

ESSAY

Tasmanian utopias

Island thinking from surviving to thriving

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OVER the past three decades, the green hinterland beyond the population centres of the state has held an increasing allure for those working in the ideas, design, gourmet, boutique, arts, slow, simple, bespoke, specialist, teacher, media, craft, commentator, software, speechwriter, viniculture, luthier, boat-builder and environmental fields. The number of experienced thinkers and doers moving to these wilder spaces has grown into an intriguing migration. From the outside it can be hard to fathom why. What about the distance, the cold, the diminished market, intermittent broadband, lack of collegiate peers, the history of whitewashing Indigenous culture, poor cousin stigma?

For the homesick Tasmanian diaspora this muttonbird-like movement is understandable. For others it often starts with a holiday in Tasmania. Camper-van windscreens become a romantic panorama while circumnavigating the island's coast, or crisscrossing its backcountry, down narrow lanes with side-mirrors brushing unkempt hedgerows left over from a less practical era. The desire deepens from staring agog in real estate windows, making price comparisons between a two bedroom wage-slave terrace under the flight-path, and ridiculously picturesque allotments with lovely stone houses, where chickens, children and dreams hatch and frolic free, down lush green paddocks to the sea.

Strange, on the one hand Tasmanian creatives decry the unfairness, the

dagginess, the ‘nothing-ever-happens-ness’ of living here and race off to find fame and fortune, mentors and mind stimulants in the world’s centres of urban excellence, and on the other, established artisans are building quiet Tasmanian utopias.

Is it sustainable? Will this wave of artisans re-shape the economy, the ideas, the civil-fairness and therefore Tasmania’s future? Could this self-curated experiment assist the island state to shift from surviving to thriving?

ONE OF THE farthest places is the northwest coast. Not that long ago, when the roads were poor, Bass Strait was the highway along the coast. Every inlet and river was a small one-jetty port. Farmers would transport their produce down from the dynamic soils of the hills and fill the holds of coastal sailing vessels.

Small ships would load up with rocks in Port Phillip Bay for ballast, cross the treacherous Bass Strait, dump the rocks at the mouth of places like the Inglis River in Wynyard, then filled to the gunwales with sacks of delicious Tasmanian spuds and onions sail back to the Melbourne markets.

Travel by hard-working locals was limited and small towns dotted the sparsely populated coastline. Isolation gave rise to strident localism. From church parish to football club, tribalism and loyalty was rampant, tolerance for outsiders was low, and new futures and horizons restricted.

As a consequence scattered along a short stretch of picturesque coastal rind are tiny towns at every turn, quaint and quiet – Penguin, Preservation Bay, Sulphur Creek, Blythe Heads, Burnie, Cooe, Cam River, Somerset, Doctors Rocks, Boat Harbour, Sister’s Beach.

For those in this part of the island there has always been a northern gaze. It’s easier to connect in this way, than across the harsh terrain east to Launceston or far south to Hobart. This mix of northern gaze, isolation, independence and relationship with the sea could be what gives the northwest coast its distinctive feel and culture.

With globalisation and the ‘flattening’ of the world, the coast is coming into its own. It faces into the clearest, brightest sunshine on the planet, with rain so free of particles and pollution it is bottled and sold in New York for

\$20 a litre. The mainland is just across a deep blue seascape full of fish so fresh they're flown to Japan quicker than you can open a can of tuna. Tiny airports along the coast can whisk you to Melbourne in less than an hour. You can be in a meeting in Collins Street faster than a peak hour crawl from Sorrento or Lorne. The ship sails from Devonport, and with a meal and a bed you can be lulled to sleep by the creaking waves and drive off for a St Kilda espresso. It is this northern aspect combined with the buffer created by Bass Strait that makes the coast a dream lifestyle platform for the emerging century with its new, first world, life/work practices.

The small city of Burnie has been fortunate in its early isolation to avoid the chip on the shoulder rivalry between Launceston and Hobart. Launceston, a beautiful valley town, is fuelled on piss and pub rock. Where blokes tailgate, and girls titillate with goose-bumped muffin tops squeezed into bare-legged minis in the middle of winter, tottering on four inch heels, above a slick of adolescent sick, outside pub dives with bouncers hovering, chewing gum, recently released from Risdon Prison wearing nasty acrylic ill-fitting suits, to hide ink-gone-wrong on muscles once pumped full of steroids and protein powder, now gone to seed. Hobart, puffed up on self-importance, considers a good night out chundering beer and Subway in your mate's beanie for a laugh, or if you're posh, releasing the inner gimp for a pill-fuelled romp around Sandy Bay.

