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# THE ARTFUL LODGER

AUSTRALIAN PAINTER MICHAEL JOHNSON'S SHORT TIME IN QUEENSLAND CHANGED HIS WORK AND THAT IS REFLECTED IN BRISBANE'S FIRST ART HOTEL, WHICH IS NAMED IN HIS HONOUR

PHIL BROWN

Having a hotel named after you when you're still alive is a compliment and quite handy. The acclaimed Australian artist Michael Johnson thinks so. Particularly when it means there's a room available for him any time he needs it.

The 78-year-old award-winning painter is chuffed about The Johnson, the newest of the Art Series Hotel Group's properties, which opens in Spring Hill, in inner Brisbane, next month.

The hotel group has given the heritage-listed former government building, designed by acclaimed Viennese émigré architect Karl Langer and built in 1967, a \$155 million makeover. It will feature 193 residential apartments (with original concept by Woods Bagot architects), 87 hotel suites with interiors by Mim Design and a restaurant, Tumbling Stone, named after one of Johnson's artworks.

Langer was a modernist architect and the substantial former office building, which is heritage-listed, is an excellent, intact illustration of his commercial work and a fine example of a mid-20th century highrise.

Johnson, a Sydney-born abstract artist, knows it well and wistfully wishes the hotel component had been there in the 1970s when he used to park in front of what was then the former Main Roads Department building on his visits to Brisbane.

"I was living in Townsville at the time," Johnson reflects when we chat over lunch in Brisbane. "I was an artist-in-residence at James Cook University. Now and then I would drive all the way down to Brisbane for the weekend and would park my car in front of that building and stay with a friend of mine across the road. I always admired the building."

Johnson says there are some nice artistic synergies around the relationship between artists and hotels.

"Matisse once lived in a hotel in the south of France and painted many beautiful paintings from his hotel window," Johnson says. "Bonnard also lived in a hotel and painted on the walls."

But Johnson's gone one better, having a hotel full of his work named after him.

The Johnson is the latest in a series of acclaimed properties developed by the Art Series Hotel Group, which is owned by the Melbourne-based, Asian Pacific Group.



Tumbling Stone (2009) by Michael Johnson.

There's The Olsen on Chapel St in South Yarra, Melbourne, themed on the work of John Olsen; The Blackman, not far away from that one on St Kilda Rd, a tribute to Charles Blackman; and The Watson, at Walkerville in Adelaide, in honour of the indigenous artist Tommy Watson. There's also The Schaller Studio (Mark Schaller) in Bendigo and The Larwill Studio (David Larwill) in Parkville, Melbourne. The hotel group has an in-house curator, Jane O'Neill, to manage the art once it's in situ.

Sydney doesn't have an art hotel yet (something Queenslanders have noted with glee) and Brisbane may have two before they get one, because another is planned for the new Howard Smith Wharves precinct in Brisbane, although the artist for that project hasn't been announced yet.

The Art Series Hotels are all themed on the artist whose names they bear. That means the artist's work is featured

throughout the hotel, each room will have several works and a book on the artist, and a dedicated video channel will run material about the artist.

The man who chooses the artists in consultation with the hotel group is writer and curator Ken McGregor, 56, who serves as art adviser.

"It was my concept and it's my job to name the hotels and get the artwork into them," McGregor says. The elephant in the room when it comes to the Brisbane property is this question: why not choose a Queensland artist?

"I chose Michael Johnson for Brisbane because a lot of his work is based on nature and was inspired by his time in Townsville and the colours of the rainforests of Queensland," McGregor says.

"I thought hard about this and he seemed right for Brisbane. I did think about having it named after a Queensland-lander, somebody like Ray Crooke, but you can't have a hotel called The Crooke, can you?"

