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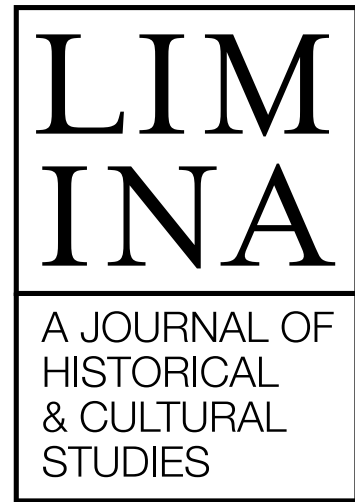
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### Taking Northern Queensland into Account: Another View of Australian Art

Celie Forbes

Professor Stephen Naylor

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This paper seeks to bridge a gap in Australian art histories by examining the contribution of Northern Queensland to the Australian arts narrative. The story of the visual arts in Australia is often written from the perspective of the southern states, and the story of Queensland art is often written from the perspective of its capital, Brisbane. This is despite the early depiction of the rich flora and fauna of Far North Queensland recognised in early surveys. In examining the history of the arts from the north however, key themes emerge that characterise and challenge understandings of the visual arts in Queensland. By exploring the work of artist Clem Forbes (1938-1997) and sculptor Tom Risley (1947-2010) this paper suggests that the contribution made by artists living and working in Northern Queensland can throw light on what is distinct about the north as a vision of Australian art.

Early histories of art in Australia have consistently spoken to a national, Eurocentric school of art. Within this, Queensland has often been celebrated for the lush and tropical landscapes of the Far North while being condemned in the south, for its parochial outlook. In between exists notions of regional art, romanticised at best, or judged as local at worst. This paper is part of a larger qualitative study of the arts in Northern Queensland 1971-1981, examining more closely the art of the region and to rethink its place in Australia's art history. Relevant to this is the geographic, economic, and cultural factors impacting on the arts infrastructure in Queensland, explained through the drive for arts spaces, education structures and cultural programmes. Further, the study seeks to distinguish the works of visual artist Clem Forbes (1938-1997) and sculptor Tom Risley (1947-2010) as artists working *in situ* in the north, arguing that their practice and exhibition outputs during their formative periods were distinct to Northern Queensland.<sup>1</sup> Clem Forbes committed to depicting the landscape of the north including the towns of central Queensland, the rainforests of the Mackay Hinterland region and the Brigalow country found to the south of Rockhampton, making use of abstract techniques while remaining true to the imagery of the landscape as he saw it. Risley, throughout his career, drew materials and inspiration from the environment, both urban and natural, that would realise both symbolic and figurative representations of the people and places of the north. Both artists benefitted from the influence and mentoring of other artists and the support of cultural programs and

<sup>1</sup> Clem Forbes was represented by the Bakehouse Art Gallery, Mackay; Martin Gallery, Townsville; Holdsworth Galleries, Sydney and Brisbane galleries including The Young Australian Gallery. He is represented in public and private collections including the Mackay, Rockhampton, and Townsville regional art collections, Mackay Entertainment Centre; Burdekin Theatre, Ayr; James Cook University Central Queensland University, Queensland University of Technology, the University of Queensland, the National Gallery of Australia print collection and Artbank (Australian Government). Tom Risley was represented from 1982 by the Ray Hughes Gallery and Andrew Baker Art Dealer. His work is represented in public and private collections including the Cairns and Townsville regional art collections, QAGOMA; HOTA; the Art Gallery of NSW; NGV; UGSA; AGWA; the National Gallery of Australia; Artbank; Queensland University of Technology; Parliament House, Canberra; Auckland City Art Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

exhibition opportunities throughout their development as artists. In remaining true to their locality, they would both seek to expand their sphere of influence beyond the constraints of their region. Through the methodology design for the project, rich and complex data informed by the 'lived experiences' of artists, directors and patrons, revealed a history of the arts in Queensland that works to broaden our understandings of the visual arts in Australia, while narrowing in on what was distinct about the practice of artists working in the north.<sup>2</sup>

### Locating Northern Queensland

The regions specific to this study include the Central; Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday; North, and Far North regions of Queensland, all located to the north of Brisbane.<sup>3</sup> This study has collectively referred to this area as Northern Queensland. The major population centres are located along the east coast of Queensland, traditionally identified as port towns connecting the north to Brisbane and further to the south (Fig 1).

The description of Queensland's landscape after the closure of Moreton Bay as a penal settlement was described in 1923 as 'rich in many types...with the heterogeneous splendour of mile upon mile of gleaming foliage.'<sup>4</sup> While the Far North of Queensland is often categorised by its wet tropical flora and fauna, forest landscapes to the south are distinguished by their evergreen or semi-deciduous rainforests, Brigalow country and Melaleuca woodlands as characterised by the Paperbark, Queensland Bottle and Tea trees.<sup>5</sup> The regions in Northern Queensland were also defined by their mining, cattle, pastoral, and sugar industries critical to the state's economic development, bringing with it the experience of adversity in the face of floods, fire, cyclones and hazardous landscapes.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the geographic distance from the metropolitan centres of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane foreshadowed the impact of isolation, prioritising the development of transport and skill infrastructures throughout Queensland over cultural pursuits.

### Queensland Art as a History

On the whole the history of Australian art has been written from the cities of Sydney and Melbourne based on the state and national collections...<sup>7</sup>

William Moore's 1934 survey provides an early national perspective on Australian art. Recognising that 'art from the continent goes back to a remote period' his chronology begins

2 The notion of 'lived experience' relies on the epistemology of hermeneutics as developed by German Philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911).

3 The geographic boundaries for the regions are defined by the Queensland Government. Queensland Government, 'Trade and Investment Queensland' (2022), <https://www.tiq.qld.gov.au/international-business/invest-in-queensland/regions>, accessed 1 Jun. 2022.

4 Matt J. Fox, *The History of Queensland: Its People and Industries: An Historical and Commercial Review Descriptive and Biographical Facts, Figures and Illustrations: An Epitome of Progress in 3 Volumes* (Brisbane: States Publishing Company, 1923), 1.

5 Tony Barker & Ian Byford, *Harvests and Heartache: Images and Stories of Queensland's Agricultural Past* (Queensland Department of Primary Industries, 1988), 3-5, 126.

6 Fox, *The History of Queensland*, 316.

7 Ross Searle, *Artist in the Tropics: 200 Years of Art in North Queensland* (Townsville: Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, 1991), 10.