The northwest has long been seen as a place of so little potential, that the rest of the state sometimes seems surprised to hear its still there. It's precisely this quiet, flying under the radar, that has produced the best and the worst of the region. The awful blundering council-approved architectural embarrassments and the pristine naivety of place.

In the end it is quiet. It has integrity. You have to learn to make your own opportunity. Facing north, you look out over that horizon and follow your dreams. Kids have to leave the nest, find a life and come and go from the oyster of the world. That's a good thing, and it's one of the great privileges of island life.

NATIONALLY ARTS AND culture generate a similar slice of GDP as agriculture. Tasmania has long been a food bowl, so perhaps this bodes well,

two economies working together – a food bowl for thought. A place where the conditions are perfect for a cultural to add to the magnetic pull of this island.

In the language of marketing this would be perfect for the ‘Tasmanian Brand’. However branding becomes self-defeating when it attempts to harness arts and culture. Brands exist to motivate purchase, maintain loyalty, manipulate. The lack of authenticity in ‘branding,’ works against the spontaneous pull that Tasmania is currently enjoying. Culture is not primarily about commodity and purchase. People purchase the pearl, not the intense and lengthy process of ‘aggravation’ that creates it. Impatient arts policy discussions merge with tourism policy discussions, they mistake the cultural process and try to manipulate it, to help drive the economy. Ultimately this kills the process, diminishes the art and excellence, stunts careers and there goes the oyster that laid the pearl – it’s a symptom born of managerial creep and risk mitigation infecting policy everywhere, as it tries to please cross-government thinking based on ‘efficiency myopia’. In response dedicated arts administrators, trying to be more relevant and gain traction across government, have adopted the managerial language of manufacturing. It is insidiously reshaping the arts, by reductionist grooming of policy, away from synthesis and towards analysis.

What Tasmania has, precisely because it is so small, is the chance to defeat this stultifying way of thinking. There is simply not enough arts clout in government to do much damage, no one in the Tasmanian government is really listening, so the organic cultural process continues to happen haphazardly, almost magically – like the annoying way truffles have to grow, underground, in the dark, left to their own devices. This is then fanned by the clandestine instincts and hard work of some smart public servants.

How lucky for Tasmania that MONA bubbled up, almost unhindered by government, nestled in unlikely Glenorchy, run by the class-clown who gambles for a living and collects classy art/porn, pays for it himself and doesn’t feel like he is owned by anyone? Would this lovely eccentric boutique museum/playground have happened if government-funded or arts policy-driven? Not a chance.

We are lucky that neither mainstream political party knows nor cares much about culture. At best art is seen as vaguely associated with recreation or an ‘event-driver’ to help fill tourist beds. At worst something to be wary of in case the photo-op looks elitist and alienates a marginal electorate.

Culture is the whole of life, it is the flow of time and ideas and practice, in which we live and breathe, while we reflect on the past and invent the future. It creates the rich soil in which society thrives. Artists are the worms in that soil, blind, slimy and producing shit to help fertilise.

This independence, non-interference and under-the-radar activity in Tasmania is also driving the artisan migration. Hopefully we can avoid the branding, bad policy, and the bean counters as consecutive governments lurch from poll to poll.

I LEFT HOME at the beginning of the 1980s, deferring further study at Sydney College of the Arts, and headed for the northwest coast of Tasmania by almost accident, full of ideals for social change, experimentation, dreams of making a living from art – generally being a wanker. Not much has changed.

Stepping off the ship in Devonport with a borrowed pushbike and a backpack, I cycled west along the coast road. It seemed the further I pedalled, the more frequently motorists used their horns – and fruity vocabulary – and the closer the logging trucks insisted on using my small sliver of gravel, weed and broken stubbies at the side of the road. They'd honk. I'd wave naively. They'd swear and then yell something about being green, gay, pink and brown – like a game of snooker.

