art journalist Phil Brown who stated that Yaxley’s style was “unpolluted by the fashions of southern salons or art schools”.⁷³ In Rockhampton, Yaxley was associated with the Rockhampton commercial Gallery 111, Gallery Up Top, and artist Brenda Lewis (1924-2010). His representation with art dealer Ray Hughes in Brisbane and Sydney, further extended his influence to a national level.⁷⁴ Yaxley continues to recognise however that Queensland is still his ‘market’.⁷⁵



Fig. 5: Bill Yaxley: Untitled [Byfield Orchard]

Clem Forbes and Dorothy Forbes: Mackay

Clem Forbes

Northern Queensland became the subject matter for much of Forbes’ works after moving from Brisbane to Mackay in 1964. The Central Queensland landscapes typical of the mining towns of Northern Queensland, including Collinsville, Clermont, and Nebo, as well as his memories of the cattle farmers in Merinda, north of Townsville, were realised in his early paintings (see Fig. 6).

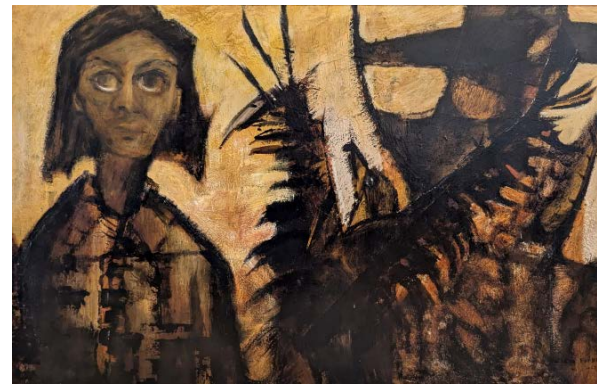


Fig. 6: Clem Forbes: Wedge Tailed Eagle [Merinda Farmer Series]

The geography of the Northern Queensland region, in particular the rainforest and cane fields of the Mackay hinterland including the Eungella region, the Melaleuca wetlands found to the north of Mackay, and the Brigalow Belt north of Rockhampton, became repeated themes and motifs from the 1970s. The understanding of landscape in these works is specific to locality, through the visual conceptualisation of local ecosystems and rural life. Further, the use of mixed media techniques, considered experimental and contemporary in style, were practiced and mastered while living in Mackay (see Fig. 7).

⁷² Information collected from author’s interview with William Yaxley on 2 July 2019.

⁷³ Diana Warnes, Phil Brown, Glenn Barkley: *The Adventures of William Yaxley*, p. 43.

⁷⁴ See *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Information collected from author’s interview with William Yaxley on 2 July 2019.



Fig. 7: Clem Forbes: Range

Forbes was able to transition to a full time professional artist in 1976, supported through studio exhibitions and ongoing relationships with commercial galleries including the Holdsworth Galleries (Sydney); Young Australian Gallery (Brisbane); Bakehouse Art Gallery and Forbes Gallery (Mackay); Munster Gallery (Melbourne); Martin Gallery (Townsville); Trinity Gallery (Cairns); and Gallery Up Top (Rockhampton). By 1982 Forbes had chosen to stay in Mackay making “its environment and the people of that environment, his special concern”.⁷⁶

Dorothy Forbes

Moving to Mackay from Brisbane with Clem Forbes in 1964, Dorothy Forbes brought with her a strong focus on studio practice and commercial gallery model experienced in Brisbane during the 1950s.⁷⁷

It was here she aspired to being a practicing artist after being selected for hanging in the Finney’s Centenary Art Prize, (later known as the David Jones Art

⁷⁶ Burdekin Mural Programme, 1982.

⁷⁷ Dorothy Forbes recalled an “excellent little gallery in Upper Edward Street” [Brisbane] selling Carl Mcconnell pottery in the 1960s as influencing her ambition to open an art gallery. She also referred to the Forbes Gallery, later established with Clem Forbes in 1980 in their home in George Street, Mackay, as similar in layout to the Johnstone Gallery (Bowen Hills, Brisbane). Information collected from author’s interview with Dorothy Forbes on 10 February 2019.



