

Artist Brian Robinson explores everyday magic in Multiverse at Newcastle Art Gallery

By Nicola Heath ABC Arts Visual Art

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The work of Cairns-based Torres Strait Islander artist Brian Robinson is on show at Newcastle Art Gallery and Vivid Sydney. (Supplied: AGSA/Marinco Kojdanovski)

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Every night as he walks across the yard to his studio in Cairns, Torres Strait Islander artist Brian Robinson looks up at the star-filled sky.

"All life, for me, starts off gazing at the cosmos," Robinson tells ABC Arts.

This deep interest in cosmology forms the foundation of much of Robinson's art, currently the subject of a major survey at Newcastle Art Gallery.

Robinson, a Maluyligal and Wuthathi man with Scottish and Filipino heritage born on Waiben (Thursday Island) in the Torres Strait, works across many mediums: illustration, printmaking, sculpture, animation and large public art installation.



Brian Robinson incorporates sculptural elements into his linocut and vinylcut prints. (Supplied: Newcastle Art Gallery/Jedd Cranfield)

The show's title, Multiverse, encapsulates the multilayered quality of Robinson's work, drawing as it does on a range of narrative traditions.

"Often, I'll start with an Indigenous storytelling base, and then I'll add layers on top of that," he told ABC Radio National's [Away!](#)

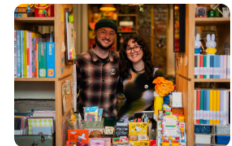
"Those layers could be biblical; they could be historical. There's always personal humour and history in the works."

Robinson is an artist who can work on a very small scale as well as the very large; for example, designing the inaugural medallion for the Prime Minister's Prize for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge Systems.

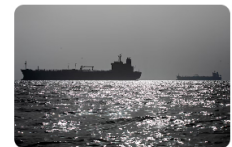
He's known for his public art installations, including Woven Fish, a series of 2.5-metre-tall sculptures commissioned for the 2003 redevelopment of Cairns Esplanade, and Citizens Gateway to the Great Barrier Reef, a 6-metre polished stainless steel sculpture drawing on traditional reef creation stories.

His work is also on show at Vivid Sydney, in the two-part Mythical Mashup: The

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Graphic Worlds of Brian Robinson at the National Maritime Museum.

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In one installation, Torres Strait motifs and pop culture icons engage in a Pac-Man-style battle on the museum rooftop. In another, LED-light figures standing on a pontoon on the harbour catch fish shaped like shoyu-tai (soy sauce containers) as a kraken's tentacles emerge from the water.



"The title Multiverse speaks about all of those different universes that I draw inspiration from for the work that I create," Brian Robinson says. (Supplied: AGSA/Michael Jalaru Torres)

Robinson is also a curator. In 2021, he worked with Newcastle Art Gallery to develop WARWAR, an exhibition of Torres Strait Islander art.

"It was a landmark exhibition," Newcastle Art Gallery director Lairetta Morton says.

"At the time ... I kept saying, 'Can we have more of your prints in the show?'"

"And I remember him saying, 'Lairetta, it's not a Brian Robinson show.'"

Five years later, that show has finally arrived and is the gallery's first major solo exhibition since it reopened in March after a four-year refurbishment.

"It's been a long journey, obviously, with the expansion, but for us it was always a promise that we'd made to each other that we would do a major survey here," Morton says.

Everyday magic

In 2025, Robinson spent a two-week residency at the University of Newcastle producing a new work for Multiverse.

Titled *Abracadabra*, the vinylcut print is full of "magic, mystery and the occasional science contraption", Robinson says.

The artist conceived of the work on the long drive from Cairns to Rockhampton, where his work was part of the group exhibition *Maximum Madness: Art Inspired by Mad Max*, at the local regional gallery in 2024.

"I got out of the car and went up to my hotel room, and I wrote out exactly what I saw," he says.

Robinson pictured a series of shelves holding a variety of weird and wonderful objects.



Brian Robinson's preoccupation with the magic of everyday life finds expression in *Abracadabra*, a work he created for the Multiverse show. (Supplied: Newcastle Art Gallery/Jedd Cranfield)

The finished print comprises four individual panels, each measuring 1 metre by 2 metres, featuring hand-drawn designs that were then hand-carved and printed to paper.

Many of the depicted objects are drawn from the University of Newcastle's scientific collection.

