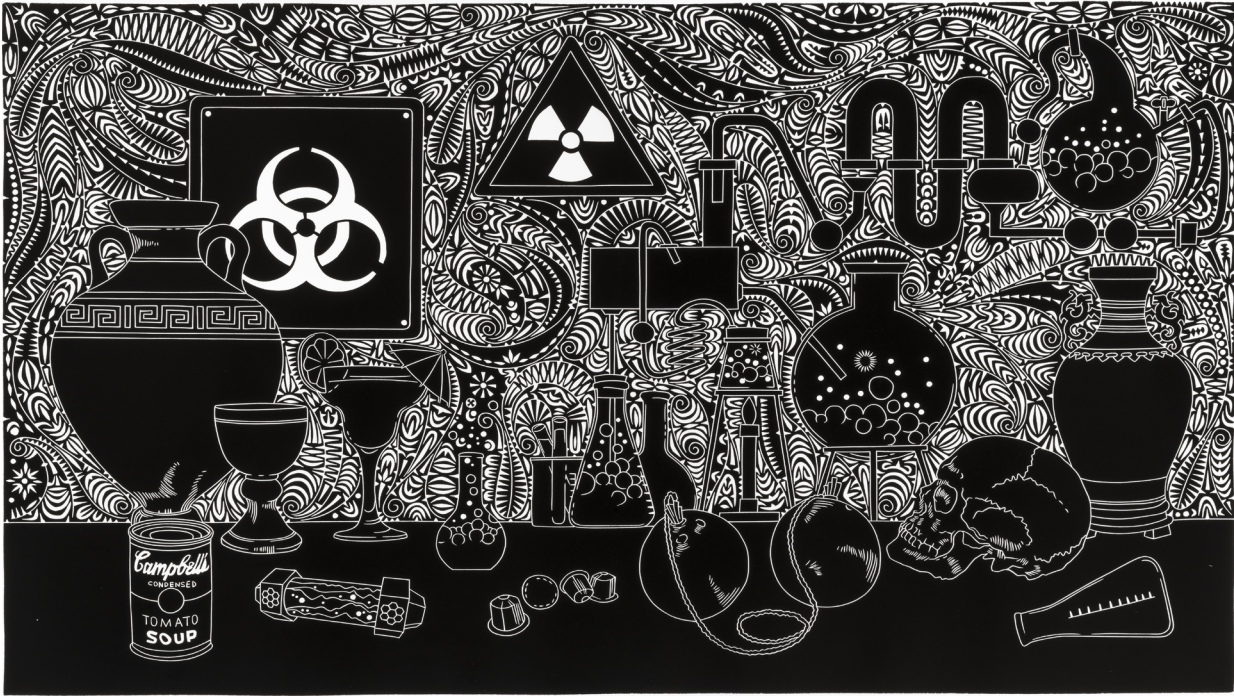


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*elixir*  blended cosmologies

**Brian Robinson**

6 – 28 April 2018

## Brian Robinson, *Elixir – blended cosmologies*

Brian Robinson presents an intoxicating world view. A constellation of wise-eyed sea creatures, muscular warriors, stars in the heavens, broad-petalled flowers and hollow-eyed skulls sweep through his works. Jostling amongst this realm of references to his island of *Waiben* (Thursday) and the surrounding sea waters and islands of the Torres Strait, are the tokens and talismans of a parallel life within a global culture of super heroes, cheeky comic characters and ancient classical mythologies.

The very recent works gathered together for *Elixir – blended cosmologies* capture the scope of this fluid artistic imagination. A key entry point is the linocut print *Proteus, the oceanic alchemist* (2018). Robinson represents this ancient Greek deity – the old man of the sea and a prophetic shape-shifter – as an octopus. The artist sees himself and his artistic process in this character – ‘versatile, mutable, chameleon-like... [evidencing] the temporal and cultural fusion in my work’.<sup>1</sup>

This image also reveals an acute observation of the natural world, drawn from a childhood roaming the waters and wharves of his island home. Robinson has depicted this personified creature, not, as often portrayed in a more decorative fashion with all eight legs extended, but as it appears in real life – scuttling across the sea floor, buffeted by the flowing currents, but remaining in control, darting quickly and surely between crevices and coral. One eye is clearly open, alert to both capture and opportunity.