Figure 1 Northern Queensland Regions Included in Study<sup>8</sup>

with the development of the 'Australian School'.<sup>9</sup> By dating this from the return of artist Tom Roberts (1856-1931) to Melbourne in 1885, Moore strongly privileges the narrative of Australian art through the lens of the Heidelberg School. Isaac Walter Jenner (1836-1901) painting in Brisbane, is described as one of the leading landscape painters in the eighties and nineties and 'William Bustard (1894-1973), after Vida Lahey (1882-1968), the leading artist in Queensland.'<sup>10</sup> While recognising the work of Queensland artists, Moore linked their subject matter and the developing art institutions to the notion of an Australian, rather than Queensland, school of art.

The early depiction of the rich flora and fauna of Far North Queensland was however, recognised by art historian Bernard Smith in his 1960 survey.<sup>11</sup> Smith attributes the geographic and historical origins of Australian art to the Far North, in which he categorised, interpreted, and evaluated artworks specific to their scientific, ethnographic and topographical value and through the notion of the 'picturesque'.<sup>12</sup> Further, Smith examined the theme of location, distinguishing the early artists of this period as 'birds of passage' in their visits to Australia, making note of the pastoral frontier artists painting between 1821-1851 beyond the Sydney, Hobart and Launceston settlements.<sup>13</sup> Brisbane was noted as one of the settlements providing stimulus for

8 Northern Queensland Regions Included in the Study, Open Data Queensland, Accessed 20 April 2022, <https://www.data.qld.gov.au>. The geographic boundaries for the regions are defined by the Queensland Government. 'Trade and Investment Queensland', 2022, Accessed 20 April 2022, <https://www.tiq.qld.gov.au/international-business/invest-in-queensland/regions>.

9 William Moore, *The Story of Australian Art from the Earliest Known Art of the Continent to the Art of to-Day in Two Volumes* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1934).

10 Moore, *The Story of Australian Art*, 112.

11 Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768-1850: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).

12 Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990 with the Three Additional Chapters on Australian Painting Since 1970 by Terry Smith* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), x.

13 Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, 42.

amateur and professional artists to recapitulate the graphic interests of Sydney's first artists, each settlement recording its local fauna and flora [sic], its native peoples and its own progress.<sup>14</sup>

Later, Smith's emphasis on the intense Sydney-Melbourne rivalry that existed at the turn of the century further shifted the history of Australian art away from its northern origins, grounding it firmly in the south.<sup>15</sup> Queensland as a result, was condemned as a 'community more philistine than most.'<sup>16</sup> Smith did however, make exceptions in his reference to the Sidney Nolan (1917-1992) exhibition at the Johnstone Gallery in Brisbane in 1954, the contribution made by the London trained artist and teacher, Roy Churcher (1933-2014), the critical outputs of Austrian born art historian Dr Gertrude Langer (1908-1984) and the paintings by artist Ian Fairweather (1891-1974). Smith further alluded to a Queensland approach to painting.

In Queensland...a number of talented painters have sought to keep in direct touch with daily life - without a complicated aesthetic to explain it. Here, too, a kind of Merioola neo-romanticism typical of Sydney in the later 1940's has been given new life and a certain vigour by being applied to subjects' characteristic of the tropics.<sup>17</sup>

In Queensland it was Vida Layey (1882-1968) who wrote one of the first comprehensive histories of Queensland art for the Queensland Art Gallery in 1959 from the perspective of its beginnings as a Moreton Bay settlement.<sup>18</sup> The University of Queensland would also complete a survey, extending the history to 1985.<sup>19</sup> This 'teleological process of art history' therefore placed importance firmly on the notion of progress.<sup>20</sup>

Ross Searle's publication 'Artist in the Tropics: 200 Years of Art in North Queensland' for the Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery, Townsville in 1991 was the first major survey of the art history of North Queensland. Searle categorically stated that there had been 'little cohesive focus for the visual arts outside Brisbane.'<sup>21</sup> The exhibition sought to provide an overview of the artists' response to the tropical environment, landscape, and lifestyle from the period of white exploration and early settlement until the late 1980s as well as showing the way in which the artists responded to the region. The goal, Searle stated, was to 'introduce the general public to an unknown artistic heritage thereby creating a sense of tradition.'<sup>22</sup> Further, regional galleries have curatorially sought to create a narrative of the arts in Northern Queensland thematically as much as chronologically, attributing the concepts of isolation, colonialism, escape, tropical and the exotic to works created, or to the artists who were either living in or visiting, the north.<sup>23</sup>

14 Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, 42

15 John McDonald, *The Art of Australia Volume 1: Exploration to Federation* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2008), 616.

16 Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, 410.

17 Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, 410.

18 Vida Lahey, *Art in Queensland, 1859-1959* (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1959).

19 University of Queensland, *University Art Museum, Queensland Works: Honours the 75th Anniversary of the University of Queensland* (St Lucia: University Art Museum, 1985).

20 Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. Christopher Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 6.

21 Searle, *Artist in the Tropics*, 10.

22 Searle, *Artist in the Tropics*, 10.

23 Exhibitions have included 'Escape Artists' (Cairns Regional Gallery, 1998); 'Beneath the Monsoon: Visions North of Capricorn' (Art Space Mackay, 2003); 'Blighted Paradise: Colonial Visions of Northern Australia' (Rockhampton Regional Art Gallery, 2001); 'To the Islands: Exploring Works Created by Artists on Dunk, Bedarra, and Timana Islands between the 1930s and 1990s' (Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery, Townsville, 2013), and 'Utopia Tropicae: The Spirit of the North' (Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery, Townsville, 2018)



## Methodology

Qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive methods, always seeking better ways to make more understandable the world of experience that has been studied.<sup>24</sup>

The research design for the project supports the collection of data that includes the lived histories of artists, gallery directors and patrons who were living and working *in situ* throughout the scope of this study. Historical comparative methods were applied to the case studies and ethnographic field methods supported the researcher in accessing works beyond national, state and regional collections through access to the participants' art collections and personal archives. The research utilised extended structured and semi-structured interviews with artists, patrons and directors who were active in Northern Queensland during the scope of the study. The inclusion of Clem Forbes (1938-1997) and sculptor Tom Risley (1947-2010) in this study meant that my own autobiography became relevant to the research design. I grew up in Mackay, the daughter of artist Clem Forbes and my mother, Dorothy Forbes (b 1934), was an artist and the director of the 'Bakehouse Art Gallery' which she established with Clem Forbes in Mackay in 1972. This meant that I was immersed from a very young age in the art world of this time (Fig 2).

This context supported the ethnographic approach to the methodology where my own history allowed me to act as a gatekeeper to the field. The work of grounded theorist Kathy Charmaz, in applying social constructionist theory, was therefore applied to the analysis of the data. Through this lens, the ethnographic, interpretive researcher is understood to engage with the participant's view of the world in utilising a methodology which 'exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power and privilege or the lack thereof'.<sup>25</sup> The research design is outlined in Figure 3.

