

Through joy, love, and pure admiration for her people – she makes space for voices and bodies, often overlooked, and left out of mainstream art discourse. Hobson’s love for the natural environment is exemplified through her ability to capture all living things. An example of this is evident in her photograph *Still*, where two boys are pictured standing in shallow, amber coloured water, a branch of a tree in their hands. Hanging from the edge of the branch is a sleeping flying fox – wuki – which the boys had found that afternoon while walking along the riverbank. Wuki come in abundance on the Coen River. Before time, the old people would hunt and cook them on the coals by the riverbanks.

Hobson talks about the spontaneity of her photographic process and explains that she’s often capturing people in the moment – very much present in their environment. In *Delicate*, a young woman is photographed with a brown spotted butterfly – paal paal - resting on her fingertips. The butterfly’s wings are on full display, and we are reminded once again of the fleeting encounters between humans and the natural world. Notably, Cape York is home to over sixty percent of Australia’s butterfly species, many of which reside on Hobson’s mother’s Country on the McIlwraith Ranges.

*Butterflies are everywhere at this time... it’s their time of the year because the rain and heat mixed together breaks the environment down creating exude from the wet wood, fruits and flowers, a condition butterflies and so many other bugs and insects love.”*<sup>4</sup>, the artist explains.

Through these images, the colours of Coen’s wet season are on full display, and, with all the bugs, birds and insects, food gathering and love of the river, this relationship is captured in all its glory. Most importantly, the photographs pay homage to the preservation of Indigenous custodianship of the natural landscape along the river that has been practised for thousands of years.

In a time of global climate crisis and changing weather patters, the knowledge of seasonal life, and peculiar habits of the creature world are all deftly interwoven. Here, Naomi Hobson presents a celebration of life, joy, and connection to the natural world.

by Shonae Hobson  
Kaantju, Umpila, Kuuku Ya’u  
Independent Curator

- <sup>1</sup> Naomi Hobson, interview with author, 2024
- <sup>2</sup> Naomi Hobson, interview with author, 2024
- <sup>3</sup> Naomi Hobson, *Adolescent Wonderland*, Coen Regional Aboriginal Corporation, 2024, p.11
- <sup>4</sup> Naomi Hobson, interview with author, 2024

# NAOMI HOBSON

8 JUNE –  
1 SEP 2024

## Life on the River



IMAGES  
Naomi HOBSON  
Kaantju/Umpila, Born 1979, Coen Queensland

Cover:  
*Replenish*  
from the *Life On The River* series  
2024  
exhibition wallpaper  
330.5 x 456 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Inside left:  
*Nurture*  
from the *Life On The River* series  
2024  
pigment ink on fabric  
480 x 320 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

Inside right:  
*Still*  
from the *Life On The River* series  
2024  
pigment print on archival cotton  
rag paper  
150 x 100 cm  
Courtesy of the artist



*Life on the River* has been supported through  
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Nestled on the banks of the Coen River - Wukaanta – sits an old tin shack which is home to my family and has been the residence and artistic base for my mother and artist, Naomi Hobson. The shack was an old Church in the 1980s and is where Mum attended services with her grandparents and siblings. Today, the residence sits on the edge of the town’s main street and is hidden beneath the expanse of the great mango trees and tall paperbarks. There, pay’pa (sulfur crested cockatoos), wuki (flying fox), wathalamu (fruit dove), tuutu (scrub fowl) can be heard, their calls echoing the cycles and changes of the seasons.

Wukaanta, along with its abundance of plants and animals, is an important life source for families in Coen. It runs directly through the township and directly connects the Ayapathu, Kaantju and Wik-Munkgan clan groups, whose ancestral and kin relations are bound by the river. Taken during the wet season in Coen, the photographs capture the very essence of life by the river, including people’s relationship to it and each other. In these larger-than-life images, the river serves as a conduit – a safe haven that connects people across time, place and geography.

Hobson wants to capture Coen’s vibrant river culture, and she does so by providing intimate glimpses into the everyday interactions between people and Wukaanta. Every wet season, Coen experiences heavy rains, with roads into the community cut off for months on end. The only access into the town is by a two-hour charter flight from Cairns. These restrictions affect people’s ability to travel, meaning more family groups are engaged with the river than at any other time of the year. During this period, the river comes to life, and the wet season is the best time to be in community. As the artist explains,

*My photographs are pictures of river life and my connection to my Ngaachi (Country). Living on the river is part of our daily existence, defining who we are as people from Coen, and what it looks like and feels like to live here.<sup>2</sup>*

*The river is spiritually important to us. It represents our history. Our people are buried along the river and there are special birthing sites there as well. The river has fed us for thousands of years - we have laid on the sandbanks and looked up at the same star constellations as our Ancestors and those before us. For us – it’s life. This series of photographs tells our river story.<sup>1</sup>*

Naomi Hobson, 2024

Hobson has lived in Coen all her life and would fish and camp along these rivers with her grandparents. For her, the river is a spiritual place – one that connects her to her Ancestors; and connects people to a shared resource. In this impressive body of work, the river symbolises the transformative power and healing properties of water. For Hobson and her people, water is used as a spiritual element to communicate with the Ancestors by providing safe passage to those travelling across Country.

In *Life on the River*, various family members are captured in spontaneous and precise moments - hanging out by the river, fishing for black bream, and collecting river cherries and freshwater mussels. Throughout the series, Hobson reinforces the spiritual qualities of the river and its cultural symbolism across one generation to the next. These activities illustrate the experience of many young people who grew up in remote Cape York, where seasonal activities played an essential part of everyday life.

In *Nurture*, Puchaanu sits bare feet on the sand. His son Puchaanu Jnr, reclines comfortably in his father’s arms, gazing quietly at the viewer. There is a freedom and quiet sensibility in this work. For Hobson, her subjects - often family members - are allowed to occupy a space that is free of external stereotyping of First Nations people within her community. Here, she presents the paternal bond between a father and his child. Whilst her photographs present an idyllic view of contemporary life for people in Coen, there is an undeniable sense of pride and agency with how her subjects are portrayed. She continues to challenge popular narratives and provides a point of view that is community centred.

*I use photography to create a voice for my people. I realised that most photographers out there were not shooting content that came from me and my people, as a First Nations and Community person’s perspective from inside Community.<sup>3</sup>*

