

firstdraft

Gallery 4

2 June 2023 – 9 July 2023

Main Drag Easton Dunne

Main Drag is a solo exhibition by Easton Dunne that explores queer experiences and identity work through an autobiographical lens within the context of rural and regional Central Queensland on Darumbal, Ghungalu and Wadja Country. It reflects on the joys and frustrations of growing up in a rural and regional area as a queer, trans and non-binary person and then returning to live there as an adult after time away in Meanjin/Brisbane.

The exhibition consists of a looped video of Dunne driving from one end of Rockhampton to the other along the city's "main drag", combined with sculptures referencing signs and symbols from roadside billboards along the route. For Dunne, the act of driving itself is a significant marker of life in rural and regional areas. The infinite repetition of the video's deliberate banality conveys both the desire to "escape" experienced by many young LGBTQIAP+ people who grow up in rural and regional areas, as well as nostalgia for the comforting familiarity that the artist experiences in driving past locations of sites that hold significance for their own coming of age as a young queer person.

Main Drag also attempts to create a space for imagining a queer futurity that is entirely specific to Rockhampton and Central Queensland: one that has queer joy and belonging at its core. By resurfacing imagery and symbols from roadside billboards that the area uses to market itself to visitors and frame its own identity for locals with hot pink, fluffy faux fur that resembles cowhide, Dunne attempts to resist and reframe the hyper-masculine narrative that casts the area as the "beef capital of Australia", offering space for imagining an alternate queer utopia in this location through kitsch and camp aesthetics.

Presented by Firstdraft in partnership with Metro Arts, Brisbane

Metro Arts

Gallery 1

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Refugee Art Project + Taring Padi**

Gallery 2

**Staging Portraits: Queer
Community photos at the
Bearded Tit**

Dorcas Tang 邓佳颖

Gallery 3

Body Says, No
Danica I. J. Knežević

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Easton Dunne is an artist, artswoker and arts educator based in Central Queensland on Darumbal Country. Their work explores connections between identity and place through an autobiographical lens with a particular focus on LGBTQIAP+ narratives in rural and regional contexts.

They utilise drawing, sculpture, installation and time-based media to create autobiographical narratives offering their perspective on life as a queer, transgender and non-binary person who grew up in rural and regional Central Queensland and returned there to live as an adult after studying and working in South-East Queensland.

Informed by Rural Queer Studies, Dunne's work aims to facilitate dialogue and exchange between regional and metropolitan communities around how socio-cultural and geographical factors influence diversity in queer identity work and practices.

Dunne completed a Bachelor of Fine Art at Queensland College of Art in 2012 and a Postgraduate Diploma of Education at Queensland University of Technology in 2014.

Artwork

Easton Dunne

Main Drag, 2023

synthetic faux fur, mdf, timber, adhesive, looped video

video: 26 minutes 40 seconds

dimensions variable

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Essay by Kathleen O'Hagan.

There are numerous ways to gauge the speed of spaces.¹ A long-haul truck races, without a minute to spare, along the Bruce Highway. An Uber inches further, braking, jolting, across the William Jolly Bridge. Easton Dunne's solo exhibition measures time in the familiar circuit of Rockhampton's Main Drag, flanked by signs and signifiers of a rural queer idyll. Dunne curbs the temporal narratives which erect the urban as a 'progressive' liberated locale in contrast to the 'regressive' rural closet.² Instead, they signpost an alternative queer visibility – grounded in and framed by regional identity. Viewers are greeted immediately by the exhibition title's wordplay, which hints at Dunne's playful recoding of the streets of Australia's 'beef capital.'

Time *drags* on like rubber against concrete. Expanded across the gallery's centre, a video recounts a twenty-five-minute loop navigating, via car, Rockhampton's broad streets. Dunne reflects on the 'half-life' of their adolescence spent in the rear-view mirror. The video tours landmarks from their youth, herded between their Catholic boarding school and family's isolated cattle property. The immersive projection is recorded in real-time and from the perspective of a dashboard camera.

There are traffic islands paved with palm trees, Motor Inns painted with hibiscus, and according to the road signage Mackay is only 338 km away. The central city is split by the serpentine current of the A1 motorway, intersected by Tunuba (the Fitzroy River) en route to the Great Barrier Reef. Flanked by 'Big Bull' statues, 24 hr truck-stops and 'A Man's Toyshop' hardware store, the viewer is provided key identifiers of 'Rocky' life and industry. As *Queering the Country* argues, 'what it means to be rural is mired in powerladen signs.'³

For many queer individuals, their relationship to rural and regional places is integral to their self-identity.⁴ Yet these connections are not without discrepancy. As Dunne states, while having an

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'acute sense of [their] own queerness and transness on a subjective level,' the billboards and signs meant to instruct gave no 'social or cultural representation' of who they were. The difficulty of identity-building for queer youth is intensified by the 'politics of LGBTQ visibility', which portrays 'backwards' regional communities 'as the last place [they] should be'.⁵

Queer theorist Jack Halberstam defined 'metronormativity' to describe the binary which informs stories of queer migration.⁶ The need to 'escape' the constraint of rural life is imprinted in narratives of coming out and the emancipatory power of the 'big city'.⁷ Thus, rural queers challenge dominant conceptions of rurality, not by producing new expressions of queerness, but by harnessing existing social and cultural signs in unique and imaginative ways.

