

## ***Wish You Were Here: An innovative Collection-building method for the Tweed River Art Gallery's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary***

October 2008 marked the beginning of the Tweed River Art Gallery's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. As the new-ish Director, I was keen to build on the strengths of the collection. I also wanted to add more contemporary work to the collection, and a more conceptual angle to the Gallery collection's focus genre of portraiture. With no funding for acquisitions provided by Tweed Shire Council, the acquisition program is based on generous gifts and donations from donors, artists and the community. I used the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration as a 'coming of age' for the Tweed River Art Gallery and the future of our collection.

In honour of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and in the hope of giving the collection a substantial boost in terms of acquisitions, I got to thinking that it might be an interesting idea to put together a large exhibition of artworks that I would love to include in our permanent collection. I saw the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a wonderful opportunity for the collection to develop a strong, new dimension. I wanted to work on our strengths in Australian portraiture and works on paper, and also support our regional artists that are so important to the integrity and significance of our collection.

What I decided to do was put together a 'wish list' of works of art that I wanted for our collection. In thinking this idea through, I came to the conclusion that it was a curatorial project with a leaning towards shopping. I don't mean that in a frivolous way, but was serious about selecting quality work for an exhibition that included important work, and also work that was accessible in terms of the price tags. My idea was to put together a fine selection of work and then *appeal* to the public to help us acquire them for our collection. I asked the staff members to come up with their 'wishes' for the collection too. This provided some grounding for me, as I was a relative newcomer. I also had two student interns from Southern Cross University in Lismore who also contributed to the exhibition concept. These two very helpful students later sourced particular works for me and completed some administrative duties relevant to the exhibition.

In coming up with a name for the show, I was trying to play with the concept of the gallery's beauty and prestige, our anniversary, our location and the idea of *hope*. The show after all was a *wish list*, so with all of these criteria to meet, *Wish you were here* seemed a natural choice. Such a title instantly lent itself to the idea of a destination. It is the sort of phrase that appears on postcards.

I worked on the idea of presenting the gallery as an ideal home for the artworks, and an ideal place to come and visit. I asked our very clever, and ever-patient graphic designer for an invitation that was sort of an artistic postcard featuring an image of the gallery, that was sort of gaudily touristy at the same time. What I was really after was an artistic version of a Bum-Titty-Bum postcard.

Commercial dealers and artists got right behind the idea, (but then again, I guess that is natural, given the sales angle), but I started to think that perhaps it was more than a whimsical idea. It was taking a bit of a gamble, I was seriously hoping that I didn't embarrass myself with the idea, but it was very gratifying to receive such favourable feedback. I owe so much to so many dealers and artists for going along with this

idea. Artists worked around their busy schedules of exhibitions and teaching commitments to produce works of art especially for this exhibition.

I set to work in assembling a selection of works of art that would compliment our collection. I will admit that on the surface, the idea of putting together an exhibition of art works that I liked was not a very difficult concept. I thought about portraiture, works on paper and the wealth of creativity and professionalism that is evident in the work of our own regional artists. There are historical reasons that these areas are the focus points of our collection, and I relished the idea about how I might shape the future of the collection at the time of this milestone in the Gallery's history. In thinking about this idea, I had to consider art works that were important artworks; artworks that were going to appeal to the public as well, because the bottom line was that the general public were the people who were helping us acquire them. I also had to source works that were relatively accessible in terms of their price.

I also considered the timing of the events around the launch of *Wish you were here*. The Tweed River Art Gallery Foundation was to host a gala dinner to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This was meant to be an occasion to tempt members of the public to join up to the Foundation. The Foundation is on a fundraising mission and it is a \$1,000 membership fee. Whilst this was important to me too, I must confess that I was more interested in taking a punt with the dinner guests and trying to convince them to buy up for the gallery too. This being the case, and as the opening of the exhibition had to coincide with three other exhibition openings, I decided to launch the exhibition prior to the anniversary dinner to give the public a chance to get a feel for what the exhibition was about.

The opening of the exhibition was a great success. As I mentioned, three other exhibitions were opening that night, but 405 people turned out for the opening and it was a huge success, and lots of fun. I figured that even if the appeal for artworks failed, then at least it was a very handsome-looking show. To lend some weight to the opening of the exhibition, I invited artist, and exhibiting artist, Michael Zavros to open the show. Michael had been enthusiastic about the idea from the outset and spoke beautifully at the opening about the novelty of the approach and the importance of adding new, contemporary artists to the collection.