## Beyond the Brisbane Line

I have often wondered why Queensland artists do not go more often to Northern Queensland for subjects for their pictures.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 17.

<sup>25</sup> Joe Kincheloe et al., 'Critical Pedagogy and Qualitative Research Advancing the Bricolage', in Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 244.

<sup>26</sup> 'Scope for Art in the North Mr. R. Campbell's Exhibition Opened', *Courier-Mail*, (22 Aug 1934), 17, in Trove [online database], accessed 8 Aug. 2022.



*Figure 2* The author, age 9, is pictured second from right, with director Dorothy Forbes (far right) at the Bakehouse Art Gallery, Victoria Street, Mackay. 1977. Persons on left are patrons of the Bakehouse Gallery.<sup>27</sup>

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27 Dorothy Forbes Archive.

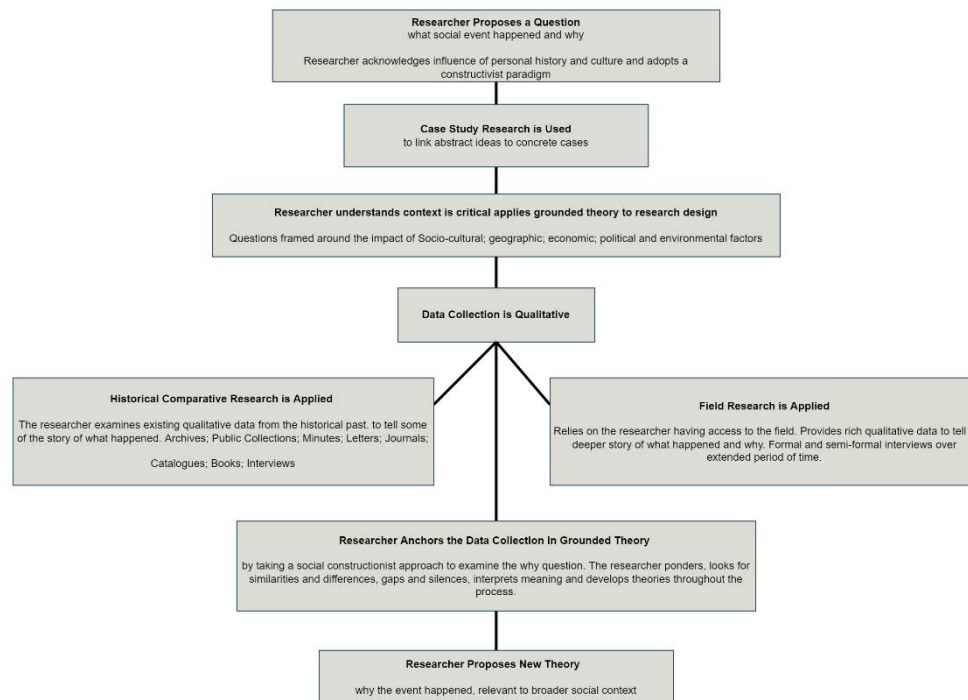


Figure 3 Research Design<sup>28</sup>

We think the north the most beautiful spot in Australia. It is so gloriously fertile. Take the canefields with their vivid and varied shades of green, the cutters burnt almost black in some cases, the farms and houses...<sup>29</sup>

While the discussion of what constituted a modern approach to figurative and landscape painting was topical in Brisbane from its beginnings, Queensland’s cultural development was also impacted by the need for infrastructure, specific to the establishment of art spaces, education, and cultural programmes. While the Queensland (National) Art Gallery opened in a temporary space in 1895, it was the Schools of Art that are recognised as the foundation of Queensland’s art history, offering the first formal art classes from 1881. Technical colleges including the Central Technical College [CTC] delivered art classes as influenced by the traditional Kensington School model from 1915.<sup>30</sup> The art societies including The Queensland Art Society (RQAS) would support exhibitions, prizes, scholarships, and education albeit with the focus on Brisbane. Later, it was the Queensland Arts Council [QAC] under the presidency of Gertrude Langer, that would introduce educational touring programs and ‘vacation schools’ from 1962, ‘aimed at nurturing arts practise’.<sup>31</sup> Tutors such as John Rigby (1922-2012),

28 Project Title: In Defence of the North. The Narrative of Place and the Art of Becoming. Northern Queensland 1971-1981. JCU. Primary Investigator: Celie Forbes

29 Roy Dalgarno, Unidentified press clipping ‘An Exhibition of Tropical Paintings’ (5 Dec 1940) cited in Keith Bradbury and Glenn R. Close, *Thorns & Petals: 100 Years of the Royal Queensland Art Society* (Brisbane: Royal Queensland Art Society, 1988), 91.

30 Eddie Clarke, ‘Technical and Further Education in Queensland: A History 1860-1990’, *Historical Perspectives on Contemporary Issues in Queensland Education 7* (Brisbane: Department of Education, Queensland, 1992), 15.

31 Philip Strobl, ‘But the Main Thing Is I Had the Knowledge’: Gertrude Langer, Cultural Translation and the Emerging Art Sector in Post-War Queensland (Australia), *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 18, no. 1 (2018), 27.



Mervyn Moriarty (1937-2021), Roy Churcher, and Stanislaus Rapotec (1913-1997) would deliver painting workshops, further situating them to run 'on-demand' tuition throughout Queensland, as supported by the regional art societies and branches of the QAC. This would, for example, bring artists such as Rigby, Moriarty and Rapotec to Northern Queensland.<sup>32</sup> The QAC also supported cultural programmes and events. The first solo exhibition in Mackay by artist Clem Forbes for example, was sponsored by the Mackay Branch of the Queensland Arts Council.

The Australia Council for the Arts was established by the Federal Government in 1967 and in 1975 became known as the Australia Council under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. The Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council would support Tom Risley with material and equipment grants in 1981, 1983, 1985 and a Fellowship in 1991.<sup>33</sup> The Australian Heritage Gallery was established in Cairns in 1976 'under the umbrella of the Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty. Ltd, the commercial arm of the Aboriginal Arts Board.'<sup>34</sup> The gallery housed for example, a workshop/studio for potter Thancoupie (Gloria Fletcher 1937-2011) and acted as her agent.<sup>35</sup>

It was the Technical and Further Education [TAFE] colleges that would deliver art education throughout Queensland. In 1967 the Queensland (Capricornia) Institute of Technology (Rockhampton) was established, later becoming Central Queensland University [CQU] and in 1983 a diploma course in art and design was offered at the Townsville TAFE, transferring to James Cook University [JCU] in 1993. JCU and CQU further established art collections inclusive of the works of artists from the region.