Fig. 8: Daily Mercury, 5 September 1977 (Art Show)

Prize) in 1963 with the work, 'Portrait of Young Man', influenced by the Modernist style of Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920).⁷⁸ Dorothy Forbes recalled that Gertrude Langer's focus, in discussing the prize at the opening, was on the importance of contemporary art.⁷⁹

In Brisbane, Dorothy Forbes would also be exposed to drawing techniques, as outlined by Kimon Nicolaides in 'The Natural Way to Draw',⁸⁰ through drawing sessions held at a New Farm studio c1954 run by artists including John Rigby.⁸¹ Contour and gesture drawing techniques in particular, had a lasting impact on her practice.⁸² Clem Forbes would utilise this method in his adult drawing classes in Mackay from 1972,⁸³ which Dorothy Forbes attended for studio practice.

As director of The Bakehouse Art Gallery co-founded in 1972 with Clem Forbes, Dorothy Forbes through the eight years the gallery was located in Victoria Street, Mackay, established an exhibiting programme of paintings, pottery, sculpture, printmaking, jewellery, textiles and crafts including, works from the Asia Pacific

78 Finneys Art Prize 1963 was awarded to Margaret Olley for 'Susan with Flowers' (Judge: Laurie Thomas).

79 Information collected from author's interview with Dorothy Forbes on 10 February 2019.

80 See Kimon Nicolaides: *The Natural Way to Draw*.

81 Information collected from author's interview with Dorothy Forbes on 15 November 2019 (topic: reflections on Brisbane in the 1950s).

82 Artist Jon Molvig, on taking over from teacher John Rigby at St Mary's Studio, Brisbane in 1955, would make use of Nicolaides' 'free' drawing techniques. Dorothy Forbes, however, did not attend these workshops.

83 See Bettina MacAulay: *Clem Forbes*, p. 25.

region. Her intense focus on contemporary art impacted the region through her curatorial decisions in bringing Australian Modernists to Northern Queensland, and contemporary Northern Queensland artists to Mackay (see Fig. 8).



Fig. 10: Anneke Silver in front of her work at the Trinity Gallery, Cairns, c. 1974.



Fig. 9: Dorothy Forbes: Figure

After moving to Brisbane in 1988, Dorothy Forbes continued to practice as an artist, resulting in a prolific body of work held in private and regional collections (see Fig. 9).

Anneke Silver: Townsville

Artist Anneke Silver studied Cultural Anthropology at Amsterdam University, moving to Townsville in 1961. Her diverse representation of the Townsville landscape is distinct to her practice, contemporary in its conceptual approach to imagery through concepts of fertility, mythology and spirituality. During the period of this study, Silver exhibited regularly at the Trinity, Bakehouse and Martin galleries (see Fig. 10).

Silver's influence extended further through the teaching the Visual Art and Design Course at the Townsville TAFE College, with Robert Preston and Ron McBurnie. Academic, Szulakowska recognised that the teaching at this time "became distinct historically and thematically from those in Brisbane and which constitute a unique contribution to Australian art history".⁸⁴ Permanently based in Townsville, Silver has produced an extensive body of work, represented in regional, state and national collections, while consistently exhibiting in Northern Queensland throughout her career.

84 Urszula Szulakowska: *Experimental Art in Queensland*, p. 100.

Tom Risley: Atherton Tablelands

Tom Risley is differentiated in his challenge to traditional representations of the Northern Queensland landscape. This was the result of a deliberate shift



Fig. 11: Tom Risley: Malanda Fountain

in his practice as a sculptor after 1978, through his use of industrial materials, including steel, which he understood as a distinctly contemporary medium. This approach is evidenced in 'Malanda Fountain' (1980) (see Fig. 11), commissioned by the Eacham Shire Council, works exhibited in the 'First Melbourne Sculpture Triennial' (1981) and 'Fabrications', his solo exhibition at the Martin Gallery (1981) (see Fig. 12). Australian critic Daniel Thomas described Risley as "an artist whose work is intensely regional in content (tropical North Queensland rustic, not metropolitan)".⁸⁵

