

The Guardian

David Malouf and Friends – artistic collaboration a Brisbane state of mind

To celebrate his 80th year, five Queensland artists have paired with the writer to create works inspired by his books. But are they any good?



Anna Carey's Pool Side was inspired by a line from David Malouf's Fly Away Peter. Photograph. Museum of Brisbane

Sharne Wolff

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David Malouf rattles off the names of fellow Brisbane-born writers - Thea Astley, Peter Porter, Jessica Anderson. Malouf spent the first 24 years of his life in Brisbane, a city he believes offers artists a “particular turn of mind”.

"I live in Brisbane in my head an awful lot of the time, and did for many years after I left," he says. "If you've grown up in what are sometimes referred to as one of the 'outlying states' - whether it's Tasmania or Western Australia, South Australia or Queensland - you're very aware that your Australianness is of a particular kind."



Author David Malouf: 'I live in Brisbane in my head.'
Photograph: Conrad del Villar/Museum of Brisbane

Born in 1934, Malouf, a Sydneysider these days, is celebrating his 80th birthday with a busy year of commemorative events and the release of two new books - a collection of poetry entitled *Earth Hour* and *A First Place*, a collection of personal essays. As part of the birthday celebrations, the Museum of Brisbane has teamed Malouf with five visual artists for a collaborative display of art and literature. Like the author, each of the artists has strong connections with Queensland.

Each artist selected a sample of Malouf's writing as inspiration. The resulting works were presented to Malouf who, in turn, drew on the art as visual stimulation for a fresh piece of writing. *David Malouf and Friends* includes both the artworks and the author's response.



Noel McKenna's Crematorium Bus. Photograph: Carl Warner

Notwithstanding the exhibition's title, the writer had only met one of the artists, fellow Brisbane Noel McKenna, before now. It's really the books that have brought the group together. Originally inspired by his schoolday memories of Malouf's poem, *Bicycle*, in 1992 McKenna published a small book in homage followed by a painting on glazed ceramic tiles. *Bicycle* is exhibited along with three unassuming line drawings painted on glass and set inside window-styled frames.

Each of the newer works responds to Malouf's novel *Johnno*, and illustrates the transformative power of language. Noting McKenna's ability to create truly memorable images, the author suggests it is "their plainness, detached as they are from all context or anecdote, their essential ghostliness, that makes them so subtly challenging".

Gold Coaster Anna Carey, an art world rising star, recently hosted her third solo show in Brisbane. Working with illusion and appealing to memory, Carey's nostalgic retro-style photographs of old beach shacks and old-fashioned apartment blocks are actually images of small-scale models the artist builds by hand. Photographs titled *Costa Vista*, *Hill Haven* and *Pool Side* draw on Carey's affinity with a line from 1982's *Fly Away Peter*, "... there was the coast: white sand with an edge of lacy surf, then whitecaps in the lines behind it, the limitless blue."



Camille Serisier's *Swan Song #7*. Photograph: Carl Warner

Sparked by a passage in the same Malouf novel, Camille Serisier reimagines a myth described in the book. Serisier, whose practice encompasses painting, photography and performative art, has constructed a life-size living picture (or *tableau vivant*) named *Swan Song #7*. An interactive stage-like setting invites the spectator into her narrative.

Malouf is both surprised by and interested in "the distance the artist moves from the writing to something that doesn't belong to a writing world, but to a visual and spatial world". Serisier has used the description of a transformation in the book to invent a human figure that morphs into a swan.



Bruce Reynolds's Bulimba Hydria. Photograph: Carl Warner

Another novel concept comes from artist Bruce Reynolds, whose inspiration for a range of layered works is the “landscape of unfamiliar objects” in Malouf’s 1978 novel *An Imaginary Life*. This fictionalised story of Ovid, the exiled Roman poet, led to Reynolds's series of plaster casts, reliefs and reclaimed lino assemblages. First appearances are deceiving. Playing with various materials, Reynolds's reconstructed classical objects are layered with witty references to the domestic kitchen and the Brisbane landscape - marrying the interests of artist and author.



