



# An exhibition to treasure

**Et in Libertalia Ego Vol. II**  
**Mathieu Briand**  
**MONA**  
 Until July 11, 2016

If the mental exercise of working out what a conceptual artwork is about may be likened to navigating a maze or hunting for buried treasure, Mathieu Briand's complex installation at MONA might be one of the most literal representations of that activity anyone interested in contemporary art could hope to encounter.

Libertalia, mentioned in the title, is a fabled pirate's utopia described in *A General History of the Pyrates* by Captain Charles Johnson, who – like Libertalia – may not have existed at all.

Real or not, Briand was fascinated and went looking for it. He found a tiny island off the coast of Madagascar and set about creating an artist's utopia there, naming it for the pirate kingdom that might never have existed.

Things did not go according to plan, however, for the island he found in 2008 had inhabitants. The story of the interaction between the artist and the people he met takes over the evolving process that is Briand's art: he tries not to get involved with island politics but it becomes inevitable.

The island family has its own ways, and there's a clear struggle between them and Briand to understand one another. Briand makes his art on the island and then brings friends, who do as artists do and make more art. The locals are unsure but recognise an opportunity and the project proceeds.

Briand does not get his anarchist pirate utopia, but stranger things happen: there is sudden drama about the ownership of the island, ritual animal sacrifice and desperate legal wrangling.

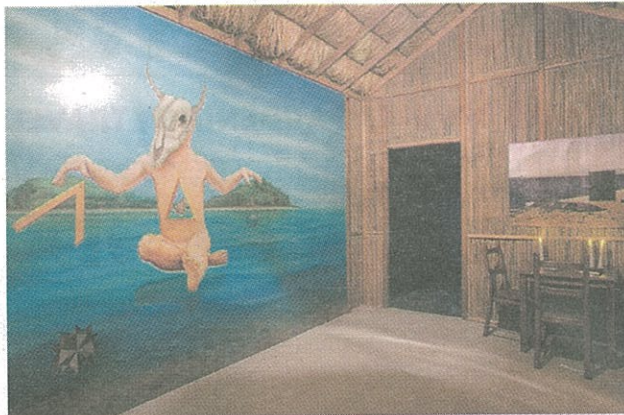
People end up imprisoned. Briand is more than an observer when the climax comes but he remains the narrator, and it's a moot question as to how reliable an observer he truly is.

Truth may be blurred with fiction but the story remains compelling. Sorting it all out is a task for each person who engages with this amazing collection of interwoven fragments.

The exhibition is a marvellous collage made of many elements. There's a beautiful outrigger canoe and a giant version of an incomplete wooden puzzle.

There are strange glowing sculptures, video works, a replica of a hut, which seems to be a duplicate of the one in which Briand lived. One may sit in the hut and peruse a selection of volumes of modern French philosophy and criticism, as long as you can read French.

It is important to recognise this version of Briand's project is a second take and a widening of the concept from its initial explorations. There is now another island with a complex historical context and history involved: Pitcairn. The infamous mutineers of the HMS Bounty settled Pitcairn Island. They were pirates of another kind who also tried to create a haven.



**ARTIST'S UTOPIA:** Elements of Mathieu Briand's MONA exhibition *Et in Libertalia Ego Vol. II*, include a replica hut, above, and glowing sculptures, below.



Pitcairn, the second largest of a group of four islands known as the Pitcairns in the southern Pacific Ocean, also has a troubled history. What emerges from Briand's Pitcairn experience will undoubtedly have a strong effect on what *Et In Libertalia Ego Vol. II* becomes.

It feels incomplete, a story still brewing, but this is the nature of Briand's art: he is fascinated by the journey, not so much by the arrival.

He went in one direction, but what he encountered has led him elsewhere.

It's possible he may never arrive at a final destination, but that's what life is like – it is rarely neat, things are not what they seem and there are dark secrets and questionable practices lurking around the corner.

Briand's work is telling a story by showing fragments and asking the audience to fill in the gaps, to construct their own version of events.



**BROUGHT TO THE FOLD:** One of Rosie Hastie's works using folded paper to look like landscapes, part of her *Folding Truth II* exhibition at the Salamanca Arts Centre.

**Folding Truth II**  
**Rosie Hastie**  
**Top Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre**  
 Until September 30

**Price:** 100cm x 67cm (image size) limited edition of 10 – \$1350 framed, \$1000 unframed; and 150cm x 100cm limited edition of 10 – \$1600 unframed

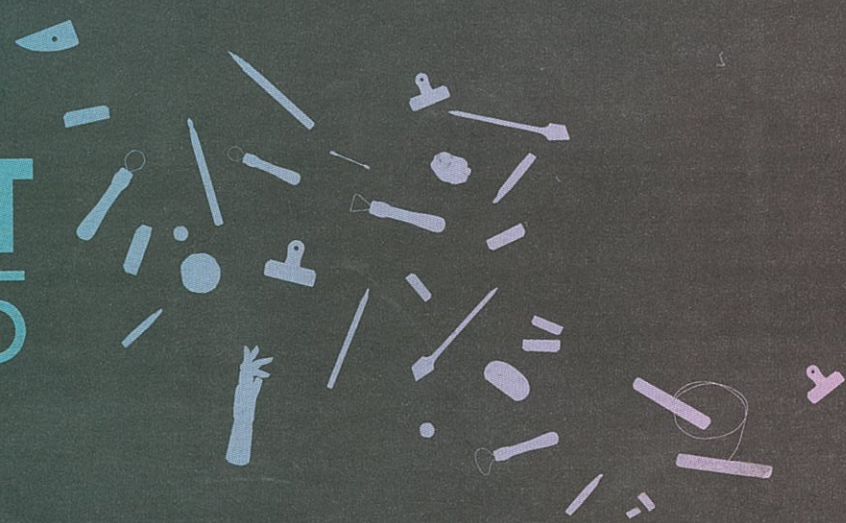
Rosie Hastie's photographs are a beautiful testament to the alchemical aspects of her medium. If alchemy sought to transform lead into gold, her photography is equally marvellous, creating visions of landscapes that do not exist.

On encountering these images, you might think you are seeing rocks on a bare mountain top, rising from mist and dew with the first touches of the sun. But closer inspection reveals it's all just crumpled paper. What appears to be fog rolling over a calm expanse of water at dusk is simply a cleverly lit piece of tissue. Even when you understand it's just paper, you still see a ragged coastline or still water.

Hastie has a photographic practice that seems to border on magic, but is the result of persistence and faith in sheer chance. Each image is the result of a long process. Hastie creates in the studio, carefully balancing different kinds of light and settings. She might take hundreds of images and none of them will be what she wants, resulting in laborious sifting and tweaking until something clicks into place. She limits herself with tight parameters, only doing with digital manipulation what she would be able to do in a darkroom, but accidents do happen. From them she makes her best work. Her work is experimental, creating parameters, testing them and seeing what emerges.

It's all too easy to get caught up in admiring her clever and patient technique. Beyond that, the images are beautiful studies of fleeting moments, with subtle and even unique visions of light created, captured and frozen in place.

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