That ride west, away from civilisation, took me into the stronghold of the Brethren tradition. Gospel Hallers – conservative dark suited evangelists who preached on street corners in black-pointed-polished shoes, stovepipe trousers with perfect creases, and white shirts with thin black ties. They seemed hip to me and kind of sexy: shy 1960s pop stars straight off the cover of a vinyl LP in Burnie's one record store. I'd cycle by and they'd fall silent, mouths agape as this lanky unsaved pestilence pedalled past on a pink Malvern Star, the inspired word of God reduced to a dribble, tongue hanging out, wintry icicle drool on the tip.

Pedalling into Burnie along the beachfront, I passed the monolithic paper mill that had sustained the town for generations, paying for teeth, school, shoes, doctors, funerals for mill families, who lived in brow-beaten weatherboard houses hanging from hillsides, creaking against the nor' westerlies, above the Pulp and the 'Port and Rail'. It was an old-school closed loop,

harvesting labour muscle from cradle to grave to line the wallets of far-away shareholders.

The pulsating Pulp, its shifts coming and going twenty-four hours a day, belched a thick concoction of steam and smoke across the small city and over Bass Strait. The Mill – like a cheap computer generated dreamscape from a B-grade apocalyptic zombie movie – sheltered under these strangely addictive clouds of steam and smoke, a heady cocktail of aromas, a sweet sort of off-salami smell with a top-note of dank sofa-bed. Yum.

Burnie was such a surprise after travelling through the hyper-real-lush-green of perfect pasture sweeping down to the sea, past contented cud-chewing bovines, who couldn't believe their luck to be gorging on the sheer bounty of it all. They'd blink with innocent ashtray eyes, without an inkling they'd soon be slaughtered and slapped on fine china, in the best restaurants and fed to long-lunching business cowboys, quaffing Grange while hardening their arteries and their hearts in one fell boozy-business-swoop while negotiating mill closures, downsizing, and redundancies in this post-manufacturing world where paper mills are as anachronistic as compassion.

Finally, around the last headland, my pulse quickened and nostrils twitched. I could smell Burnie before I saw her. That cauldron of industry, throbbing, belching and rumbling, nestled at the foot of her protective industrial gully, perched on the edge of Tasmania's equal second deepest port.

Day in and day out, hungry ships docked, cargo-holds agape while forests of rare hardwood, freshly chopped and chipped poured day and night from conveyor belts into the bowels of bulk carriers bound for China. Only to return a few months later as newsprint cheaper than could be made at Burnie's mill.

A selection of the finest were saved to be made into shiny smooth Reflex paper. Far too expensive to sell competitively, but a thing of local pride and beauty which soon helped bring about the downsizing demise of this venerable arcane institution. Gleaming reams of beautiful virgin A4, bound for photocopiers around the country complete with a little green and yellow triangles and the words 'Australian Made'. There's your problem right there.

Sometimes, with an easterly blowing and the mill pumping chlorine, detergents and other effluvia into Bass Strait, surf would be whipped into great plumes of pale industrial-strength foam that would fly across the road, blinding windscreens with beige snow. Kids would squeal in delight, lolling unbelted in family rust-bucket Holdens coming back with a boot-full of cray

from a weekend at the shack. Ahhh, the sweet smell of home and environmental negligence.

These ‘shackies’ often worked at the Pulp, which conveniently churned out truckloads of ‘Burnie Board’ – masonite. Nestled up and down the coast, alongside the fairy penguins and the muttonbirds, were colonies of wobbly masonite holiday shacks, pristine, crown-land, waterfront architecture, with a footprint lighter than Glenn Murcutt – each year a new room would be added from Burnie Board smuggled out by the uteload.

Burnie was an addictive, beautiful, austere and strangely forgiving community. Of all the Tasmanian tiny towns proudly calling themselves cities, Burnie, although the smallest, seemed the most city-like and strangely the most cosmopolitan. Busloads of Latvians and Poles would head for the backcountry and the cold Central Highlands to help build or maintain the hydro dams. Some settled in the northwest and kind of disappeared; after all, it’s not like they’re locals.

Burnie remained largely unaware of the derision in which it was held from the outside. A youthful Midnight Oil breezed into town, played to sell out crowds at the Menai Hotel, and later an emotional Peter Garrett and Rob Hirst sat up in their jimjams penning a song about the utter desolation of a place they didn’t have the time to understand. To Burnie it seemed a kind of a compliment.