Dunne utilises camp and kitsch aesthetics to remould the hyper-masculine and over-idealised iconography of their home town. Boldly shaped billboards, enveloped in neon pink faux fur, line the walls of the gallery space. Two sit on either side of the projection screen, like sentinels straddling a flamboyant thoroughfare. In *Feeling Backwards*, Heather Love argues for camp's 'backwards' pull, a temporality paradoxically ascribed to rural spheres.⁸ Camp betrays a 'stretched' adolescence with its yearning for lost pleasures and a dogged attachment to forgotten fashions.⁹

Like camp, drag is a 'backwards' art. Its exaggerated pantomime of bygone celebrities and songsters revels in our 'pop' cultural past. (As do cowboys, in leather boots.)¹⁰ Pointedly, Cameron Crookston contends that drag's 'backward-facing' perspective is an indispensable way for queers to create and connect with their own histories.

Dunne's hyperfeminine aesthetic (think PINK!) and use of 'fly' faux fur addresses their own Y2K upbringing. In conversation, they recount Elton John's crooning voice on the car radio, and the unmatched pageantry of the Friday night rodeo. As such, Dunne's billboards fuse icons of rural brawn and bliss with effeminate fun. Their chosen fabric imitates the vivid tactility of fluffy cowhide, warmed by the morning sun.

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Beach Bliss. Bush Battlers. Boom or bust. Dunne's six upright signs recast images Rocky usually paints for itself. Each maintains its own chosen theme such as fast food, surf, and turf. A focal point of the exhibition, a large sign proclaims, 'Welcome to Paradise!' The irony of this greeting is not lost.

As Dunne states, 'Whose paradise? Is it paradise for the First Nations people whose land has been stolen? Paradise for queer or trans people like me who sometimes struggle to access adequate physical and mental health care?'¹¹ Thus, their aesthetics of gaiety are equally serious in their confrontation of regional Queensland's continuing colonial legacy. As the visitor guide attests, 'you simply can't experience the Rockhampton of today, without an appreciation of days' past.'¹²

By peering backwards, Easton Dunne reimagines a queer past, present and future for their regional community. Main Drag provides an alternative pathway to rural belonging, paved by distinct markers of queer visibility. Indeed, as this exhibition travels from Rockhampton to Brisbane to Sydney, and back again. Influence runs both ways, as does our National Highway.

Footnotes

1 Lucas Crawford, "A good ol' country time: Does queer rural temporality exist?," *Sexualities* 20, no. 8 (Dec 2017): 881.

2 Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 9–11.

3 Colin Johnson, Brian Gilley, and Mary Gray, "Introduction," in *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, ed. Colin Johnson, Brian Gilley, and Mary Gray (New York; London: New York University Press, 2016), 12.

4 Johnson, Gilley, and Gray, "Introduction," 14.

5 Mary Gray, *Out in the country: youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America* (New York; London:

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New York University Press, 2009), 168.; Andrew Gorman-Murray, Gordon Waitt, Chris Gibson, “Chilling out in ‘cosmopolitan country’: Urban/rural hybridity and the construction of Daylesford as a ‘lesbian and gay rural idyll’,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2012): 77.

6 Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 36–37; Gorman-Murray, Waitt, Gibson, “Chilling out in ‘cosmopolitan country’,” 71.

7 Johnson, Gilley, and Gray, “Introduction,” 14.

8 Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.

9 Halberstam, *Queer Time*, 135; Nishant Shahani, ““Between Light and Nowhere”: The Queer Politics of Nostalgia,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 4 (2013): 1220

10 Cameron Crookston, “It Feels Like Yesterday: Drag, Nostalgia, and Queer Affective History in The Vaudevillians,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 69, no. 5 (2022): 877.

11 “Meet the Rockhampton Artist Queering the Beef Capital,” interview by Nate Woodall, Q News, April 6, 2023, <https://qnews.com.au/meet-the-rockhampton-artist-queering-the-beef-capital/>.

12 “Rockhampton,” Tourism and Events Queensland, Accessed 15 May, 2022,

<https://www.queensland.com/au/en/places-to-see/destination-information/p-56b25da32880253d74c450f4-rockhampton>.

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