Karla Marchesi has created a series of oil paintings.
Photograph: Laura Jung/Museum of Brisbane

Heat, humidity and the exotica of subtropical Brisbane are unmistakable in Karla Marchesi's series of oil paintings. Based on a line from Malouf's 1984 *Blacklock* lecture (now published in *A First Place*), Marchesi's semi-tamed suburban wildernesses somehow recall the city's "darkly luminous" spaces and "the key colour of green" even without the use of green hues in her palette. Now based in Berlin, Marchesi has drawn on the writing and memories of her own Brisbane childhood to create her lush and mysterious landscapes.

Through these exchanges of literature and art, David Malouf and Friends points to infinite possibilities. As to the encounter between a writer and his readers, Malouf believes writers "send their books out into the world to make friends for themselves".

David Malouf and Friends is at the Museum of Brisbane 16 May to 23 November

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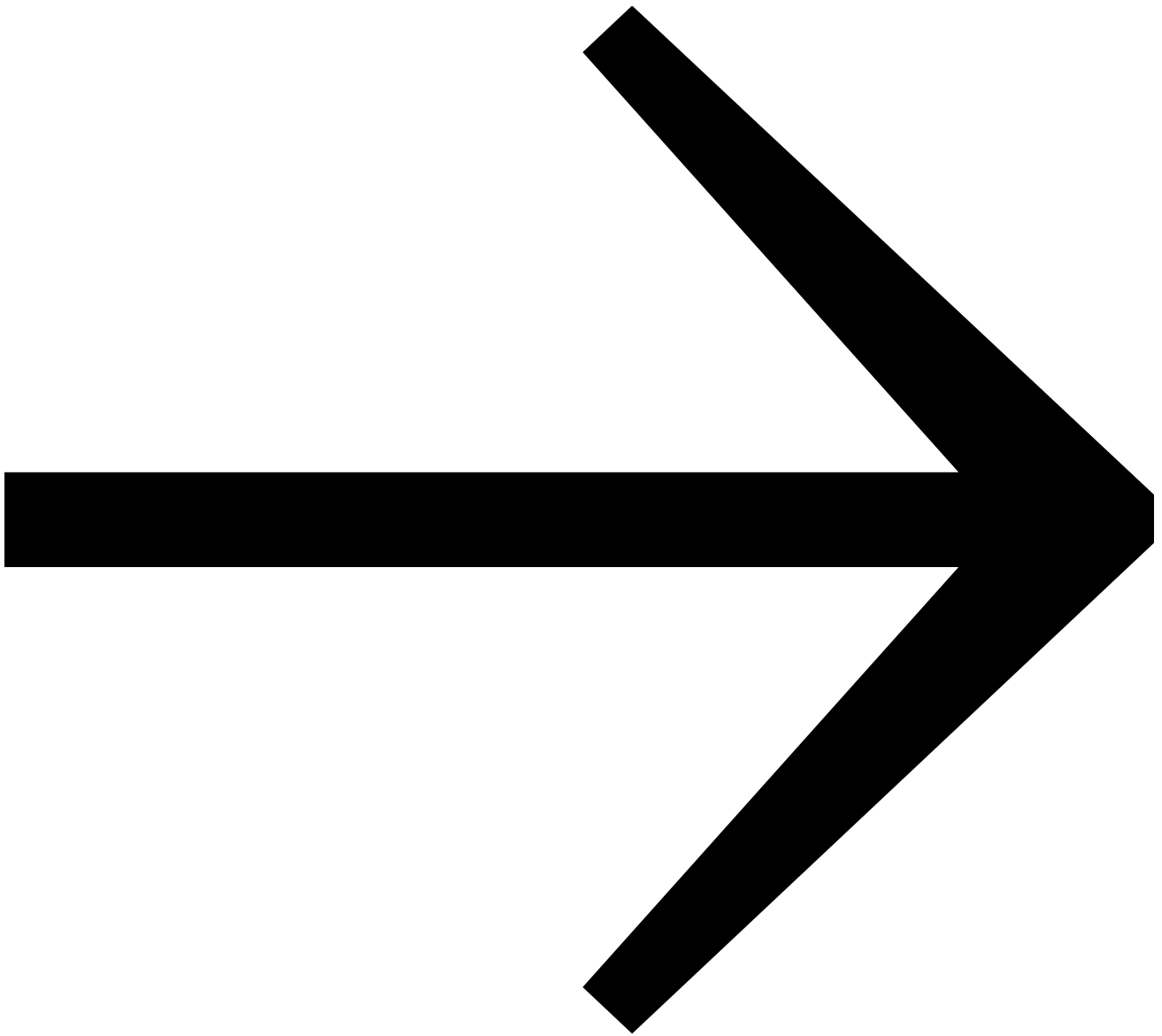
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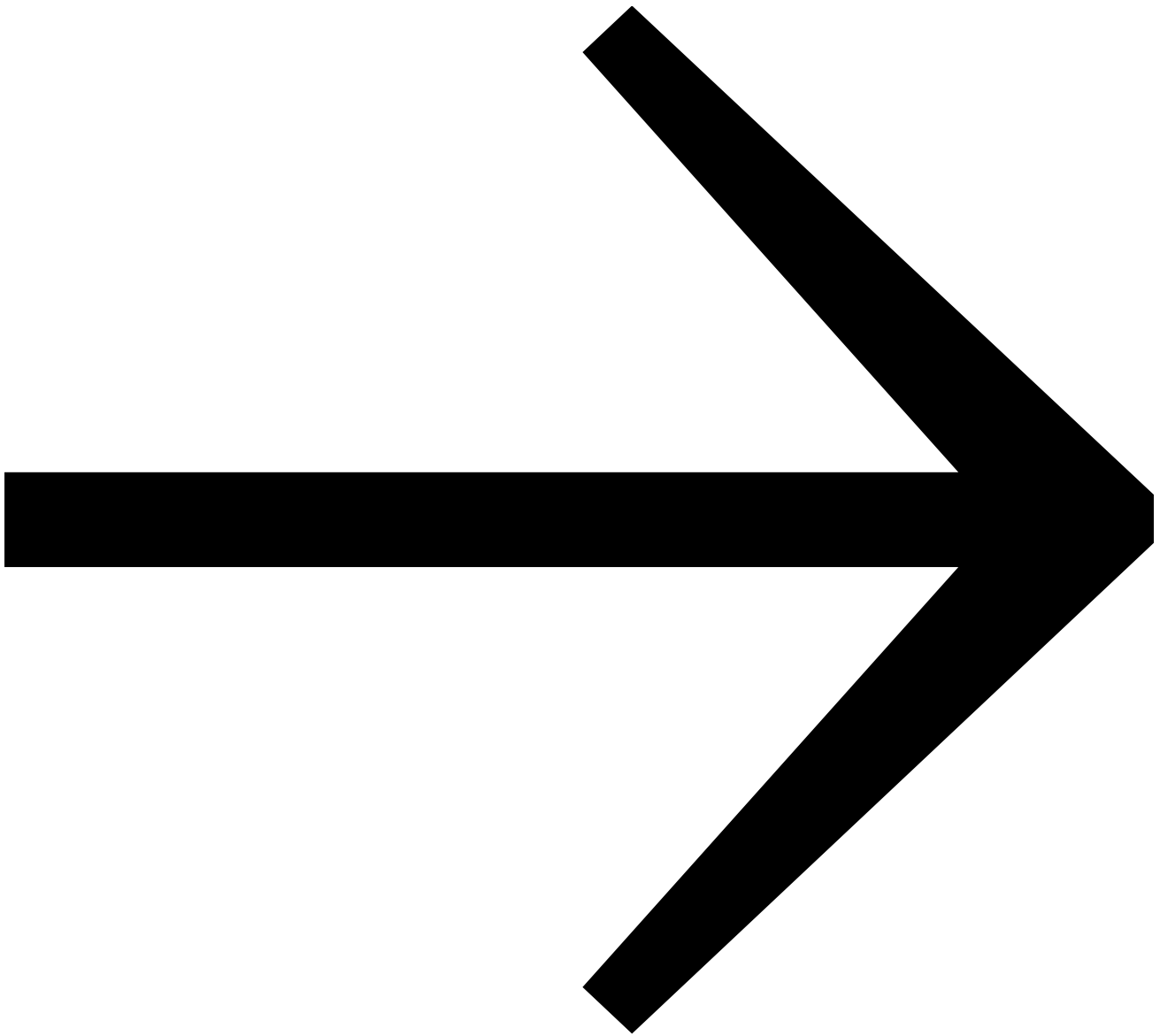
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