Like Brisbane, professional artists in the north also became teachers and educators. Artists and academics in this study including Ron Kenny (1925-1987), Anneke Silver (b 1937), and Ron McBurnie (b 1957) all established careers in Townsville. Mervyn Moriarty formed the 'Flying Arts School' in 1971 facilitating workshops throughout regional Queensland.<sup>36</sup> Clem Forbes from 1972 would deliver art classes, workshops and painting schools for adults and children at the 'Bakehouse Art Gallery' and later from his studio in Mackay and locations such as Eungella in the Mackay hinterland. The Queensland Adult Education model further supported workshops as delivered by professional artists. Artist John Rigby for example demonstrated painting techniques at a Clem Forbes workshop, speaking on 'the need for originality and strength in artistic expression.'<sup>37</sup> This message of creativity was therefore delivered through the artists working in the north as well as artists practicing in Brisbane and Sydney.

Regional galleries sit outside the scope of this study but did not however, play a key role. Rockhampton Art Gallery was founded in 1967, moving to a purpose-built space in 1979, Townsville's Perc Tucker Regional Gallery opened in 1981, the Cairns Regional Art Gallery in 1995, and Artspace Mackay in 2003. It was instead the art societies and branches of the QAC, as well as the emergence of commercial galleries, that would act as cultural hubs for artists and patrons along the east coast of Northern Queensland at this time. Their members and patrons advocated for the establishment of regional galleries and art collections and would provide exhibition opportunities, prizes and scholarships with a reach throughout the state.<sup>38</sup> The painting 'O'Neill's

32 Gertrude Langer, 'Gertrude Langer Papers', Brisbane, The University of Queensland, Fryer Library, Box 65.

33 Douglas Hall, *Tom Risley: The Indigenous Object & the Urban Offcast* (South Brisbane, Queensland, 1992), 25.

34 R. Macfarlane, 'Email interview' [email to Celie Forbes], 14 Jan, 2022.

35 R. Macfarlane, 'Email interview' [email to Celie Forbes], 14 Jan, 2022.

36 Marilyn Irene England, *From River Banks to Shearing Sheds: Thirty Years with Flying Arts 1971-2001* (Brisbane: University of Queensland, 2007).

37 'Art Style', *Daily Mercury*, 10 (Oct, 1971). Newspaper clipping, Dorothy Forbes Personal Archive, Brisbane.

38 Michael John Richards, *Grow the Arts, Reap the Harvest: Queensland's Arts Councils and How the Arts Build Stronger Communities* (Teneriffe, Qld: Post Pressed, 2006).

Place' by Clem Forbes, awarded the 1972 Mackay Caltex Art Prize, was presented by the Mackay Art Society to the Regional Council as the 'first step' in establishing an art collection, and in 1980 'Rainforest' (Fig 9) was gifted to the council by the Mackay Branch of the QAC.<sup>39</sup> From 1972 the Gallery Uptop (Fig 4), Rockhampton (Director: Lal Lanyon); The Bakehouse Art Gallery, Mackay (Director: Dorothy Forbes); The Martin Gallery, Townsville (Director: Ralph Martin), and The Trinity Gallery, Cairns (Director: Jim Macfarlane and Rosemary Macfarlane) (Fig 5) would support artists through exhibition turnover, teaching opportunities and the provision of studio space for artists. These galleries would connect dealers and artists operating from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne to exhibiting opportunities in the north.<sup>40</sup> Works by Australian artists exhibited in these galleries included Sidney Nolan, Gil Jamieson (1934-1992); Clem Forbes; Robert Preston (b 1942); John Rigby, Ray Croke (1922-2015); Robert Dickerson (1924-2015); Pro Hart (1928-2006); Anneke Silver (b 1937); Brett Whiteley (1939-1992); William Yaxley (b 1943); Tom Risley; William Robinson (b 1936), and David Rose (1936-2006).<sup>41</sup>



Figure 4 The Gallery Uptop<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> 'Painting Presented to City', *The Daily Mercury*, 1972 in Dorothy Forbes Personal Archive, Brisbane.

<sup>40</sup> Evidence of correspondence with galleries are found in archives including the Martin Gallery archive, JCU Special Collections; the John Cooper Collection, Fryer Library UQ; the Gisella Scheinberg Papers, NLA; Dorothy Forbes papers and interview with Jim and Rosemary Macfarlane.

<sup>41</sup> This is not the complete list of artists in the exhibition history of these galleries as included in the study. Works by Australian artists were also found to be represented in the collections of patrons in the study.

<sup>42</sup> The Gallery Uptop, 248 Quay Street, Rockhampton, Queensland, c. 1971. Photo: Kevin Langford. Rockhampton Regional Library.



Figure 5 The Trinity Gallery<sup>43</sup>

### The Art Side of Art History<sup>44</sup>

Clem Forbes and Tom Risley were artists working in Northern Queensland during the scope of this study. Forbes lived and worked in Mackay from 1965, while Risley, born in Rockhampton before moving to Cairns as a young boy, lived and worked in the Atherton Tablelands. Forbes would award Risley the 1977 Mareeba Art Society prize for sculpture, becoming a mentor to Risley during this period.<sup>45</sup> As a maturing artist, Tom Risley would include the sculpture 'Letter to Clem Forbes', evocative of rainforest foliage, in the 1981 'Fabrications' exhibition at the Martin Gallery, where Forbes' work was also exhibited.<sup>46</sup> Risley acknowledged Forbes in the catalogue, writing, 'I would like to thank Clem Forbes for making available his work to augment my own.'<sup>47</sup> Both Forbes and Risley understood that to mature as an artist you 'needed to be around like minded people,' whose practice had developed beyond their immediate region.<sup>48</sup> They would however, adopt different strategies in making their work available to the public. Clem Forbes sustained his practice in the north through representations in galleries, exhibitions, and tuition. Risley, while basing himself in Herberton from 1984, was represented by the Ray Hughes Gallery in Brisbane from 1982, giving him access to the critique of artists, dealers, and curators in the south.<sup>49</sup> In this way these artists can be discussed both individually and collaboratively through the critical decisions they made as artists as informed by their locality.

43 The Trinity Gallery, Australian Heritage Gallery Cairns, 229 Sheridan Street, c. 1976. Photo: Cairns Historical Society.

44 Bernard Smith, 'In Defence of Art History (2000)', cited in S. P. Rex Butler (ed.), *Antipodean Perspective Selected Writings of Bernard Smith* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing), 340-60.