*...This is my home
This is my sea
Don't paint it with the future of factories
I want to stay, I feel okay
There's nothing else that's perfect
I'll have my way
Brought up in a world of changes,
Waste product pedestrian limb from limb
Short changed by the surfing priest again
Two children in the harbour, they play their games storm water drain
Write their contract in the sand it'll be grey for life...*

Burnie – Midnight Oil

How would Mr Garrett know the beauty of living there, so close to a perfect lifestyle? In ten minutes you’re out of town and on the way to your

own piece of coastal paradise. They needed to stop and smell the smokestacks awhile.

TASMANIA IS REGIONAL. Being an artist working here, means being badged a regional artist. So much art made in the regions for regional audiences is very poor. Being tagged as a regional artist is damaging. Much art made in and for metropolitan audiences is also poor, but unlabelled. Definitions and labels can be useful. They often originate to draw attention to an issue, to ensure support. Defining a problem can create new infrastructure, establish territory. However labels tend to outlive their use-by date and create ghettos. The truth is most artists working in regional areas would be better off without the stigma of the term.

Fortunately something more creative is going on in Tasmania. Something that defies labels, and it must try and avoid definition. It is an organic and collegiate gathering of excellence in response to 'island place'. Ideas and aspirations are thriving across a range of disciplines. It probably would be best not to talk about it at all – but here we are.

As artists who happen to live and work in regional areas, we have to own this issue. We have to stop the false praise, stop romanticising our work, stop the excuses for mediocrity, and name it when we see it, rather than encourage it in the hope it improves. We must search for and self-fund our own professional development. Nobody owes us a living or funding. Ideas deepen through competition. Our competitors are global as well as local. And so we must avoid being branded Community Arts, Regional Arts, Community Cultural Development, or Community Partnerships. Use the labels, where advantageous, but avoid definition, contradict yourself, de-specialise, confound.

Artists pursue excellence and bring ideas into being with the whole world as a potential audience. If we live by definition, we die by definition. Sometimes we must refuse to network. We should avoid using business models designed for manufacturing to develop arts careers. Don't be categorised. Don't get linked in. Instead, explore your career as a long-term expression of self. Live on an island, away from the status junkies and dud-Diaghilevs. Instead, springboard from the exotica of this island narrative at the arse-end

of the world, to be part of international conversations and markets. Use the silence and space to support a unique vision and voice.

The population of Tasmania is about the size of Wollongong, and we have a state symphony orchestra. This doesn't necessarily mean Tasmania shouldn't have a professional orchestra, perhaps it means Wollongong should. It does however, mean finding audiences, building an arts company, finding a niche, and this requires creativity and flexibility, nimble negotiating. If we can't do it, move on.

A career in the arts in Tasmania fails when it's based on a sense of entitlement, when it bemoans the tiny amount of government funding, when it whines about philanthropy and sponsorship for the arts compared to sport. Instead, it thrives on outward looking qualities, the 'How can I help?' and the 'Saying yes' attitudes. When combined with creative problem solving, it can make Tasmania a near perfect choice for basing an international arts career.

BURNIE HAS ALWAYS enjoyed a strange underbelly of frankness. It seems to wear its sexuality on its sleeve, just so long as you don't mention it. On arriving, my first outing to try and make a few friends was to local life-drawing classes. The models my first evening were a rough-round-the edge, country loving, lesbian couple, with faces like smashed crabs and beer-bellies like melting snowmen – perfect to draw. Strangely they seemed to be enacting some kind of wild exhibitionist fantasy. Coming straight to Burnie, however, it didn't strike me as that odd. But it seemed strange that no-one commented. No-one even cleared their throat, not the old retired doctor with the quivering handlebar moustache; not the Baptist lady – who no matter who was modelling, always painted a vase of flowers; not the drawing teacher – who admittedly seemed off her tits on anti-depressants. It struck me that everything in Burnie was taken in its stride, providing you didn't mention it.

I'd cycle away from life-drawing on my pink pushy with a pannier full of pink tushy, past the Brethren preachers, up the quiet main street, to a church hall where a band I vaguely knew were forever rehearsing obscure covers from groups in faraway Scotland that they had learnt by ear, courtesy of an unlikely strawberry-haired teen listening to ham radio on a dairy farm in the wilds way up the coast, to sounds emanating from what must have once

been his gene-pool. I'd call in to the church hall, and unfurl a collection of hand-rendered lesbian soft-porn ink drawings onto the floor and the music would stop for a mental wank, a shrug, and then resume, slightly out of tune into the night, songs that nobody would ever want to hear in this forlorn town, where Slim Dusty was deemed a little too experimental.