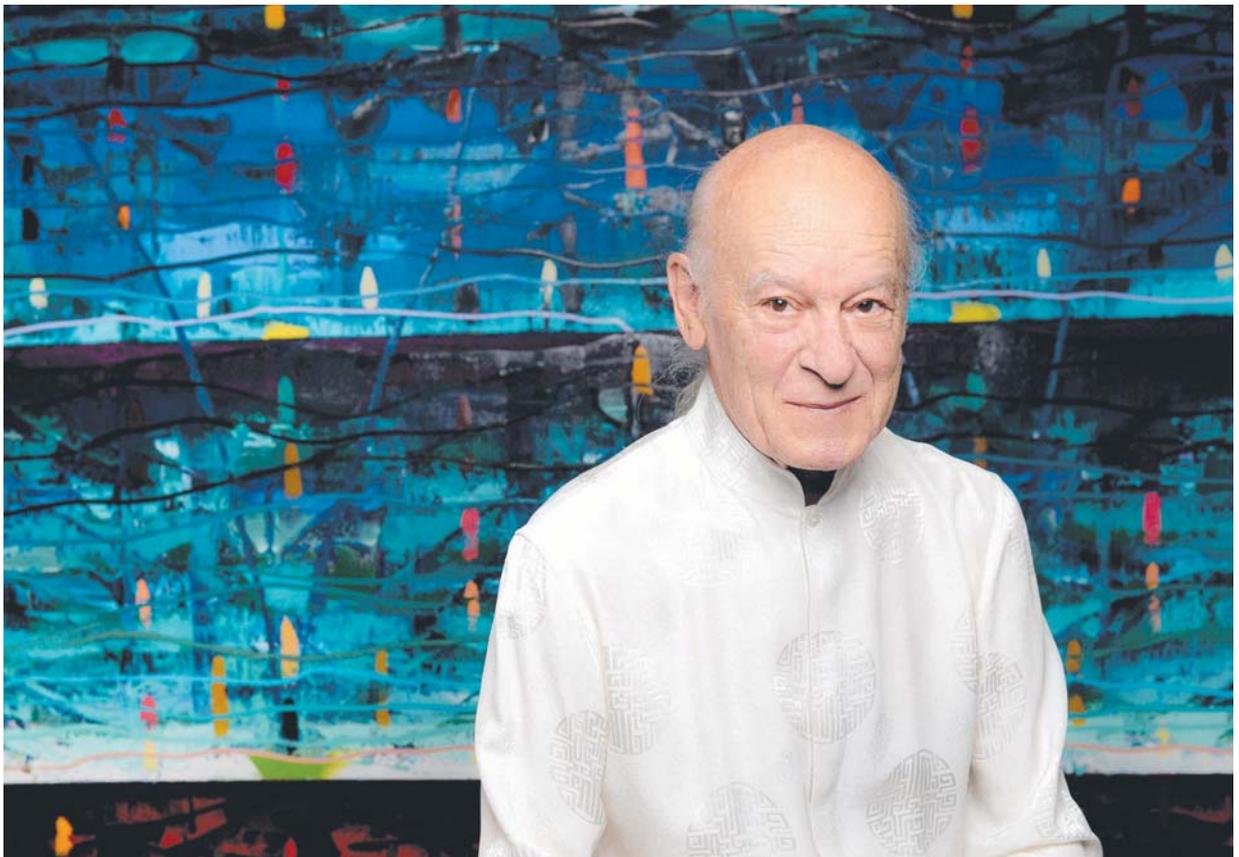
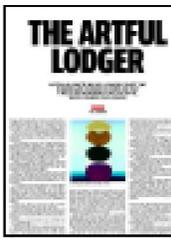
Chief executive of the Asian Pacific Group, owner of Art Series Hotels, Will Deague, 38, says he has often been asked "why don't we choose an artist from Queensland and why not a woman artist?"

"We choose an artist we think is right for the area and the design of the building," Deague says. "Michael works well for Brisbane, I think. The Johnson is going to look fantastic, although it has been a big and difficult project. We bought the building off the State Government and everyone knows it as the former Main Roads Department building. People still turn up looking to get their driver's licences."

**ARCHITECT KARL LANGER, WHO DIED IN 1969, WAS REGARDED** as one of the fathers of modern architecture in Queensland. He was a significant cultural figure, as was his wife, Gertrude Langer, who died in 1984 after serving as *The Courier-Mail's* art critic for many years.

Deague describes his hotel in Langer's building as "a game changer" and says the art theme is a point of difference that customers love.

As for the Queensland connection, well, at least Johnson did live in Queensland, and even though it was only for a year, it was perhaps the most significant year of his career.



(Main picture) The artist Michael Johnson in front of his work *Cerulean* (2008); (top) an artist's impression of how The Johnson hotel at Spring Hill will look.

In the book *Michael Johnson* by respected writer and curator Barry Pearce, the author describes how Johnson, who was living in New York in the mid-1970s, was trying to decide whether to stay in New York and follow his minimalist abstract path or come back to Australia.

Johnson needed some reason to return or he would stay and "become an American artist".

Luckily the residency in Townsville turned up and Johnson, his wife Margo and their two children, Matthew and Anna, moved to north Queensland.

"Leaving New York in May 1975 with his family, he stayed in Paris for a month, then Thailand for three months, arriving in Sydney in August," Pearce writes.

"After a few days, he moved up to Townsville to assume residency at James Cook University, and became overwhelmed by the impact of being back: 'When I got to Townsville, I was really impressed to find the courtyard of life in Australia ... I went into the landscape and felt so good to be among the dwarf white gums and beautiful dry creeks ... I did this quiet vault from New York into my own home, Australia.'"

Johnson still talks fondly of the year he spent in the

### A LOT OF HIS WORK IS BASED ON NATURE AND WAS INSPIRED BY HIS TIME IN TOWNSVILLE AND THE COLOURS OF THE RAINFORESTS OF QUEENSLAND



north and his eyes light up when he talks about fishing trips and expeditions into the rainforest and to the Atherton Tableland.

"I was so invigorated to be back in nature," Johnson recalls. "My time in Townsville stimulated me so much, it refreshed my work and changed my style."

He has exhibited twice in Brisbane in recent decades at Philip Bacon Galleries and he's about to have another exhi-

bition of sorts here, the biggest he's ever had, in fact, when the hotel opens.

The exhibition will feature three of his major works in the foyer and there will be about 400 prints of 30 works in rooms, hallways and other spaces.

The hotel will have smart cars branded with Johnson's work for hotel guests to hire and will also have a gym, bar, cafe and 50m pool with a sun deck designed by Olympic swimmer Michael Klim.

Johnson says he will travel to Brisbane again sooner rather than later, now that he has a room waiting for him here. Who knows, he might even become a sort of occasional artist-in-residence. John Olsen does a bit of that in Melbourne apparently, and the venerable artist is not averse to meeting and greeting admirers when he lunches at The Olsen.

Johnson says he is in good company and is honoured to have a hotel named after him, particularly since it's in a building he has long admired in a state he loves and still yearns for from time to time.

"I miss Queensland," he says. "I miss the mud crabs and mangroves. And the rainforest." ■