45 Coral Risley. Interview with Author. 11 July 2019.

46 'Letter to Clem Forbes'. Nov 1980. Jeff Risley Collection.

47 Martin Gallery, 'Tom Risley, Fabrications', (Townsville, Queensland, 1981). 'Martin Gallery Archive', James Cook University Special Collections.

48 Coral Risley. Interview with Author. 11 July 2019.

49 Risley had a studio in Kangaroo Point from 1982-1984. While awards, residencies and commissions took Risley to various cities including Japan, Auckland, Murano (Italy) and New York, Herberton remained Risley's base throughout his life. Coral Risley. Interview with Author. 11 July 2019.

### Clem Forbes (1938-1997)

There are three things that obsess me and each one incorporates the other at some stage. Rainforest paintings, Lasseter paintings [and] Brigalow paintings. The Brigalow is the scrub from Mackay to Rockhampton and is being cut down at an alarming rate and the Bottle Tree is dying...the Brigalow paintings are something of a requiem to me...I have been around gold mining towns quite a lot in the north ... and is right through my paintings. Lassater has become for me the soul of this.<sup>50</sup>

Forbes was born in 1938 in the Bowen in the Whitsunday region. His parents as hoteliers, would move to small towns throughout Queensland including Merinda, Esk, Eumundi on the Sunshine Coast, and Amity Point on Stradbroke Island in Queensland's Moreton Bay. Forbes would not however have been identified as an artist from Mackay or even the north until 1970.<sup>51</sup> Clem Forbes for example, was a competent portrait artist working in Brisbane from 1962 in the style of Max Meldrum (1875-1955).<sup>52</sup> From 1965 Forbes would hold major exhibitions in Brisbane and Sydney while consistently exhibiting in Mackay, Townsville, Cairns, and Rockhampton. As a mature artist, he would act as teacher and judge throughout the north including Mackay, Atherton Tablelands and Cairns.<sup>53</sup> Forbes stated in 1982 that he had chosen to stay in the north, making 'its environment and the people of that environment, his special concern.'<sup>54</sup>

Forbes' early art training was through in Eumundi on Queensland's Sunshine Coast where he received lessons in various media including watercolour, from artist James Phillips Samuel (1879-1962), who trained at the Royal Academy of Art.<sup>55</sup> Forbes' early studies were therefore informed by the Kensington School model, also delivered at Brisbane's CTC. Forbes was to contract tuberculosis in 1954, spending over two years in the South Brisbane Auxiliary hospital. He was sustained through this period by his study of art. In this way Forbes was largely self-taught. It was in Brisbane during the 1950s that Forbes was therefore a witness to the emerging discourses on contemporary art where he would later develop associations with artists including John Rigby whom he would acknowledge as a mentor.<sup>56</sup> Visits to Brisbane art galleries would also inform his thinking.

Central Queensland would feature heavily in Forbes' more developed works after moving to Mackay with his wife Dorothy in 1965. The dry and remote landscapes typical of the mining towns of western Queensland, including Collinsville, Clermont, and Nebo, as well as his memories of the Merinda farmers on cattle farms to the west of Bowen where he grew up, were realised in these paintings. Forbes did not paint *en plein air* instead working in his studio from memory and photographs he had taken *in situ*. Forbes would win the Cairns Art Society Non-Traditional Art Prize in 1967 (Judge James Wieneke, Director Queensland Art Gallery 1967-1974) for his work 'The Crow and the Hides' (Fig 6) and 'Blair Athol Township' (Clermont, Queensland)

50 Clem Forbes. 'Artist Statement' [Letter to G Scheinberg], 3 March 1973, Records of the Holdsworth Galleries 1969-1996. Files Relating to Clem Forbes. National Library of Australia, Canberra, Box 55.

51 'Artist profile'. Daily Mercury, 1969. Newspaper clipping, Dorothy Forbes personal archive, Brisbane.

52 Portraits included Leneen Forde 1935-1966, Governor of Queensland in Bettina MacAulay, *Clem Forbes: Image Maker* (Mackay, Queensland: Artspace Mackay, 2004), 10.

53 In 1976 Forbes become a full-time practicing artist.

54 Programme for the opening of the Burdekin Theatre Mural, Clem Forbes commission. Burdekin Theatre, Ayr. Burdekin Shire Council. 1982 in Dorothy Forbes Personal Archive, Brisbane.

55 MacAulay, *Clem Forbes: Image Maker*, 11.

56 Dorothy Forbes. Interview with Author. 18 April 2019.



was exhibited in the 1971 Redcliffe Art Contest.<sup>57</sup> Dorothy Forbes understood these paintings as his move away from traditional approach to landscape, for three reasons. One, that Forbes had shifted or removed the horizon line within the composition of the work, secondly, through the understanding of mark making and the use of colour, particularly ochre, and finally, through experimentation and mastery of media and technique, developed after his move to Mackay.<sup>58</sup>

This was evidenced in the 'Lasseter' series painted between 1967 and 1973 (Fig 7 and 8).<sup>59</sup> Artist Stanislaus Rapotec, visiting Queensland in 1971 through the QAC vacation schools, would have a significant impact on Forbes' career. On meeting Forbes in Mackay, Rapotec would reflect on the painting techniques that allowed Forbes to visually transcribe the landscape of Northern Queensland.

There is a coat of P.V.A [poly vinyl acetate] – or P.V.A white paint firstly put down and that you painted on top of such a surface with a sort of mixed media ... That is the way you explained it to me if I remember it well.<sup>60</sup>



Figure 6 'The Crow and the Hides'<sup>61</sup>

57 QAGOMA, 'Research Library', 'Art Prizes and Exhibitions 1950-1975', Accessed 11 June 2022, <https://qag.trimagiccc.com.au/>

58 Dorothy Forbes. Interview with Author. 18 April 2019.

59 The series was not only inspired by visits to mining towns in Queensland but by the legend of Harold Lasseter's lost gold reef, as described in the novel 'Lasseter's Last Ride' by Ion Idriess published by Angus and Robertson 1931.

60 Stanislaus Rapotec, 'Letter to Clem Forbes', 5th September 1971. Dorothy Forbes, personal archive, Brisbane.

61 Clem Forbes, 'The Crow and the Hides', 1967. 952x660mm, Acrylic on Composite Board. Cairns Non-Traditional Art Prize, 1967. Judge James Wieneke (Dir. Queensland Art Gallery). Collection Dorothy Forbes Collection. Photo: Matt Forbes.