Occasionally, I'd cycle up the treacherous hills and visit the belligerent but brilliant Slovak jazz pianist, who'd escaped the 1968 revolution by throwing a dart at a spinning globe. It hit Burnie – as far from Europe as possible – and he smuggled his wife and two divine daughters out squashed in the boot of a clapped out VW Beetle.

He was a fascinating man, tall, fearsome – and fascinated by himself. I waited fifteen years to get a word in: '...alright, Scott, you may speak now,' he eventually conceded in a rich baritone. He worked during the day as a child psychologist for the Education Department and at night played jazz in bars. I think he terrified the children back to sanity, by growling compassionately at them. Years later I cast him in a show for one of Robyn Archer's Melbourne International Arts Festivals, with a bunch of homeless people and saw him treat them with such hidden tenderness it made me weep.

There were many strange figures who peopled this micro-city – the stiff legged, slightly manic control freak lefty who worked a lifetime to build real lives for people trapped in institutions through disabilities; a horny cat loving music teacher with an over-active thyroid and an itchy smacking hand; a cranky old commie who ran Adult Education and seemed to believe in free-love and free photo copier paper, as long as it was used for anarchy, who nearly sent the department broke by giving a free education to anyone who asked nicely.

Amongst this strange Burnie cast I discovered some of the deepest and most inspiring friendships of my life. A wellspring of creativity ensnared my heart and brain igniting some kind of desire to create, and prevented me doing anything useful ever since. Burnie gave rise to ideas, from some kind of mini-mill, that filled page after page of that Reflex paper with scribbled possibility. It was out of this energy that an unlikely arts company, Big hART, was born, out of the pain and the brain-drain the town was suffering. Strangely it seemed the perfect place to establish a national arts company.

IN THE 1980S and '90s few people in Burnie noticed that, as the mill downsized, at the other end of town the safety nets were falling away. Few except the police, the youth workers, the domestic violence services, and the nightshift nurses at the hospital. Stick wounds and bruising with the full moon; premenstrual-petty-crime from angry young women; testosterone laden vandalism from hopeless suburban lone-white-wolf-lads; the homeless couch-surfers; the sex-for-a-six-pack, chicks old and inked by seventeen; all the usual transactions of a small country town.

It can be cold in Burnie, too cold and wet for people to stay out long enough to notice the kids sleeping rough under the town hall steps. By dusk, with comforting smoke wafting from chimneys, the good people of Burnie are tucked up at home in front of their wood-heaters, with three kids, three channels, meat and three veg.

Big hART began against this backdrop, with a friend and producer John Bakes, who grew up on a potato farm on the back blocks. He had an empathy borne out of working long hours with his crippled father in backbreaking spud farming work, with no time for school until he ran off to join the circus. John started touring tent performances around the agricultural show circuit and nurturing young artists who he thought had potential. I guess I was one of those. I was raw and John was patient. He was also a bit nervous at the size of the schemes and dreams that began to open up around Big hART. Burnie was a good training ground, a good place to stew, to think and experiment. Burnie was a lab, where it was possible to consider and reconfigure many different possibilities for the processes of making art.

Being away from the main centres of artistic endeavour, where peacocks strut in emperor's new clothes, it was easier to re-examine the processes that could be used to make, distribute and delight in art. Re-examine the unashamed attachment of art to commodity; the way we chronically endanger fledgling talent and ideas; the way we, as artists, hive off the arts from mainstream society into our own little ghetto – as if deliberately trying to decrease audiences, limit ideas, lessen potential for funding and careers. The whole city-centric shebang – the sponsorship-led, tourist-focused, moribund approach stuck out, like a nonsense, like not the way I wanted to structure the whole of my career.

In contrast, Burnie, as far from anywhere as you could see, provided an

unlikely springboard to start this large, new, athletic, nationally focused, not for profit, arts company.

Big hART became an experiment in developing new processes to fund, make, deliver and document unusual work in unusual places for audiences that don't usually venture into the hallowed halls of cultural institutions – people who frequently miss out on opportunity, creativity and its enjoyment because they are locked up or locked out. It became an experiment in telling the stories of those people who are almost invisible. The company based itself on a notion from one of Burnie's soothsayers, 'It is much harder to hurt someone if you know their story.'

