

VIEW - 21 November 2011

## **Art, Life and Everything**

Good afternoon, great to be able to join you today.

I am pleased you chose a maritime theme, this goes with various aspects of my life, although at a slight remove from a number of them. But we will get to that later in the talk.

To start at the beginning, I was born in Queensland to John and Eve Dingle, children from cattle farmers, and as far back as anyone can remember, my forebears were cattle farmers.

For my family our home country is from Kilkivan via Gayndah to Mt Perry and Monto.

Though my parents left farming behind, someone had to stop.

They were both from very large families.

When there is a combined total of nearly twenty children not all could remain on the land.

I was born in Maryborough and raised in the seaside town of Hervey Bay. Well actually I was raised in what, at that stage, was a small village called Pialba, which was about the same size and looked a bit similar to Sussex Inlet. Pialba has since grown and merged with four other villages to become the city of Hervey Bay.

My home town, as in a lot of small coastal villages, did not offer schooling beyond primary level and there were certainly not many job prospects. On reaching 15 to go any further at school would have involved a boarding school in a larger town. As I did not achieve a scholarship and my parents could not afford the board, I looked for a job.

This is where the Navy comes in, I applied for entry and was accepted as a Junior Recruit, which was a bit like going to boarding school but you ended up with a job and a career.

So you might think that there is not much more maritime than being in the Navy for 12 years. Well I actually ended up following an electronic engineering stream and landed in Nowra at the Fleet Air Arm, HMAS Albatross. I did go to sea, a little bit, twice in 12 years.

The first, was for 12 months on HMAS Melbourne, the aircraft carrier.

I arrived on board, the ship went for a 10 week tour to Hong Kong and Singapore, arrived back in Sydney and went into dry dock.

I lived on board a ship in dry dock for the rest of my year at sea.

Three years later, I went to the survey vessel HMAS Moresby, my job was to maintain the electronics associated with the helicopter on the vessel. The job was to survey seas north of New Guinea.

Within a few weeks of arriving, while in Rabaul Harbour, the helicopter ended up taking a swim due to engine failure, and not, I might add, the electronics.

So not having anything to keep me occupied, I ended up in a survey camp, on shore, for the rest of that sea time.

By this time I had already decide that I would leave the Navy at the end of the 12 years.

While I did not regret joining, I just knew it was not the life for me and I had already started taking evening art courses at Nowra TAFE.

I have spent most of my time on the south coast, I first arrived here in the very early 1960's and only left, briefly and reluctantly after finishing with the Navy.

I started a new job in Sydney, but at the same time, on a whim and knowing that every year there were two thousand applicants for a very small number of places, I had applied for entry as a full time student at the National Art School in Darlinghurst. I think they were so surprised to receive an application from an older person I was accepted and joined a class of 17 year olds as a full time art student.

My parents were shocked and concerned that I had just disposed of a really good career in electronic engineering.

Probably rightly so, as after I had graduated, and been practicing as an artist for 12 months, I discovered that an artistic career does not bring in sufficient income to pay the mortgage. Even though I was supplementing my income by working as a cleaner every night.

I needed a job and preferably in the arts sector.

I started at the Australian Museum as Head of Community Relations.

But I was missing the south coast and while I enjoy life in Sydney, it is the coastal lifestyle that appeals. This is when I purchased my place here at Sussex Inlet. For twenty five years I commuted , building my house and garden at Sussex Inlet,

( still not finished), and working in Sydney at Museums. First, the Australian Museum, then as Assistant Director at the Australian National Maritime Museum.

So I hear you think, we are back again to our maritime theme. Yes, though I was not hired for my maritime skills. When managing a museum the last person you want in charge is the one who is totally fixated on any particular topic. Can you imagine what sort of museum would result from a fixation on the braiding of hemp ropes from 17<sup>th</sup> century sailing vessels?

I was hired to manage a group of really talented experts all of whom were all fixated on various aspects of our maritime heritage.

I was also employed for the ability, an ability that most artists have, to come at a subject from left field.

In the former, for example, I was responsible for the operation of HMS Endeavour, the replica of Captain Cook's vessel. The captain reported to me and we worked out the sailing and exhibition program for the vessel, and importantly how to raise the money to fund these activities.

Examples of the latter include developing public programs, for example those that went under "Food at Sea". While the experts put on programs that looked at the history of exploration through artifacts, my program took as their starting point that, anyone exploring by sea could not get very far at all without access to food and fresh water.

The first program, aimed at children and families, explored the history of food storage and preservation. It included fungus gardens – I'm sure you have all seen the quite beautiful blue green fungus that grows on an orange when it goes bad and pumpkins grow a black fungus. But the big hit with children, though not so much their parents, were the weevil and maggot zoos.

When the Navy delayed the de-commissioning of an Oberon class submarine destined to be on display at the Museum. To fill in the gap, I negotiated the loan of a Russian Foxtrot submarine.

