

THE AGE

Entertainment

MONA recreates the enchanted island still casting its creative spell

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**Andrew Stephens**

Senior writer

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Mathieu Briand was born in Marseilles, but lives and works in Melbourne. *Photo: Courtesy of the artist and MONA*

The island – small, with two humps – was lodged in Mathieu Briand's psyche long before he first trudged up the beach at the place that has since become so special to him.

Briand, a French artist, knew when he arrived on this small island – which he calls Libertalia – that it felt important. He had always been fascinated by isolated places. He wonders if he was born with the island inside him.

In 2007, Briand's sister, who was visiting his aunt on the island of Nosy Be, off the coast of Madagascar, sent him a photo showing a sandy beach shaded by coconut palms. But it was a smaller island in the distance that caught his eye. As soon as Briand saw it, "it became a motive and a motif".



Mathieu Briand, *Et In Libertalia Ego, vol. II.* *Photo: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image courtesy of MONA*

"I immediately fell under its spell."

The island became the focus of a long-term art project that has resulted in an exhibition at MONA (curiously on another island, Tasmania); the exhibition has been evolving with new artworks since it opened in September.

When he visited Nosy Be a year after he first saw the photograph, Briand decided to swim across to the smaller island, taking only one thing with him: a tri-cornered hat, like that worn by a pirate. It was a one-kilometre swim, though sometimes when the tide is low you can walk there. He believed the place uninhabited and had no idea what the island would come to mean to him, or what his presence there would do to the people whom, he discovered, had been living there for some time.

What he encountered on Libertalia, he says, has changed his life. He has been back seven times, most recently last month.

What was it that attracted him to this particular island? What made him want to swim across, late that afternoon?

"Maybe I was not attracted to the island, but the island attracted me," he says. He may have had no choice in the matter: magnetically, it drew him across – and embroiled him in a long-running story that has since conjured up black magic, the murkiness of colonial history and the complexities of human culture.

For Briand, the relationship he has formed with the island and its inhabitants has led to multiple artworks by him and his many artist friends, including Pierre Hughy, Christophe Perez, Juan Pablo Macias, Gabriel Kuri, Sophie Dejode and Bertrand Lacombe. His main impetus was to try and work outside the gallery and museum system, to find what he describes as a safe haven for contemporary art, where it can be made for its own sake, beyond the constrictions and financial constraints of the art market. The MONA show is a happy consequence, but it was certainly never his motivation for doing the project.



Mathieu Briand, *Et In Libertalia Ego*, vol. II. Photo: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image courtesy of MONA



The head of a zebu used in *Et In Libertalia Ego*, Vol. II, project by Mathieu Briand at MONA. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and MONA

Islands feature richly in art, literature and the cinema as places of isolation, mysticism and queer happenings. From the groundbreaking TV series *Lost* to H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to Umberto Eco's *The Island of the Day Before* or John Fowles' *The Magus*, islands in fiction are often presented as places filled with enigma, hidden in the mists of another world where a separate culture exists in contrast to the "real" world far away on a continental landmass. Often a traveller arrives through a shipwreck or other disaster and cannot find a way "home" to the "civilised" world.

Islands often appear in children's stories. Briand finds this interesting, as almost all children's books are written by adults, for whom a sense of an inner island has somehow persisted since childhood, a place perhaps of refuge and freedom for the imagination and the creative impulse.

Briand speaks of how he grew up in Marseilles, where the island Chateau d'If, famed as the site of Alexandre Dumas' adventure novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, was always in his view and in his consciousness, perhaps echoing that sense of an island that resided within him – a mythical or psychological place he has always been trying to get to.

Briand's project is called *Et In Libertalia Ego* and entering the exhibition's magical spaces is like embarking on a sort of enchantment. In many ways, it has the quality of a children's adventure story – tall ships, caves, secret huts, mystical trees and beaches. There is a golden glow about it, as if it were buried treasure (which it is, deep in the recesses of MONA). Afterwards, visitors might feel like they have been to Briand's distant island.



Mathieu Briand, *Et In Libertalia Ego*, vol. II. Photo: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image courtesy of MONA

At MONA, Briand stands before one of the many films reflecting his adventures on the island. It shows him dancing and watching the ritual slaughter of a large antelope-like animal known locally as a zebu. It is slaughtered under a sacred tree and the killing is part of the magic connection binding the people, and Briand, to the island. Beside the screen is a painting of a zebu which Briand made by using the animal's blood. One the other side of the room is a sacred tree alongside a replica of the studio-hut he built on the island.

In the small book Briand has written for the exhibition, he reprints a story first published in 1728 by one Captain Charles Johnson, an author about whom nothing is known. *The History of the Pyrates Vol II – Of Captain Misson* tells the story of the fabled 18th century pirate paradise Libertalia, also said to be off the Madagascar coast.

A combination of fact and fiction, it relates how Libertalia is a sort of utopia, a reaction to the economic, political and religious oppressions of the time. Briand's hope was to create a new Libertalia, a place where the artwork would be found in the process: research, experimentation and experience. Its realisation – the films he hoped to make, the pieces of art that might eventuate – would not be the object, but a consequence.

As it turns out, the exhibition is captivating and the various moving images, shadowy dioramas and nautically flavoured displays – none of which have labels or didactic text panels – simply make us intrigued to find out the back story, which is beautifully related by Briand in his small book.

As he writes in *Et In Libertalia Ego*, when he realised on his second visit that the place was inhabited – he met the patriarch, Papa, who is described as a sorcerer and prince, as well as head of a large extended family – he also began to encounter all sorts of rumours and stories about the island (including tales of a complicated court battle about its ownership). He felt he was "in a kind of waking dream".



Mathieu Briand, *Et In Libertalia Ego*, vol. II. Photo: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image courtesy of MONA



One of the most significant things he came to understand is that art does not have the same meaning for the people of the island as it does for him and his artist friends. For the islanders, there is ritual, sacred and magical art, with no exhibition space: it is lived. That is perhaps why the islanders were initially suspicious of Briand's work; some of it was destroyed, because it was believed to be black magic.

As he writes: "By confronting our two worlds on this territory, we cannot help but reach a new situation in which art will take on a new meaning: perhaps then it will become magical again."

Mathieu Briand: *Et In Libertalia Ego* is at MONA
until July 2016. mona.net.au



Et In Libertalia Ego, Vol. II, project by Mathieu Briand at Moná. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and MONA



Mathieu Briand, Et In Libertalia Ego, vol. II. Photo: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image courtesy of MONA

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