Others, as in many of Robinson's works, come from traditional Torres Strait

Islander culture, biblical stories and pop culture.

In the top-right corner, for example, is the carapace of a hawksbill turtle, used to make traditional Torres Strait turtle shell masks.

"You've got other pieces that are traditional charms used to bring the rains forth to water your gardens; other charms that are placed in gardens to promote growth of the crops," Robinson says.

Keen-eyed viewers will spot Harry Potter's wand, Shrek's love potion, the Back to the Future flux capacitor and references to the Marvel universe alongside chess pieces, shrunken heads and light bulbs.



Multiverse draws from the last 10 years of Brian Robinson's career. (Pictured: Banks' bounty: Exotic cargo, 2022-24) (Supplied: Newcastle Art Gallery/Jedd Cranfield)

In *Abracadabra*, Robinson channels the magic of everyday life.

"When the light bulb was first invented, everyone thought it was magic — how does this happen? First, it was little candles with burning wicks, and then you've got this bulb that contains this fire," he says.

"Magic is a part of the culture that I grew up in, and it infiltrates every section of the globe; no matter what culture you come from, there's an aspect of magic and mystery."

Living by the stars

Many of Robinson's works feature symbols of Indigenous astronomy and the Space Age exploration of the solar system.

Seafaring Torres Strait Islanders traditionally relied on the stars for navigation and to mark the passing of the seasons.

Zugubal: the wind and tide set the pace — a vinylcut and animation Robinson created in collaboration with Sydney creative technology studio S1T2 for the Rising festival in 2023 — tells the story of Tagai, an ancestral spirit who stands aloft in the night sky in his canoe in the Milky Way.

Tagai is a grand constellation incorporating stars from smaller Western constellations, including the Southern Cross, which forms the warrior's left hand holding a spear.



Brian Robinson's work "skims the surface of cultural narrative", he says. "There are certain aspects of Torres Strait culture that aren't for the eyes and ears of the rest of the world."

Life in the Torres Strait is tied to Tagai's progress across the sky.

Robinson says the constellation serves as a "seasonal calendar" for island communities.

"Straight after turtle mating season, you can go to beaches and collect turtle eggs.

"It tells of the incoming monsoon season, which brings a lot of water for your crops that have been planted, even when certain migratory birds move across

the strait from north to south and south to north."

A master of composition

Robinson's artistic talent was evident from an early age growing up on Waiben.

"As a child, I loved to draw," he says.

His early experiments with printmaking, however, were far from promising.

"I did my first linocut when I was in year eight at high school," he says.

"I couldn't wait to bin it ... It was horrible. It was this old brown crumbly piece of lino. I drew up something that I thought was pretty deadly at the time, and I started to carve and it was falling apart in my hands."

Robinson tried printmaking for a second time a few years later at Cairns College of TAFE and had a very different experience.

"I fell in love with it," he says.

"It was a fantastic time of my life, being at the college ... surrounded by all these other fellow artists and people learning the skill of visual art."



Brian Robinson still loves to draw. "Drawing is always the basis for pretty much all the larger work that I create," he told ABC Radio National's *Away!* (Pictured: By virtue of this act I hereby take possession of this land, 2017)

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Today, Robinson is part of the Torres Strait's vibrant printmaking movement.

"It's an extension of the ancient art of carving into turtle shell, into wooden masks, into the fronts of long wooden outrigger canoes," he says.

The intricate patterning of Robinson's prints draws on traditional Torres Strait design known as *minaral*, which translates as mark-making in the local language.

While Robinson first sketches the main elements in his designs, he carves these *minaral* patterns — which evoke organic forms such as vines and leaves — freehand into the material.

"There are also areas of flat black where the eye has the chance to rest before exploring the intricacies ... across the print," he says.

Morton says it's this knack for composition that sets Robinson's work apart.

Newcastle Art Gallery holds six Robinson works in its permanent

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collection, including Urban Oasis, which Morton describes as a "big pop of bold beautiful cherry red".

Morton, a printmaker herself, praises Robinson's work for its technical skill and — unusually for printmaking — sculptural elements.

"As a printmaker, you do think very much in two dimensions but of course Brian Robinson doesn't — any dimension with him is possible," she says.

While the intricate patterning and multilayered quality of Robinson's work catch the eye, Morton says his use of black space is masterful.

"It's a beautiful balance and no one does it as well as Brian."

Brian Robinson: Multiverse is at Newcastle Art Gallery until August 30.

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