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# Thinking big pays off

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Noel McKenna was a scout on a camping trip when he visited his first "big thing", the Big Pineapple on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. The 16-metre-high fibreglass icon, officially opened in 1971, was a source of civic pride: visitors flocked and it won a tourism award.

McKenna would eventually become an artist of urban landscapes and suburban objects, often drawn to the strong visuals of the more than 300 tourist big things in Australia. "I don't know when the first one was but it became a bit of a disease other small towns followed," the bespectacled 56-year-old recalls in the cluttered garage studio of his Rose Bay house.

"Australia has this history of painting the landscape, usually just gum trees and stuff. I don't think many painters have painted the big things; it was overlooked."

McKenna studied architecture at the University of Queensland but a vague ambition was soon brought undone by his messy rendering with a Rapidograph pen. The lecturer took him aside and said: "I don't hold much hope for you to get through the course but I think your drawings have the potential to be art."

Convinced "country town" Brisbane back then invested little civic pride in art, McKenna moved to Sydney in 1981 and became collectible as an artist of the everyday: fibro houses he chose because they lacked architectural style, domestic pets and the younger of his two sons, Felix, dressed as Batman.

He began researching, then painting, a map of Australia, highlighting the locations of all the big tourist things he could find. He hasn't physically been to see many, painting about 20 from photographs, postcards or images sourced on the internet.

He has seen the Big Merino at Goulburn and the Big Orange at Berri, however, which, along with the Big Koala in Cowes, Victoria, figure among his big things paintings to date.

McKenna notes with a chuckle that a second pineapple was built next to a service station in Gympie but demolished in 2008.

"It was built to be bigger [by] about four inches so they could say: 'We have the biggest pineapple.'"

His painting of this copycat pineapple is included in a Museum of Contemporary Art show *South of No North*, in which curator Glenn Barkley has juxtaposed the Australian painter's works with images from two other artists. They are the New Zealand photographer Laurence Aberhart, 63, who photographs rural settings and buildings in danger of demolition; and the US photographer William Eggleston, 73, whose colour images of urban everyday subjects are lauded despite being derided by critics as snapshots rather than art 35 years ago.

"All three artists work on a diminutive scale and their works provide a window onto the world where you really have to *look*," says Barkley, who notes McKenna's big things "have this magical quality and we are rendered childlike in their presence".

A Catholic altar boy until 16, McKenna says the church's baroque sense of ceremony may have had a subconscious influence on his work, in which revered single objects are often isolated in the frame.

Going to art school and meeting artists who weren't church people, and the death of his very religious father when McKenna was 28, changed his view. "For me now, I'm definitely an atheist," he says. "I think religion's OK as long as it doesn't get too extreme."

Early Nolan and Tucker paintings and contemporary Ken Whisson works have influenced McKenna. Mostly, his ideas come from taking his film camera to suburbs by train - he doesn't drive - and walking that local world.

A map of Australia showing public swimming pools may be a clue to his next project.

"I generally have an attitude you can paint anything you like," he says. "I do things around my everyday world, walking around the streets. I get ideas from magazines, movies, TV. You just wake up every day and something comes to you."

***South of No North* opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art on March 8.**



Larger than life ... Big Pineapple, Gympie.