

## STATE OF THE ART – purpleskin issue 5 - Dec 2013 – Feb 2014



**The major new Jervis Bay & Basin Shoalhaven Contemporary Art Prize** has been decided and exhibited and while it is the first and the only contemporary art award being offered in the Shoalhaven, the hung entries were of a relatively good standard, given the newness of the prize. I hope we can expect better things as this contemporary art prize gathers momentum.

New media was really only represented by Rebecca Gallo's video *Sunset Cycle*, an interesting work initially but as with most video art does not have the staying power required to keep the viewer interested for more than the time required to establish that nothing more than the protagonist riding an exercise bike, albeit in the middle of a lake, is going to happen.



Michael Purdy's sandstone sculpture *Squidpidgeon Earth Trumpet* was intricate, beautifully carved, with great sense of organic growth, though there is a slight uneasiness in balance, a feeling of top heaviness not fully resolved. Mignon Steele's painting *Stroke* also exhibited a nice sense of organic growth and of depth.



The winner Elizabeth Raul's work on paper *Too Soon Goodbye*, is subtle and emotive comment on nature and the environment.

The sponsors of the prize including Architects Edmiston Jones, Wray Owen Funerals and Jervis Bay Kiosk should be acknowledged for their important contribution to the arts of our region.

I also compliment the exhibition selection process now in place at the City Arts Centre. Along with the Shoalhaven Contemporary in the main space were three really good exhibitions, paintings by Jill Talbot, mixed media on board by Anna Herold Pola and sculptures and collages by Lesley Prosser. All four exhibitions were complimentary and provided a well thought out and planned approach to the whole Arts Centre exhibition program.

**Why are a lot of people in awe of art?** Recently, during a stint of babysitting an exhibition in a commercial gallery, I was fascinated by the way people reacted to art, not those who walked past with barely a glance, they were obviously not interested, but those who did exhibit some level of interest. Firstly the window shoppers who just made their assessment by looking through the window and then, mostly, moving on. The level of engagement then went to standing in the open doorway and looking at the exhibition, these people were also the most easily scared, the slightest acknowledgement of their presence would send them hurrying on their way. Of those relatively few, the majority in twos or larger groups, that actually entered the gallery approximately 75% never went further than halfway into the space and quickly inspected a few art works before departing. Then the minority who managed to traverse the entire space are split into three groups, those who quickly walk

around, hardly ever pausing to “look” at any particular art work, the garrulous, outgoing souls only interested in chatting to the staff who are essentially a trapped audience and finally the people who are “at home” in exhibitions and galleries and study the art that takes their fancy, perusing the catalogue for clues and prices.

Virtually all speak in whispers and low tones, no laughing, or signs of animation; art galleries are obviously serious places. How did we get to this? How did we get to the point where people seem to be afraid of art, afraid of commenting, afraid of arguing the merits or otherwise of a painting or sculpture? I know people have opinions and do have discussions after leaving an exhibition. Why is the gallery treated as hallowed ground, a place of worship and whispers. Art is a personal thing, if something does not appeal that is a perfectly natural reaction as is its opposite and you do not have to fully understand exactly why a certain art work appeals or does not, though it can be far more enjoyable if you do some background study and are able analyse why. I am beginning to suspect that these reactions to art have been driven by the so called professionals, the art dealers, the curators, the art media, they who write incomprehensible “art speak” in catalogues and equating good art to expensive art, promoting an art work as having a deep and profound meaning when it is clearly a load of detritus badly put together, that they, the professionals are the only ones who can understand, are the only ones to carry out the role of priest and interpreter. If we are honest, just because a famous art name has signed a work this does not mean it is good art. Certainly not every one of the thousands of art works produced by artists such as Sidney Nolan, Picasso, Arthur Boyd, to name a few, are great works of art. Yet you are hard pressed to hear anybody say “the Emperor has no clothes”..... have you heard anyone say something like ‘this (eg Picasso) is a real stinker, it was obviously tossed off after a bad night on the turps.’ The reverse is also true good art does not have to have a ‘famous ‘ name attached, there are a good number of brilliant works of art that receive little recognition with a very few lucky ones being re-discovered many years later, usually years after the artist has died.

Along the same lines have you ever wondered why contemporary art collections all have art by the same small group of fashionable art practioners? Try bringing the art of an unknown but brilliant artist to the attention of a lot of curators, they will not look at and assess the quality, they will ask “What collections is the artist represented in?” If the answer is none then there is no interest, if the answer is ‘all your peer group collections’ then a work must be acquired immediately.... In the process critical appraisal is lacking, that arrives in the form of justification after the acquisition in the form of art jargon aimed at the peer group rather than the public.

When was the last time you heard laughter, a loud discussion or argument in the halls of our public art galleries, and have you noticed the frown on the face of volunteer or staff member if you do involve yourself in such “outrageous” behaviour. Do we need a revolution that will cleanse our public art galleries of those who have made them into houses for the worship of the god mammon?

**Just what is art ?** In the past there were Fine Arts and Applied Arts and these could easily be defined. Fine arts, art to do with the creation and appreciation of beauty and intellectual meaningfulness, consisted of five main categories, painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry and two minor, drama and dance, while the Applied Arts involved the application of design and aesthetics to functional materials and objects such as ceramics, textiles, jewellery, glass and furniture.

During the last Sydney Festival and again at the coming Sydney Festival one of the “attractions” is a giant inflatable “rubber duck” floating in Darling Harbour, a bit of fun to lighten the day. But why did the PR hacks and subsequently the media call it “ART”. Does this mean that those much derided Australian icons, the Big Prawn, the Big Pineapple, the Big Banana, the Big Potato, the Big Merino et al are now “ART” and should be immediately gathered in and displayed in the Sculpture Garden at the National Gallery of Australia?

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