While challenging clichéd notions of regionalism in seeking a profile beyond Northern Queensland, Risley was able to remain true to his locality through his diverse and complex representation of rural landscapes.⁸⁶

By 1981, Risley's relationship with art dealer Ray Hughes gave him exposure beyond Northern Queensland facilitating professional relationships with artists, including Queensland William Robinson, Bill Yaxley and Ian Smith (b.1950).

Risley is represented in regional, state, national and international collections. Steven Tomkin, Senior Curator of Cairns Regional Gallery in 2005, stated of Risley that "while the subject may be regional, the processes that drive his practice have important art historical precedents".⁸⁷



Fig. 12: Townsville Daily Bulletin, 14 November 1981

⁸⁵ Daniel Thomas: Tom Risley. Further Concern with Still Life and Composition.

⁸⁶ See Chapter 6 case study in Celie Forbes: In Defence of the North.

⁸⁷ Steven Tonkin: Tom Risley, p. 6.

Thanakupi: Cairns

While the reach of Ceramicist Gloria Fletcher Thancoupie [Thanakupi], is extensive, through her exhibition output, murals and public art works, her early career as an artist in Cairns, through her links to, and influence on, artists throughout Northern Queensland is formative. Moving from her home in Weipa (Napranum) to study ceramics at the East Sydney Technical College, Thancoupie returned to Queensland in 1976, basing herself in Cairns.⁸⁸ Here she was supported with a workshop/studio by the Australian Heritage Gallery, which also acting as her agent.⁸⁹ Describing her functional ware as “story pots like books or paintings”,⁹⁰ they are interpreted through understandings of relationships between land, culture and the natural world. Thancoupie stated, “when I’m working with clay, I am at peace and harmony with clay (earth), firing the kiln (fire), water (the sea and the wetness of clay) and the air, (the fresh air of Trinity Beach)”.⁹¹ Potters Carol Rosser (b. 1939)⁹² and Arthur Rosser (1938-2020);⁹³ Rick Wood (1949-2007);⁹⁴ based in the Mackay and its hinterland region, and Connie Hoedt (1936-2014),⁹⁵ practicing in Townsville, were also unique in their contemporary and experimental approach to ceramics at this time.

A Northern School of Art

“... and the atmosphere is Queensland.”⁹⁶

It was art critic Robert Hughes (1938-2012) who described artist Ian Fairweather as a “local artist” whose value to Australian art lay in his images as “projected through a philosophy of experience”.⁹⁷ The notion can also be applied to this context. To understand the unique contribution of Northern Queensland to the broader Australian contemporary arts narrative is to engage in the imagery and experience of the north projected through a visually rich and complex collection of works. This is further realised through the multi-faceted lens of education, informal infrastructure, and cultural programmes, driven by the dedicated activities of artists, patrons and directors all working in situ. In this way a complex story of the arts in Northern Queensland emerges, one that is distinctive as a northern school of art responsive to national and international art movements, whilst remaining true to the ethos and identity of its own locale.

88 See Cairns Post, 21 November 1977 (s.n.: Pottery Exhibition).

89 Information collected from author’s email communication with Rosemary Macfarlane.

90 J. Isaacs: Thancoupie the Potter, p. 58.

91 Quoted in J. Isaacs: Thancoupie the Potter, p. 60.

92 See McBurnie, Jonathan, Anneke Silver, Ross Searle: Connie Hoedt.

93 See Artspace Mackay: Fire and Ash.

94 See Artspace Mackay: Hands On.

95 See McBurnie, Jonathan, Anneke Silver, Ross Searle: Connie Hoedt.

96 Gil Jamieson, artist statement, in Mervyn Horton: Present Day Art in Australia.

97 Robert Hughes: The Art of Australia, p. 291.

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