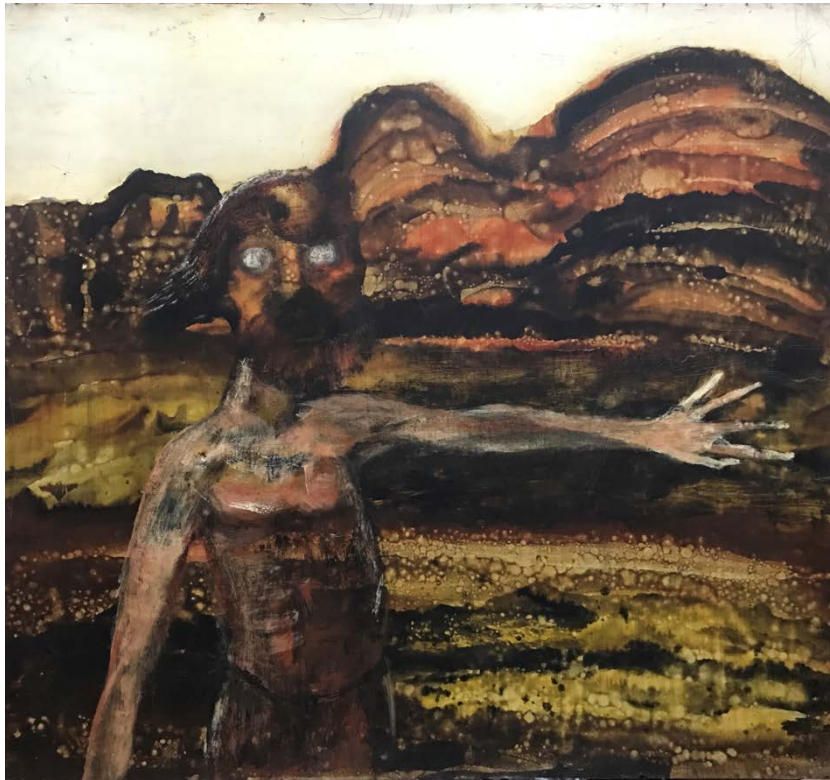


Figure 7 'Lasseter Searching' (Lasseter Series)<sup>62</sup>

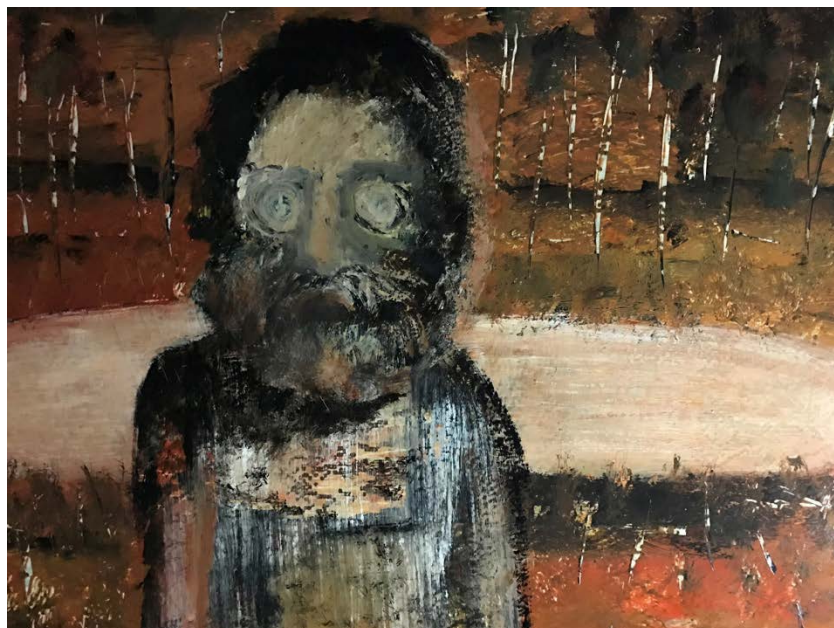


Figure 8 'Lasseter Dreaming' (Lasseter Series)<sup>63</sup>

62 Clem Forbes, 'Lasseter Searching' (Lasseter Series), c. 1968. Oil on Composite Board, P.V.A. base. 92cmx92cm. Dorothy Forbes Collection. Photo: Celie Forbes

63 Clem Forbes, 'Lasseter Dreaming', (Lasseter Series), c. 1968. Oil on Composite Board, P.V.A. base. 92cmx92cm. Dorothy Forbes Collection. Photo: Celie Forbes

Rapotec would present a selection of these paintings to the Holdsworth galleries on his return to Sydney.<sup>64</sup> As a result, the 'Lasseter' series formed the foundations of a major exhibition of over 70 paintings in 1973 becoming somewhat of a homage to Northern Queensland.<sup>65</sup>

Gisella Scheinberg, director of the Holdsworth Galleries, in describing reactions to the exhibition wrote to Forbes that,

Most of the public have told me that they compare your work with Nolan, but the funny thing is that those paintings sold are your original work and people do not compare them with other artists.<sup>66</sup>

It was the use of mixed media that Forbes would go on to master. It was this technique that would allow him to depict the translucency of the environment he saw in the Eungella rainforests (Fig 9), Melaleuca wetlands (Fig 10), and the canefields of the Mackay Hinterland region.

During this period Forbes would also become fascinated with the Brigalow country and its Bottle Trees typical of the landscape connecting Mackay and Rockhampton. These works would evidence Forbes' move to printmaking, and the use of gouache and acrylic as media that would document yet aspect of the Queensland landscape (Fig 11 and 12). The truth of these works therefore is in the understanding of their imagery as strongly local. Dorothy Forbes stated, 'the development then was authority, authority over the landscape as he saw it and authority over his method – the way of describing it.'<sup>67</sup>

### Tom Risley (1947-2010)

Risley has spent most of his life in Far North Queensland...The regional environment has enriched his work, as evident in his early pieces employing 'found objects' depicting the wildlife of the coast... While the subject matter may be regional, the processes that drive his practice have important art historical precedents<sup>68</sup>

Tom Risley lived and worked in Tolga in the Atherton Tablelands to the south-west of Cairns, moving to Herberton where he would be based from 1984. It was Risley's period of experimentation in Tolga throughout the 1970s that was formative in his development as a mature artist.

Tom Risley was a self-taught artist acknowledging however the use of the trade skills gained at Cairns State High School, his training as an electrician and his work for Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation [CSIRO] in rainforest ecology research, as critical to his practice. Risley's father Noel Risley (1919-1980), a figurative sculptor was an early influence.<sup>69</sup> Noel Risley was immersed in the arts community of the Far North, sustaining friendships with artists such as Ray Croke (1922-2015), Heinz Steinmann (b 1943) and Percy Trezise (1923-2005) while exhibiting with the Trinity Gallery in Cairns and the Martin Gallery in Townsville.<sup>70</sup> His sculptures, carved from coral, pumice and red cedar found in the coastal environments

64 Dorothy Forbes. Interview with Author. 18 April 2019.

65 NLA: MS9153, Box 55, *Records of the Holdsworth Galleries 1969-1996, Files relating to Clem Forbes, Bakehouse Gallery, 'Exhibition Catalogue Clem Forbes 10th April - 5th May 1973'*.

