

# Positive Vibes: A dream future

Andrew Purvis

I couldn't explain why I had been away from my hometown for so long. Throughout the years spent as an independent curator and essayist in cities like Berlin, New York, Tokyo and London, I was often asked by bemused gallerists and artists: "Why are you here? Why waste your time in Paris when you could be in Perth?" In all honesty, I didn't have an answer. I hadn't been back since Perth experienced its great arts boom in the '20s when, with typical acumen and foresight, Premier Buswell along with a group of visionary philanthropists switched our state's economic focus from mineral exploitation to cultural development. Now, I hardly recognised my hometown. Whizzing through thriving commercial galleries on an efficient light rail public transport system and enjoying the lavishly funded public institutions down at beautiful Elizabeth Quay, I wondered why I had ever left. In my absence, Perth had become everything I ever wanted it to be and I wished I had stayed to help make it happen.

My dream may seem like an odd one, even a bit crazy, but really, when did optimism and a

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genuine sense of excitement about the future become so unfashionable? We hear a lot of doom and gloom about the Perth arts scene. A lot of people seem to operate under the unexamined assumption that the grass is much lusher on the eastern side of the rabbit proof fence. As an unfortunate result, we tend to suffer a kind of Perth diaspora, a constant sapping brain drain, whereby young art school grads fly for the tantalising prospects of Melbourne or Sydney, out the door before their mortarboards have even hit the ground. But that's not the case for everyone.

Potential and opportunity are largely a matter of perspective. For all the grumbles about what needs to change, perhaps the first thing to shift is our outlook. Maybe it's time that we started talking about all that is good about maintaining an arts practice in Perth.

The hustle and hubbub of Melbourne and Sydney isn't for everyone; our local art scene moves to a different rhythm. For some artists, the idyllic west coast environment and lifestyle may be more conducive to creative contemplation. Installation artist Rebecca Baumann agrees, "I have always found Perth to be a great place for making – the relaxed pace allows the space and time I need to be able to focus and disappear into my work."

For Baumann, Perth is an ideal base of operations – it is a place to process new influences, allow ideas to ripen and to develop new works. But that doesn't mean that her art practice is an insular one. "It has been important to have time away from Perth to see new things, have new experiences, and gather research. I have been lucky enough to



have had residencies and research trips to India, Berlin and New York, all of which have enriched my work and given me a sense of where my practice sits within a global context."

Indeed, Baumann is an international operator. Recently returned from exhibiting in Art Basel Hong Kong, the artist is currently preparing for a solo show at Auckland's Starkwhite gallery in September. There's been plenty of interstate attention too, with recent shows in Anna Pappas Gallery in Melbourne and a collaboration with fashion label Romance is Born at Carriageworks in Sydney. Baumann attributes her success to hard work, luck and the support provided by local organisations such as the Department of Culture and the Arts and Artsource.

Perth residents are all too familiar with chatter about our geographic isolation and the fabled 'tyranny of distance'. It was once supposed that our remoteness was an insurmountable inhibitor to maintaining an interstate or international arts career, but Rebecca Baumann is just one young Perth artist proving that this is not the case. Other examples are all

around us. Recently, the Art Gallery of Western Australia's own Robert Cook was invited to curate the annual Primavera exhibition at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art where he took the opportunity to showcase the work of Western Australian artists Jackson Eaton, Jacqueline Ball and Thomas Jeppe, amongst others.

Another young Perth artist who is seeing his work flourish on the interstate gallery scene is Abdul-Rahman Abdullah. He says, "the reality is that nobody cares about geography if the work stacks up." Having secured representation with Melbourne-based Dianne Tanzer Gallery + Projects as well as Perth's Venn Gallery, Abdullah is soon to be exhibiting at the Melbourne Art Fair and will be showing new work at the Jan Murphy Gallery in Queensland and the Campbelltown Arts Centre in New South Wales. He maintains an equally strong presence locally, recently exhibiting at the Fremantle Arts Centre and Moana Project Space.

For Abdullah, it was a conscious choice to push his career in a national direction. "As a West Australian artist you have to make the effort and spend the money, go over east and familiarise yourself with the galleries and spaces, meet people, go to openings and events, say hello and be a happy face. The fact is we need to show over east to get the audiences and to build a sustainable profile, it's a matter of maths." But despite this, the artist has chosen to remain in his hometown.



Perth's unique identity is a key component to Abdullah's work. The artist recalls growing up in 'crusty' Victoria Park, where for a 'curious kid on a skateboard' there was always something to see and do. But inside his family's 'classic rundown Californian bungalow', his mother's Malay heritage proved to be an equally formative influence. "The interface of suburban Australia with the global culture of Islam", an idiosyncratic mix typical of Perth, has shaped much of Abdullah's work.

