

ARTISTS in AUSTRALIA The Bigger, and Smaller picture.

There is still some currency to the myth that Australia is an equitable classless society, with equal opportunity for all. Take another look.

The 'White Australia' policy was the World's first and only legislation to categorize and divide people on racial grounds, and subsequently was adopted as the model for Apartheid in South Africa. Australia is well versed in the systemic practice of 'diminishing' sections of our community that do not fit the model required to sustain an affluent and predominantly white, Anglo Celtic power base.

Ask our Indigenous people, with 50,000 years of sustainable stewardship of this land to their credit, but for them only its loss, and their pain to show, and two centuries of damage to their property! Ask refugees, re-branded for political expedience as 'Illegal immigrants' and consigned to prison camps in impoverished neighbouring countries, with little prospect of release, or of hope. However raffish, larrikin or quaintly bohemian our well known and established Artists might appear, those that have achieved major recognition and reward are those with social connection to the 'Australian Art' status quo. Occasional 'aberrants' might gain temporary access, on the understanding that their hazardous lifestyles will be of brief duration, with a skyrocketing 'brand' value for their work.

So how does one survive as an Artist in such a selectively hostile environment?

You can of course wear the shoes, walk the walk, learn 'Artspeak' and blend in with the others at the Art trough, and hope to be noticed!

A few can make this work quite successfully!

It is an advantage if, rather than new and different work, you produce work which is *like* that of an established artist. If you can genuinely back it up with some 'Artspeak' about your need to follow this artist as a mentor etc., so much the better. But sooner or later you will need to find *something to say*, in your *own* visual language. Real Innovation and vision is not a good financial plan. Getting your work to an audience will be pushing the proverbial uphill, unless you are also a wizard at marketing, and have vast social network! You risk being permanently sidelined in rented gallery spaces, selling the odd work to generous friends!

But, on the other hand, and if perchance your background is more like mine, i.e. a teenage runaway from a poor dysfunctional white migrant family, who lived for a while on the streets, but still managed to get through Art School, and obstinately make Art anyway..... then you may find that you neither share or endorse the values or conduct of the 'establishment' you are proposing to 'entertain'!

The chances anyway are that unless you can put on a very convincing performance, you will not be admitted! Gate Keepers rule!

Art in Australia has, since white settlement, occupied the social role of status and property for an affluent upper middle class. Acquired Art offered, along with invitations to piano recitals at the Governor's residence, a visible elevation from the convict rabble. At least a skilled English forger could turn his hand to landscapes, and make a living!

A crash course in wine appreciation and facile chatter is as functional to an Artist's career as any skill with brush or pencil ! OK, so you keep your principles and integrity, and any originality you might own, but meanwhile you need to find work that will provide income to support your Art practice. So you become a taxi driver, a check-out chick, a chicken processor on night shift....how long then will your perceptions remain clear, your aspirations sustainable?

I had young friends with ability and aspirations, now still driving taxis a year from retirement, and *not* because they have found it fulfilling and worthwhile. As an Artist, neither can you expect support from the poor, though they may find your skills useful. To the under educated, in our sad and barren Ozzie Ozzie Ozzie sport and booze culture, Art is irrelevant and meaningless. It is 'the trappings of the toffs'! Tell your western suburb Centrelink office that you are qualified as an Artist, and they will push you into re-training for worksite traffic control, or refer you for counselling!

If then you still think you are an Artist, but you do not feel you are an easy contender for the selective fraternity which, supposedly, constitutes 'Australian Art', you will need to be very committed! Possibly obsessive!

But, if being an artist (of any kind!) is, in your conviction, what and who you are, then you must follow that path wherever it takes you!

It has for generations taken many Australians overseas to more open, tolerant and creative climes! Remember, you are free to give up at any time!

What matters to you then is the work you produce, and continue to produce, regardless of your own welfare at times, regardless of economic circumstance, and regardless of the opinion of others. You must justify your identity as an Artist to yourself only. Marriage and family may be a comfort and luxury you honestly can't afford. Artists who are failed partners and parents are commonplace. How did and do I sustain practicing as an Artist? You don't rent an Artist's Studio, you rent old factories and workshops that have been vacant and need some paint and repair, and are not located in fashionable inner city art precincts; And you don't just work there; you live there. You make work on a scale to suit the space you have. You learn to cook well, and shop carefully for your needs. You learn a preference for second-hand clothing, and fifth-hand cars if the budget will stretch there, and how to fix them! You learn to need little..... and you try to avoid favouring techniques that requires putting \$3,000 worth of oil paint on one painting with a shovel!

I have worked as a subsistence commercial fisherman, living and painting miniatures meanwhile in a boatshed. I have worked part time as an 'Artsworker' with psychiatric patients at a city day-care centre, as an 'Arts Worker' with the damaged fragments of the Aboriginal community on the outer urban fringe, as a house painter and handyman, as a maintenance worker with a homeless youth refuge, as a teacher of English to refugees and migrants. My studio and home, have been part of a disused church, a derelict hat factory, little city flats, a room with a window, various rural and semi-rural shacks.

Often we can't foresee the social changes that technology will bring, but it is already clear that not only are there now more vehicles for the visual arts, but that new media is already changing the way Art is presented to an audience, and vice versa. How, and if, this evolves as a fairer and broader means of sustaining a livelihood as an Artist.....in Australia... remains to be seen!

The other BIG factor NOW for ALL the Australian Arts, and its practioners, is the right-wing political momentum, and how far it is able to crush dissent, mute any voice not singing from the approved song-sheet, and smother creativity with a mountain of slogans. Meanwhile, if you have it, and the courage...**use it!**

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