66 Gisella Scheinberg, 'Letter to Clem Forbes', 26th April, 1973 in *Records of the Holdsworth Galleries 1969-1996*.

67 Dorothy Forbes. Interview with Author. 18 April 2019.

68 Steven Tonkin and Tom Risley, *Tom Risley*, (Cairns: Cairns Regional Gallery, 2005), 6.

69 Hall, *Tom Risley*, 8.

70 Jane Cornwell (daughter of Noel Risley). Interview with Author. 6 April 2022.



of the Far North, were typical of his work.<sup>71</sup> In 1977 Clem Forbes would award Tom Risley the Mareeba (Atherton Tablelands) Art Society sculpture prize for a small soapstone piece strongly influenced by this style (Fig 13). His father, Risley stated,

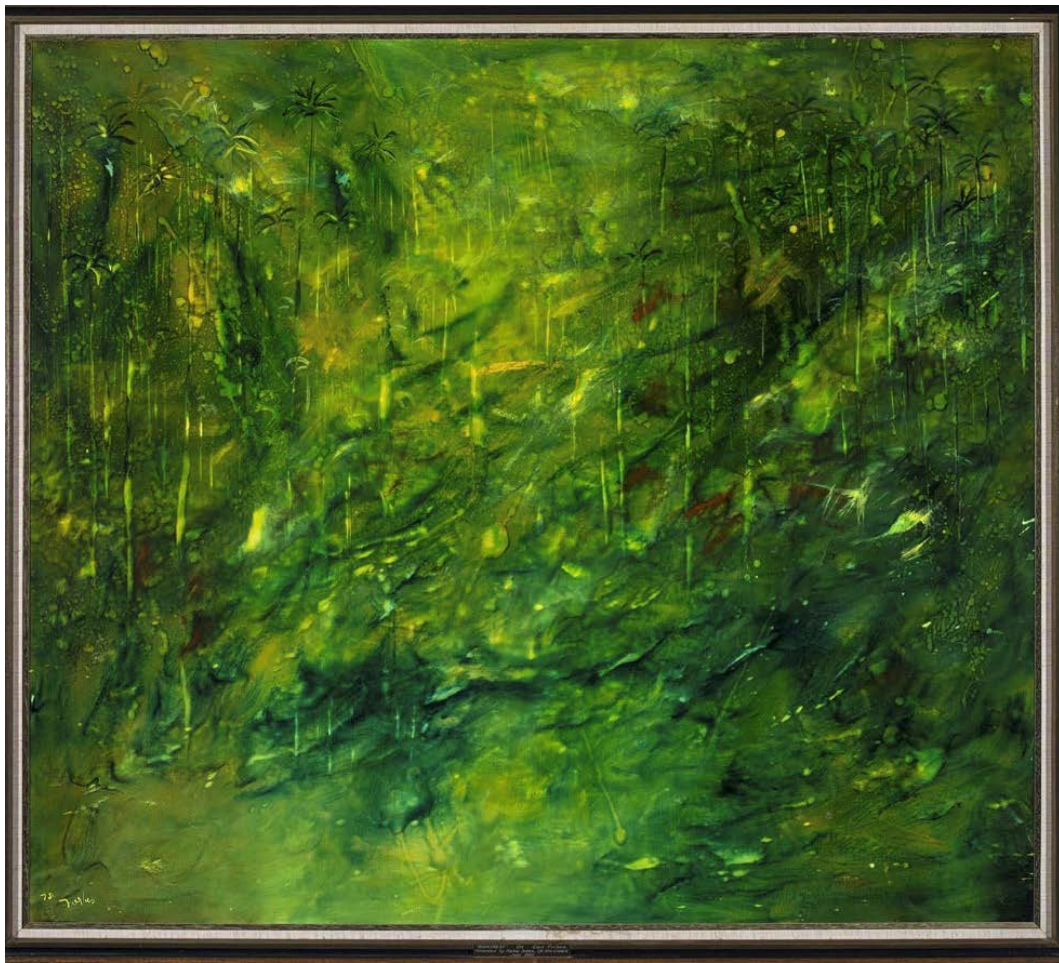


Figure 9 'Rainforest'<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Examples of these sculptures are found in the James Cook University Special Collections. Noel Risley archive.

<sup>72</sup> Clem Forbes, 'Rainforest', 1978. Oil on board, 1190mmx1335mm. Mackay Regional Council Collection.



Figure 10 'Eungella'<sup>73</sup>

73 Clem Forbes, 'Eungella', [Tea-Tree Swamp (in the wet) Series], c.197. Synthetic Polymer Paint on Board, 90mmx67.2mm. Collection of Mackay Regional Arts Council. The series was exhibited in the Young Australian Gallery, Brisbane in 1974.





Figure 11 'Lost Image'<sup>74</sup>

74 Clem Forbes, 'Lost Image', 1977. Etching and Aquatint, printed in Brown Ink, from multiple plates, 30cmx22.6cm (plate mark). National Gallery of Australia Collection: <https://www.printsandprintmaking.gov.au/works/41857/images/24675/>.





Figure 12 'Smoking Brigalow'<sup>75</sup>

'developed in me a spiritual association with nature which has, in recent years, been enhanced by a scientific understanding.'<sup>76</sup>

Risley however, would move away from this style by 1978, becoming 'disenchanted with my (till then) figurative work in natural materials.'<sup>77</sup> He would acknowledge the influence of American sculptor David Smith (1906-1965) and Anthony Caro (1924-2013) in his transition to the use of paint and metal as opposed to stone and wood

<sup>75</sup> Clem Forbes, 'Smoking Brigalow', 1978. Oil on Board, 90cmx90cm. David Bleakley Collection. Photo: Celie Forbes.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas G. Mccullough, *The First Australian Sculpture Triennial: 28 Feb.-12 Apr. 1981: At Preston Institute of Technology and La Trobe University* (Boondoor, Victoria, Melbourne: First Australian Sculpture Triennial Committee, 1981), 152.