Perth's geographic position, once seen as a detriment, is now touted as the city's primary selling point. Boasting an unparalleled proximity to South East Asia, Perth based practitioners have easy access to Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia and elsewhere. It's an acknowledged fact that it is easier and cheaper for Perth artists to attend the Jakarta Biennale than its Sydney counterpart. Other young Perth artists like Nathan Beard and Jacobus Capone are taking advantage of international residencies to enrich their locally based practices with a global dimension.

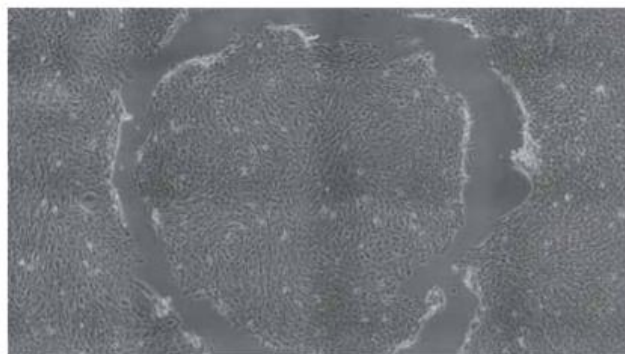
But with all this talk of international influence and interstate markets, we shouldn't forget that Perth can be an exciting destination, not just a convenient launching pad or cosy home base. International Art Space's Spaced program facilitates residencies in rural and remote communities throughout Western Australia for both international and Australian artists.



↑ Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, *Wednesday's Child*. Image courtesy of the artist

➔ Installation view, *Primavera 2015: Young Australian Artists*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. Image courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Australia. © the artists. Image: Alex Davies

➔ Rebecca Baumann, *Smoke Fields* (2012). 75 smoke canisters, 4.125m<sup>3</sup> coloured smoke, electronic igniters. 10 minute performance. Image: Brodie Standen



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Our unique landscape, history and the cultures of our diverse communities offer a rich and exciting array of influences for international visitors. It is not surprising then that some have chosen to adopt Perth as their home.

Performance and new media artist Loren Kronemyer relocated from Los Angeles to Perth in 2011, in order to study and work with the internationally esteemed SymbioticA. She is currently preparing a new performance work for this year's iteration of the Proximity Festival at the Fremantle Arts Centre. Another new arrival is Alex Maciver, who traded Edinburgh for Western Australia in 2011. The artist was “...intrigued at the prospect of entering a new art scene as an outsider; meeting artists, exploring new artistic influences, possible developing trends and experiencing a new gallery scene.”

Maciver and Kronemyer have been welcomed and embraced by the Perth arts community. Both artists have exhibited at Paper Mountain, benefitting from the strong supportive network

that operates out of this artist run initiative. Maciver was also the recipient of last year's Fremantle Print Award. At the time of writing he is due to open his new exhibition *PERF* at Melody Smith Gallery. The winking, elbow-to-the-ribs title hints at the significance Maciver's new surrounds have for him. The show promises interesting developments in the painter's practice, straying into areas of sculpture and performance, but, as the artist says, it also operates as, “...a confession that my immediate surroundings of Western Australia, its cultural mannerisms and my daily observations, are beginning to influence my artistic practice.”

Maciver is interested in giving back too. He says, “I have a lot of ambition to support the interests of local artists; encouraging the development of both their artistic pursuits and the Perth arts scene.” With this in mind, Maciver sees some room for growth in his new hometown, speaking about enhanced engagement between artists and funding bodies and a general improvement in artists' conditions.

Likewise, Abdul-Rahman Abdullah also has opinions on how the Perth art scene can get better, but his advice is to take note of what we already have: “We need to become more curious about each other here at home. There is a huge variety of practices right here that seem to have very little overlap and it would be great to see some worlds collide. A lot of this separation is generational or stemming from different art schools and social groups but ... we are all peers in an exciting, volatile industry and there is much more common ground than we assume.”

Abdullah stresses the importance of a positive outlook when it comes to the Perth art scene, urging us “...to celebrate each other's successes and back each other onto bigger stages.” There are huge grounds for optimism and positivity in Perth. Though we still have a ways to go before my dream of a great arts boom comes to pass, it's not impossible. We just need to get excited. ☺

↑ Loren Kronemyer, *Life Drawing Promo Cell Circle (detail)*, 2013. Image courtesy of artist.

➤ Alex Maciver, *Wherever I am, I am what is missing*, 2014, mixed media on canvas.

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