An exercise that was not without its hazards, apart from running into a cyclone while it was being towed to Australia from Vladivostok, Customs impounded it on arrival in Sydney because it had torpedoes on board.

I thought it was fairly obvious that you could not have a submarine without any torpedoes and had insisted that they be included.

Australian Navy experts were called in to check if they were the dummies I had requested, but refused to go anywhere near them. In the end one of two Russian navy crew, who came as a part of the deal, unscrewed a side plate and showed that the contents were building bricks included as ballast.

Then ASIO got involved and insisted on an inspection, presumably to check whether any secrets had been left on board.

After finally going on display and proving to be one of the most popular exhibits ever, one of the Russian crew broke his visa requirements and disappeared into the community.

It is not easy reporting that you have managed to lose a Russian sailor.

The Shoalhaven has its own maritime museum, The Lady Denman Heritage Centre at Huskisson, built around the Lady Denman Ferry. I got involved when Vera Hatton and architect Gavin Hughes were planning the exhibitions in readiness for the opening in 1988 and again later when Gavin designed the building that now houses the ferry as well as the temporary exhibition space. I acted, in a voluntary capacity, as consultant on the museum and heritage issues involved in permanently storing a very large wooden ferry inside a building.

These days I have left the museum work behind and am concentrating on my own art, while my main voluntary work is with the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre, the exhibitions I have curated for them include “Personal Journeys : Fourty years of Australian Women’s Abstract Art “, “Black is the Colour...” an exhibiton of art where black is the most import element within the work, either because it is the main focus or because it makes the other colours shine.

This year was “Making Do : Art from found objects”, twenty Shoalhaven artists were asked to make art works from found objects to display along with a workshop area for visitors to make their own art work from found objects which they could hang on the wall. There were interactive arts works to join in with, a group drawing, a car-park where children could “park” a matchbox toy car and help complete this art work. Plus one that divided visitors into love or hate it, which was bubblegum art. Take a piece of gum, chew, then stretch and stick to the art work.

Next year’s exhibition is called “Less is More: More or Less” and features prints, ceramics, drawing, sculpture and painting where the artist explores the potentialities of elimination without the loss of meaning or self expression.

In 2012 will be a survey of over 50 years of the work of artist Margaret Dredge, an artist who was listed as among the top artists in Australia in the early 1970’s, not willing to put up with the chauvinistic and commercial behavior of the art world, she withdrew and virtually never publically exhibited her work again. She died at age 74 in 2001 and left a legacy of nearly 80 major works in her studio. I am working with her children, two daughters and a son to put a survey of these works on display for the first time.

I am on the Shoalhaven Council Arts Board which oversees the development and promotion of the arts in the region.

For me making art is very personal, it is not something that is done to please other people, it is not done to make money.

If other people like your work that is great, and if someone likes it enough to buy that is really very great.

When it comes to making art, I need to be inspired by a story a myth or a landscape, something that drives me to try and capture a psychological essence, a mood or a sense of place.

I mainly work in welded steel, acrylic on canvas, collage or in ceramics, though in fact will work with any media that allows me to resolve an artistic problem of physically depicting a fleeting idea or emotion.

The main style of my work, if you need to hang a label, is Abstract while the influences are many and varied, from Impressionism though the Minimalist movement during what is termed the “Modern Art” period.

Earlier this year I completed a series of paintings and sculpture based on the Greek myth of Phaedra, which tells, the story of the Athenian queen who falls in love with her stepson. Her obsession goes via deep seams of emotional truth, into the dark recesses of the heart and the psyche of people attempting to deny a natural life-force such as sexuality or emotional release, and it all ends in suicide, death and tragedy.

Greek myths have influenced the thinking of artists for a long time especially the view that myths are eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas.

- Approaching Storm At one point in the Phaedra myth, the king calls on the Gods for vengeance and summons for a storm. In this painting I have tried to capture the moments before a storm, the wind has picked up and is swirling around. There is a sense of foreboding, that the sky is about to split open as dark clouds gather at the edge of your world.
- Wave (marquette) In a part of the story, during the storm, great waves roll ashore. This sculpture tries to captures the essence of turbulent, rolling waves coming to the shore

Currently I am working on a sculptural series influenced by the ritual of the catholic mass. The sculptures have names such as Gloria, Sanctus and Kyrie. Most of the series are in an exhibition in Sydney, but I do have this one “Hoc est corpus meum” or “This is my body”.

The latest work on canvas is “Islands – morning mist Kangaroo valley”. Driving into and through Kangaroo Valley in the morning can be a mystical and beautiful experience when, as very often is the case, the valley is full of mist. Rocky cliffs reflecting the sunrise are glimpsed through rain streaked windows, hills rise above ground hugging cloud. Mist swirls upward as the air warms and at other times low clouds, snagged by mountain rim, spill down the cliff like a slow waterfall.

This painting could probably be described as a multiple landscape, four or five scenes from over the time taken to drive into and through the valley during the early morning.