



Image: Joe Ruckli. Courtesy of the artist and Onespace.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Brisbane region, the Turrbal and Jagera peoples.

We acknowledge their continuing connection to the lands, waters, culture and community. We pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

Onespace is a trusted gallery for quality artists, contemporary art exhibitions and public art commissioning services. Our gallery work is part of a valuable conversation with curators, institutions and collectors that draws a wider audience towards the cultural and environmental narratives that shape our era.

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Cover: Brian Robinson, *Constructing the constellations*, 2021, vinylcut print, 150 x 75.5cm, 2AP + Edition of 15. Photo: Michael Marzik. Courtesy of the artist.
Inside: Brian Robinson, *A league of extraordinary gentlemen: The curse of the Cortez*, 2023, 100 x 200cm, 2AP + Edition of 10. Photo: Michael Marzik. Courtesy of the artist.
Back: Brian Robinson, *Sculptural Blooms from A Carved Landscape: Stories of Connection and Culture* (2021). Photo: Joe Ruckli. Courtesy of the artist and Onespace.

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Brian Robinson is of the Kala Lagaw Ya and Wuthathi language groups of the Torres Strait. Born on Waiben (Thursday Island) and now Cairns-based, Brian is nationally for his printmaking and public sculptures in which he uses a variety of techniques to produce bold, innovative and distinctive works.

Brian’s work has contributed significantly to his home environs of Cairns through a number of major public art installations including his monumental and iconic stainless-steel sculptures installed on the Cairns Esplanade in 2003. Over 1 billion people worldwide saw his artwork design for the Parade Track for the opening ceremony of the 2018 Commonwealth Games.

Brian’s art reflects the tropical marine environment surrounding Waiben (Thursday Island), in the Torres Strait, and the inhabitants of that environment. It is an essential part of his life and culture, imbued with the customs, traditions and lifestyles of the Torres Strait Islander peoples. The animals from ancestral stories and their presence today are also an integral feature of Brian’s work.

Brian has experienced many career highlights in recent years, including major public art commissions underway at the New Performing Arts Venue at QPAC (Brisbane) opening in 2025, and the Cross River Rail project (Brisbane) opening in 2026. Brian has been curated into major group exhibitions such as *Gone Fishing*, QAGOMA (2023); *Seeds and Sovereignty*, QAGOMA (2024); and *Shadow Spirit* (Melbourne), as part of the RISING Festival. His work has featured in many exhibitions nationally and overseas, including in Berlin, Noumea, Washington DC and New York City. Brian’s work is held in major collections including National Gallery of Australia; National Gallery of Victoria; National Museum of Australia; the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art; Tjibao Cultural Centre, Noumea, New Caledonia; the Australian National Maritime Museum; and the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, Virginia, USA.

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Brian Robinson
Blooms, Beasts and Beyond
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Heroes, Interconnectivity and a Radical Act of Hope

...we cannot be hopeful without rethinking our images of the future, in which imagining the impossible turns out to become a necessity: a radical act of hope ¹.

‘Blue sky thinking’ in philosophy studies such as imagining the impossible, futures literacy, and possibility studies, are all bedded down in more straightforward ideas of hope, capability, and learning. A recent article titled “Imagining the Impossible: An Act of Radical Hope” suggests that our current ‘dark times’ of wars, social polarisation and climate change lead us to question whether it is still worth being hopeful at all and, if so, how so? More specifically, the authors align a poverty of hope with a poverty of the imagination. Brian Robinson’s exhibition *Blooms, Beasts and Beyond* engages this need to rethink our images of the future. His intercultural multiverse of stories and symbols is a ‘radical act of hope’ invested with a generative interconnectivity and an ongoing belief in the inspiration of ‘heroes’.

When Brian speaks about his art, it is often difficult to keep up with his speed of transmission between stories and references drawn from Zenadh Kes (Torres Strait Islands) cosmology²(the mainstay of his aesthetic), Western art iconography, popular culture, and sociopolitical concerns (e.g., global sustainability and First Nations land rights). After three decades of national and international exposure through exhibitions, commissions and art prizes, he has developed a sophisticated, confident and mature art practice that translates multi-dimensional storytelling across social and cultural diversity into a cohesive image of collective expression. The hopefulness in this aesthetic is that humankind is potentially more than the sum of our parts.

Brian’s multiverse is built through layering different cultures, times, and interactions between the human, spiritual and cosmological realms. This complicated breadth of experiences becomes visually coherent through strategic triggers of interconnectivity. An ongoing application of ‘minaral’, traditional Zenadh Kes patterning and designs, provides a positive flux of energy linking the multiverse. But in an unexpected creative act of rethinking our world, popular culture triggers such as Lego, space invaders, the Phantom, and the Aztec skull coins from Pirates of the Caribbean (see *Between the moon and the stars* 2024 and *A league of extraordinary gentlemen: The curse of Cortez* 2023) are also ‘connectors’, or building blocks, of the imagination, and possibly a more hopeful collective consciousness. Plastic and Lego blooms burst forth from wall installations, conjuring images of perpetual, dynamic life-force and inspiring perception and sensations with positivity and optimism.

However, reference to heroes conquering good over evil is arguably the most ‘hopeful’ aspect of Brian’s imagery. The Phantom is a key figure but so too are Zugubal, who are four superhuman figures from western Zenadh Kes mythology whose powers dictate all manner of natural, supernatural and human existence. Brian’s 2024 work titled *Cursed be the ground for our sake. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for us, for out of the ground we were taken from the dust that we are, and to the dust we shall return* is possibly his most emphatic expression of (radical) hope. The title derives from a quote from a 12th-century chronicle, the *Book of Ely* (Liber Eliensis), but particularly as it is used in the 2010 film featuring Denzel Washington (the ‘hero’) titled *The Book of Eli*. Eli (Washington) is a post-apocalyptic character whose journey through dystopia brings him to a sanctuary of literature and music where he can safely deliver the last remaining copy of the Bible. This sanctuary of the creative and spiritual imagination is where rethinking hopeful images of a better future occur. Symbols of nihilism, toxicity (and a nod to a *Mad Max* landscape) are countered in Brian’s artwork with images of belief, futurity and hope.

The scale and density of Brian’s imagery is utterly immersive: you cannot look at the work without feeling a sense of entering the layers of the multiverse and observing the ebb and flow of the powers of good and evil. Brian’s understanding of the holistic nature of spiritual and everyday existence in Zenadh Kes mythology—where “gods did not exist in a separate realm [but] were integral to everyday life” ³—and his extension of this understanding into a contemporary intercultural world are important ways of rethinking who we are and where we are going. The imagery respects and acknowledges the wisdom and relevance of First Nations knowledge but is at the same time globally inclusive and hopeful.

Few artists achieve such future-focused visual language.

Sally Butler

Sally Butler is Associate Professor in Art History at the University of Queensland and a freelance arts writer with a particular interest in contemporary intercultural art. Recent publications include S. Butler ‘Brian Robinson’s Printmaking: The Imprint of Universal Printmaking’ in *Minar Palay Mabayg: Brian Robinson* Mossenson Publishing, Perth WA, IN PRESS 2024/25.

1. Loes Damhof and Jitske Gulmans, “Imagining the Impossible: An Act of Radical Hope,” in Possibility Studies & Society, 2023 1, no. 1–2: 51, DOI: 10.1177/27538699231174821.
2. Tom Mosby, “Here Is the Story of the Torres Strait,” in Tom Mosby and Brian Robinson, Ilan Pasin (This Is Our Way) (Cairns: Cairns Regional Gallery, 1998), 17–30.
3. Brian Robinson, artist’s statement, 2024.