The artist extends this visioning of the complex maelstrom of influences that shapes his navigation through life with the major new print *A concoction of elixirs* (2018). Like an alchemist, he conjures an elusive elixir of understanding from many sources: goblet, amphora and Assyrian vase representing classical mythologies; *Zenadh Kes* (Torres Strait) cultural references of skull and coconuts; the pop-art meme of Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup can; and the stimulation of coffee pods and cocktails. Distillers, filters and bubbling condensers are the processes. This heady mix is held together by the dynamic movement of swirling Torres Strait patterns known as *minaral*, binding all this like the strong sea currents that tie the island cultures together.



Moving from two-dimensional print surface to wall relief, this same dynamic flow is evident in the large new work *Containment of the seven seas* (2018). Stingray and fat-lipped red trout tumble out from the creator’s vessel, their bodies covered in the distinctive floral patterns and riot of colour for which Robinson’s work in this medium is known.

Bringing his large-scale public-art practice into the medium of printmaking for the first time, Robinson has made literally a 'blueprint' of his major, recent commission for the Cairns foreshore, *Ocean guardian – Citizens gateway to the Great Barrier Reef* (2017). This linocut-embossed etching, *A constructed view to the reef* (2017), reveals the artist's clear-sighted vision and his respect and passion for the care of this great living organism.

Growing up in a relatively remote island community, Robinson recalls the childhood thrill of the arrival of colour television and Saturday mornings spent absorbed in the cartoon antics of Hanna-Barbera, Looney Tunes, Disney and anime characters. Robinson also belongs to the *Star Wars* generation – a boy in the prime-target age group when George Lucas's space empire, with its cast of friendly robots, wicked monsters, dark villains and white heroes, was unleashed on the world. Some of those character figurines have managed to find a place jostling amongst books and models somewhere within the artist's tightly packed studio just south of Cairns. At times, they also creep into his work. In the recent print *Where the wild things are* (2018), they appear malevolent and a bit frightening, but, drawing from his knowledge of the Torres Strait practice of *puri puri* or black magic, the artist imbues them with a kind of fantasy humour.

For set amongst this line-up of cult monster toys is a voodoo vial of elixir that sits as a potent warning against misbehaving. The *Star Wars* characters appear also in the collaborative print *Realm of the artificial tabernacle* (2017) with printer/printmaker Elizabeth Hunter.

This vitality of Robinson's mingling of ancient and popular mythologies has parallels with the cultural phenomenon witnessed with the recently released *Black Panther* film (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2018). For a boy who grew up with a seemingly endless parade of white heroes on film, seeing a predominantly black cast of proud and powerful men and women set within a visually splendid and highly sophisticated indigenous culture was profoundly moving and a theme that Robinson sees resonating with his own work.

However, not everything presented in *Elixir* has this heightened level of drama and complexity. Three small etchings, *Wrapped charm* (2014) are a visually quiet homage to the sacred objects made by Torres Strait Islander craftsmen and artists that are held privately within island communities and shown only to those allowed to see them according to cultural lore. Wrapped in dried coconut leaves and bound tightly, these objects – and the power and guidance they hold – are just as vivid within Robinson's imagination as super heroes and mythological figures. He has travelled to some of the great museum collections of the world to see similar objects that were collected by enthusiastic anthropologists, and has found them sitting silent in drawers and cupboards. This rendering however – where the viewer is denied that gaze – truly acknowledges their quiet power.

Grounded in such intimate and physical knowledge of customs and Country, Robinson's concoction of visual references to cultural mythologies and cosmologies – traditional and global, ancient and contemporary is surely a potent elixir that invites us into a vision of a shared humanity.

## Virginia Rigney

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<sup>1</sup> Artist Statement, correspondence Onespace Gallery, March 2018.

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Brian Robinson is a highly celebrated Indigenous artist of his generation, and a leader in his field within his community and throughout Australia. In recent years, he has moved further afield, building a strong, international reputation.

His innovative art practice combines a unique blend of organic and man-made reference materials, while embracing popular culture and the historical concerns of his traditional art. His work is also informed by his Torres Strait Islander heritage and familial experience.

Robinson, says: 'My creations are seemingly incongruous concoctions where motifs and characters are co-opted into the spirit world of the Islander imagination, which are then intertwined with historical narrative, personal history and humour.'

## Acknowledgements

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Image (cover): Brian Robinson, *A concoction of elixirs*, 2018, linocut, 80cm x 135cm, Edition of 15. Photo: Michael Marzik

Image (above): Brian Robinson, *Where the wild things are*, 2018, linocut, 53.5cm x 100cm, Edition of 15. Photo: Michael Marzik



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