

## South Coast – State of the Art

Like the frog in the saucepan of water, the arts on the south coast is happily swimming, while governments are applying the heat of reduced funding ; “NSW government axes TAFE art courses” , “Baillieu government cuts \$290 million to TAFE in Victoria”, “Campbell Newman turns Queensland into “developers’ paradise” at the same time axes Premier’s Literary Awards.” “the python squeeze of less and less funding by the federal government on the arts sector that contributes \$30 billion a year to GDP more than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined” to quote from recent news.

At the local government level, in the Shoalhaven, while our Council supports the arts in the *Community Strategic Plan - 2020* and in funding for the City Arts Centre, Library, Lady Denman Museum and the Entertainment centre, in actual fact, arts development and marketing is minimally funded and the arts are not integrated into the fabric of tourism, town planning, community development or other parts of the Council’s areas of responsibility. On a brighter note, the *smARTspaces, Arts & Cultural Heritage Strategy 2010 - 2014* was developed and a strategic plan for the City Arts Centre is currently being developed.

However unless the community and council actively pursue the goals outlined in such plans they are a waste of time and resources.

And why is the development of arts within our community so important ?

It is the difference between a civilized and cultured society and a tribe of barbarians. As noted by J Paul Getty in *As I See It* , Prentice Hall 1976 :

“ Twentieth-century barbarians cannot be transformed into cultured, civilized human beings until they acquire an appreciation and love for art. The transformation cannot take place until they have had the opportunity to be exposed to fine art--to see, begin to understand and finally savor and marvel.”

The South Coast is blessed with a number of museums throughout the region and is well catered with Libraries but as a whole, the South Coast does not have enough fine art, we have good community art and festivals run from within the community by volunteers. The Shoalhaven Art Society, Jervis Bay & Basin Art Society and the Millhouse Art Society cater for their members with regular exhibitions and also contribute to cultural festivals, *Escape at Milton / Ulladulla, See Change Festival* in the Bay & Basin area. All of these in the main cater to the local community. The *Arts in the Valley* at Kangaroo Valley combines music and visual arts in a high end festival that can be said to also appeal to tourism. At these levels there is a reasonably strong and vibrant art community, who are very supportive of arts initiatives.

Quite a number of practising artists live on the South Coast and while a number contribute work to local exhibitions and festivals, in the main most exhibit in Sydney or other major population centres. There is a lack of high end commercial art galleries in the area along with an insufficiency of people who would purchase.

The Shoalhaven City Arts Centre is mainly a community arts centre rather than a Regional Art Gallery; we have a designated *Regional Gallery Collection* which is in storage at the Arts Centre. While about 6 fine art exhibitions are installed each year in the main gallery of the Arts Centre, 25 or so community exhibitions are held annually in the other three exhibition spaces. We need to support community spaces but we also need a Regional Gallery that will set bench marks in the local art scene and act as a focal point of cultural tourism. The South

Coast must be one of the few ‘destinations’ within Australia that does not have a fully fledged Regional Gallery.

Of the 6 fine art exhibitions installed each, most are ‘bought in’, mainly from the travelling exhibitions that tour the country and there is also an annual exhibition, curated and installed by volunteers, from the *M G Dingle & G B Hughes Collection*, a bequest to the Shoalhaven. The rest of the Regional Gallery Collection is hardly ever shown. This is because there is no gallery space devoted to this task, as other spaces within the Arts Centre are devoted to meeting rooms, available for rent. There is also a shortage of staffing to enable a regular turnover of exhibitions if such a designated space did exist. Hopefully the new strategic plan will address these issues.

I hope to be proved wrong but I suspect that even with the various levels of planning in place there is no strong drive within Council to deeply embed arts within the community in similar ways to the *Renew Newcastle* program, the *Pop-up Parramatta* project or the Sydney City Council’s laneway art projects and the reinvigorating of Oxford Street through art in under used spaces. To implement such programs requires drive and commitment from the top down through all levels of Council, support from the business community and the encouragement of our citizens.

Arts and culture projects, ranging from storytelling, music, writing, theatre and dance, to painting, craft, photography, print making, film-making, collage and sculpture can be used to creatively engage communities. Art and culture work at many levels in making a difference, bringing people together, breaking down of social isolation, providing joyful experiences and capturing important moments. A profound and lasting impact is made when communities are engaged in projects which are positive, safe, valuable and provide a quality arts or cultural experience. Evidence to date highlights the benefits of the arts including increased self-confidence and resilience, improved physical and mental health, connection to place, shared optimism plus new personal and creative skills.

The artists are here on the South Coast. What is needed are better ways to tap into their creativity for the benefit of our community, better support for the arts by Council, better exposure for our Regional Gallery Collection and better feedback to all politicians on the importance of the arts.

To paraphrase French writer Albert Camus “The purpose of the arts is to keep civilization from destroying itself.”

Max Dingle

*Max Dingle is an artist, independent curator, and is currently a community member on the Shoalhaven City Council Arts Board. [www.maxdingleart.com](http://www.maxdingleart.com)*