The processes the company developed to create these stories/projects can take half a decade or more, and in the process of making the work, they address social issues – not on the stage, rather on the ground in communities, or in policy forums with government. National projects such as *Ngapartji Ngapartji*, *Namatjira*, *The Northcott Narratives Project*, *Junk Theory*, *Drive in Holiday*, *Drive*, *Yijala Yala* and many others have been landmark, award-winning projects of scale. Eight Coalition of Australian Heads of Government awards, a World Health Organization Award, an AFI, critics' awards, a Helpmann, among many others, have flowed to Big hART and the communities involved.

2012 marked the twentieth year of Big hART and this fascinating experiment in new art-making processes across many disciplines using large group collaborations. These days this company from Burnie is exporting its ideas and working at the most challenging end of Australian society, in places like the Pilbara, the Central Desert as well as rural Tasmania. Big hART partners with the resource industry, with government, philanthropists and communities. Documentaries and TV series made by the company have been seen by millions, Big hART performances by tens of thousands, and it is now exporting more and more project designs overseas.

And yet this is an arts organisation, run from that hotbed of culture – the northwest coast of Tasmania.

Interestingly, although Big hART ticks many of the most difficult boxes and is acknowledged for delivering exemplary projects, it remains only tenuously funded by the federal government's main cultural funding agency – the Australia Council, with a contribution averaging less than

4 per cent of the company's annual turnover. This can be attributed in part to structural and policy issues in the Australia Council. The agency calls for excellence from organisations but struggles to be able to fund it, essentially cost-shifting the funding for their priority areas to other departments and sources. Organisations of scale involved in difficult cross-discipline work, have to hide the cost of their processes and dumb down their innovation and experimentation to fit the funds available.

The Australia Council also struggles to afford to fund access – with all the extra costs, time and diligence this entails. Often meaning the Australia Council is a minor funding partner (with a prominent logo) in projects in remote, high need or dangerous locations, while staking its claim as the peak funding body for precisely this work.

Fortunately, with recent reviews and the addition of new vision at board level such as Robyn Archer as deputy chair, things could shift significantly. However you make few friends by questioning, critiquing or getting involved at Artform Board level to try and effect change. Public servants are too overworked meeting efficiency dividends to hear it as anything but disgruntled carping.

ONE OF THE most liberating things about living and working in Tasmania is you feel freer from the eyes upon you. You spend less time second-guessing an imaginary audience of your peers, or imagining quite so strongly the success of others, where you are on the ladder, or whether their gains are your losses. It feels as if there is more room for your vision to develop without the 'illiteracy' and dumbing down that comes from too much exposure to ideas. You don't see owls, foxes, swallows, anchors, etc sweeping like a virus across a hip aesthetic – or the latest marketed fab fad.

Island life can be a harbour for your own vision rather than incremental reinterpretation, or clever footnote, or nuanced reference. Finding your vision or voice is like discovering a naïve parallel universe of thought – an expression of self – not a search for originality. This can be more difficult in the urban environment, because space, silence and time are at a premium and the clamour for, and proclamations of, 'originality' can be deafening. And now that criticism has come to be seen as a kind of consumer protection, rather

than an invitation to risk more and fail brilliantly, this atmosphere of shrill critique can be toxic for creativity.

There are of course many advantages to creating in urban centres, however island life, especially rural island life – for all its disadvantages – can help protect against these vanities. Eventually, in the creative journey, as an artist matures, the false longing for gongs and stimuli gives way to a desire to mine deeper silent seams of experience, rather than a fascination with the perpetually new.

This maturing can seem less fashionable because it is seen as the end of a market, rather than one emerging, and the ‘new’ provides the best fix for the status junkie. Maturing artists often create natural islands for themselves, even in the midst of busy urban environments, to accommodate this deepening process – giving Tasmania a kind of magnetism.

Although the island mentality can also create a sense of ‘over there,’ and regret that everything is happening elsewhere, it can breed resilience, a ‘how can I help?’ ‘nobody owes me a living,’ hunger to achieve and contribute. And this perspective opens doors.

Brilliant younger artists of every generation have to battle their way through the preoccupation with identity and the tribal uniform of their peers. Wander through the lanes of Melbourne; count the ‘on-trend’ beards; the quasi-Italian motor scooters; the anaesthesia of social-media; 140-character infantilised-e-intellects, it is both wonderful energy and wasted wank.