<sup>77</sup> Martin Gallery, 'Tom Risley, Fabrications 13 Nov-4 Dec. 81', (Martin Gallery Archive, Townsville: James Cook University Special Collections).

which was for him, indicative of an association with craft.<sup>78</sup> This transition began with 'Printed Circuit' (Fig 14), a work referencing Risley's technical background through the engineered approach to sculpture and the fabricated environment it evoked. It was awarded the Cairns Art Society Sculpture Prize in 1980.<sup>79</sup>

The Malanda Fountain, the 1979 commission for the Eacham Shire Council (Fig 15) funded by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, would see Risley making use of welded steel on a scale and volume he had not worked with previously. The abstract sculpture, evocative of 'a flame on a misty Tableland evening' was positioned outside the Eacham Shire offices.<sup>80</sup> Doug Hall, director of the Queensland Art Gallery from 1987-2007, described the Malanda Fountain as 'a large and impressive work in its visual strength, its denial of materials to override ideas and in its ability to express strong abstract principles drawn from nature.'<sup>81</sup>

In 1981, Risley was invited to exhibit three pieces in the 'First Australian Sculpture Triennial' at La Trobe University in Melbourne, marking another milestone in his career.<sup>82</sup> Included was the work 'Homage to my father', a large, welded steel work evocative of Noel Risley's figurative sculptures. Risley saw the sculpture as 'a slight deviation toward the figurative image, to accommodate what were his [father's] great humane qualities.'<sup>83</sup> 'O' (Fig 16) was also exhibited, evidencing again, Risley's approach as symbolic in the relationship with the Australian environment. Doug Hall stated that 'O' 'evoked a sense of beginning that invites associations with nature, not unlike an embryonic seed form, sprouting into its new existence.'<sup>84</sup> 'Eclipse' (Fig 17) further represented this understanding of the northern environment in its use of form, shape and through placement of objects, a clear shift from the more two-dimensional steel pieces evident in the Malanda fountain.

The 1981 'Fabrications' exhibition of works primarily in steel, at the Martin Gallery in Townsville, was Risley's first solo exhibition and the culmination of this developmental period. The period, Risley stated,

was one of introspection and soul searching as to the validity of the object as art, but came through convinced that I can still make a worthwhile contribution in this area.<sup>85</sup>

78 Risley, 'Artist statement', Fabrications.

79 Coral Risley. Interview with Author. 11 July 2019.

80 Lianne Gibson and Joanna Besley, *Monumental Queensland: Signposts on a Cultural Landscape* (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2004), 90.

81 Queensland Art Gallery, *Tom Risley: The Indigenous Object & the Urban Offcast*, 8.

82 Mccullough, *The First Australian Sculpture Triennial*, 152.

83 Mccullough, *The First Australian Sculpture Triennial*, 152.

84 Queensland Art Gallery, *Tom Risley: The Indigenous Object & the Urban Offcast*, 8.

85 Risley, 'Fabrications'.



Figure 13 [Untitled]<sup>86</sup>

86 Tom Risley, [untitled sculpture], 1977. Soapstone, 130x140x85mm. Mereeba Art Sculpture Art Prize 1977. Judge: Clem Forbes. Dorothy Forbes Collection. Photo: Celie Forbes.





Figure 14 'Printed Circuit'<sup>87</sup>

87 Tom Risley, 'Printed Circuit', 1979. Timber/Plywood, Fibreglass/Polyester, Resin/Pigment, Aluminum Tube/Sheet, Chromed Steel, and Paint, 320x170x90cm. Cairns Art Society Sculpture Prize 1980. Judge: Michael Shannon, Martin Gallery, Fabrications Exhibition 1981.



Figure 15 'Malanda Fountain'<sup>88</sup>

88 Tom Risley, 'Malanda Fountain', Eacham Shire Council Offices, 1980. Five welded steel plates, 5m<sup>2</sup>. Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council Funding. Photo: Coral Risley Archive. The sculpture was relocated to the Malanda Environment Centre by the Eacham Council in 1999 and later to Herberton in 2009, through the advocacy of residents.





Figure 16 'O'<sup>89</sup>



Figure 17 'Eclipse'<sup>90</sup>

89 Tom Risley, 'O', 1980. Welded Steel Strip, 150x140x55cm. Coral Risley Collection. Photo: Celie Forbes.

90 Tom Risley, 'Eclipse', 1980. Welded Steel Strip/Rolled, 150x240x120cm. Atherton Art Society Prize 1981. Judge: Clem Forbes. Martin Gallery, Fabrications Exhibition. Coral Risley

Risley's exhibition in 1982 at the Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane was the first in his relationship with the director, Hughes. Aligned to the Queensland Branch of the Contemporary Art Society, Hughes would exhibit emerging contemporary Queensland artists experimenting with abstraction.<sup>91</sup> It is through this relationship that Risley would gain the critical exposure he sought beyond regional representation and would facilitate professional relationships with artists such as Ian Smith (b 1950), William Yaxley and William Robinson. As early as 1982, Risley's 'still life' works would demonstrate the use of urban found objects marking once again, his renewed direction as an artist.<sup>92</sup> Artist Ian Smith, born in Cairns, reflected on Risley's technique as a successful challenge to traditional representations of the northern landscape.

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...<sup>93</sup>

### **What is Forgotten...Remains in Limbo until Drawn to Light by Historians<sup>94</sup>**

In this way the key themes characterising Queensland's art history are evident in the case studies, explained through an understanding of the Queensland landscape as different to that of the rest of Australia. The challenges understood as typical of Queensland, in the drive for arts spaces, education structures and cultural programmes, were resolved by the artists while living and working in Northern Queensland. Clem Forbes would realise the heterogeneous landscape of Northern Queensland through a prolific body of work. His reach was as an educator and through his studio and exhibition output in the north and in through major exhibitions in the metropolitan centres to the south. Risley's physicality as an artist was through his experimentation with materials drawn from the rural, coastal, and urban environments of the Far North. In engaging with the arts community beyond the region where he lived, Risley would go on to produce a diverse and extensive body of work that would have an international reach throughout his career. The truth of both these artists, however, is in their practice as distinct to their experience of Northern Queensland. Searle's argument, therefore, that 'redirecting the flow of information from the regions back to the urban centres will support Australia in having a sufficiently broad base on which to form ideas of what truly constitutes its national identity', is consistent with the findings of this study.<sup>95</sup>

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Collection. Photo: Tom Risley (Tolga), Coral Risley Archive.

91 Helen Fridemanis, *Artists and Aspects of the Contemporary Art Society* (Queensland Branch, Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1991), 56.

92 G. Langer, 'Three Still-Lives in Shape', *The Courier Mail* (29 Oct 1982).

93 Ian Smith, 'Artist's Choice No. 27. Tom Risley: Drums', *Art and Australia* 23, no.4 (Winter, 1986), 492.

94 Smith, *In Defence of Art History* (2000), 348.

95 Searle, *Artist in the Tropics*, 10.