Amongst the immense talent of this new generation of artists, the feeling your back could be stabbed by whispered splintering ironies, by those who keep out the cold wind of their own failure with a cloak of sarcasm, can be a debilitating environment for fledgling talent to thrive. Those who persevere will do so partly because they found clear air for their own voice, and rural island life can also be restorative in this way.

There are tough lessons ahead for younger artists who have been brought up in the good times, with parents who needed to be their friends foremost, pandering to whim. It’s hard enough to get match fit for the athleticism required for creative life. The expectation of mentoring, of doors opening, of someone cutting a swathe through the jungle of opportunity doesn’t fit reality. Things are tough and getting tougher. It’s those who can imagine their future through the tears of gruelling resilience, and innovate it into being who will succeed. Tasmania and its point of difference can provide clear air and

intellectual space for avoiding the toxic and predictable, silencing the head and freeing up time.

Space and horizon and rhythm and boundaries are essential to creativity. Being able to raise the eyes and see beyond to the horizon, to watch it settle and change, to enclose but not cut off. The undulating rhythms of changing Tasmanian horizons have a satisfying scale, and a feel that seems to awaken the creative impulse, before a short walk to the pub.

ABOUT TEN YEARS after I first fell in love with the belching city, Burnie was well into its time of transition. Its beautiful industrial history and architecture was a thing of shame, and the clever thinkers at council, and the businessmen's clubs, seemed hell-bent on tearing down anything associated with this wondrous past – shopfronts, facades, warehouses, quaint streetscapes were to go. No doubt a plethora of crackpot cultural mappers and a confederacy of consultant town-planning dullards had been through. Soon everything was to be slavishly reinterpreted to mirror the architectural triumphs and seaside colours of such aesthetic success stories as Cronulla and its clones.

Yes, same as regional towns all over, every footpath was to be covered in the ubiquitous cheap paver, every lamppost powder-coated in three tones of aqua blue. Triangular shade-cloth sails and faux-archways sprouted in the main street. The town needed a new heart apparently, but they couldn't afford one, so the 'place-makers' prescribed a civic pacemaker of mosaics and mermaids and land markers. The 'cultural consultants' aesthetic wrecking-ball was let loose, buildings and streets and facades – distinct, quirky and attached to story – were replaced with monotone monuments to pre-fab mediocrity, another cereal box streetscape, focus-tested to the edge of architectural asphyxiation, rolled out to pretty up memories of an ugly industrial past, an anaesthetic white-wash over the rough-diamond-beauty of Burnie.

And on and on it goes, over the decades, 'What next?' Umm, how about a monstrous cement car-park on the best waterfront corner in town? 'Yes thank you.' A prefab concrete slab-sided apartment building that would be decried in New Delhi for its architectural bastardry straddling an age-old volcanic dolomite rarity. 'Excellent choice.' And now that the Pulp has

finally closed, should it be a wonderful precinct that facilitates the emerging ideas, artistry and boutique innovation of the future Tasmania, with a public art-making precinct? Definitely not, let's throw up one of those important cornerstones of civil society – a Bunnings. Well done, Burnie. Well done Tas – the smart state, the holiday state, state of denial, state of 'whatever'.

All this could fill you with despair, yet strangely it kind of fits with this history of utilitarian destruction. A place forged by waves of unspoken genocide, experiments with another destruction, from behind the twin blinkers of shame and survival. With this atmosphere people continue to move away, others arrive and some of these are artists and artisans. There is optimism and a sense of waiting for something to arrive on the northwest coast. Change happens, but fewer people notice, things are wrecked, but more slowly, other things are built up.

Something about the island is shifting. The sleeping magnetism is yawning awake. People feel its pull. Many are ideas-careerists at the height of their powers, deepening their investigations, seeking a platform to explore new, more balanced ways of working. Somehow in the island state, the ducks seem to align, like stars (and metaphors). The scale of the place; the romance of the distinct sharp seasonal transitions; the crystal clean air; the elixir of tank-water; vegetables that burst from soil to plate crying 'eat me'; a new favourite vista over every hill; nostalgia mixed with wood-smoke and home-baked-dream-cakes.

It all seems so perfect, except occasionally, when in season, someone starts shooting their quota of ducks. Brings you back to reality.

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