The Gallery also programmed in at that time another exhibition that was about collecting, and the generosity of support from the community. The smaller gallery space featured a show of works that had been acquired for the collection by our very generous Friends of the Gallery. Titled simply *Gifts from Friends* this show reminded our regional visitors of what had already been achieved. There were some fabulous works on show, and I talked about the fact that I had a stunning range of works to select from in curating that exhibition. In short, this was an exhibition about what had been achieved, and what could be achieved. I wanted that idea to rub off on the idea of *Wish you were here*.

Thankfully in the fortnight or so between the launch of the exhibition and the gala dinner, the show received excellent publicity in the media. I did radio interviews, and there was good publicity in the newspapers. Gradually, the generosity of the community kicked in and we were in action. It was truly astounding who the donors were – ranging from regular visitors to complete strangers who had never before visited the gallery. To this day I am amazed by the response. It was really heartening that visitors actually bothered to read the exhibition information!

All of the gallery staff did an excellent job of 'selling' (in the true sense of the word) the exhibition, and it was working. I went to work on the Friends of the Gallery, who are always so generous, and had received ample prior warning from me of the pending shopping spree, and they were very forthcoming in acquiring in excess of \$13,000 worth of art works for the Gallery. As soon as a work was acquired, we put up splendid Acquired labels indicating that the work was now part of our collection. It seemed as though these new labels were catalysts for sparking new waves of interest in the show – just like red dots in a selling show.

Artists were also very generous. Quite a number of artists decided to donate their work to the collection. Although this was never my intention, I was keener on seeing how the public would respond – as after all, our role in galleries is to support artists too. So I held off on quite a few of those donations until the end of the show, and luckily too, as there were a couple which were purchased for us outright by the public, thus helping the artist too.

By the time of the anniversary dinner, we were going well, but then horror struck in the form of the Global Financial Crisis, and I thought that the show was destined for disaster. I could not believe the timing.

At the dinner, I talked mostly about the fact that those artists included in *Wish you were here* were significant Australian contemporary artists; artists whose works are not only beautifully executed, but whose works are also sound and secure cultural investments for our future. Despite being in somewhat troubled financial times, I chanted, the art market had not faltered, and these artists have proven themselves to be solid. They were being collected by the nation's leading cultural institutions and they were themselves commercial successes. Another important fact that I stressed for the dinner guests was that any financial assistance provided to either the Foundation or the Gallery was 100% tax deductible. It appeared that these words were magic. 'Tax deductible' seemed to really hit home. I added that we would welcome any financial donation, large or small. I also included information about tax deductibility in the promotion and presentation of the exhibition. I added in the exhibition script that there may be a particular artwork of the visitor's choice from this exhibition that they might like to acquire for our Collection. Alternatively, their tax deductible donation, large or small, could be a contribution to our Art Acquisitions Donations Fund.

Donors who contributed \$1,000 or more were added to our Donors' Board on display in the Gallery foyer. Alternatively, upon their request, donors could remain anonymous. For gifts over \$1,000 donors were eligible for membership of the Tweed River Art Gallery Foundation Ltd.

I couldn't resist a little bit of humour at the anniversary dinner, and something that the guests might remember. Apart from having new membership forms to join the Foundation designed and printed and laid as part of their place settings on the table, I added a sweet treat in the form of a fortune cookie. I had some custom made fortune cookies made up with subtle little messages on the inside. I suggested to the guests that they enjoy their tasty sweet treat and that they take note of the prediction of their fortune cookie. The messages were:

- *You are about to reach for your cheque book*
- *You are about to become an arts philanthropist*
- *You have an irresistible urge to donate a work of art*

So now to the bottom line; the results. Did the exhibition concept succeed? Here's some statistics for you.

10,077 visitors came to the gallery during the exhibition period.

Total number of artworks in exhibition: 72

Total number of artworks acquired: 32

Total value of exhibition: \$391,403

Total value of acquisitions: \$170,963

Percentage of works acquired from exhibition: 44%

Breakdown on the acquisitions:

Total value of acquisitions: \$170,963

Value of acquisitions that were acquired through purchases: \$71,518

Value of acquisitions which were donated through the Cultural Gifts Program: \$90,680

Value of acquisitions which were donated outright by artists: \$8,765

Breakdown of the purchases:

TOTAL: \$71,518

Purchases by the general public: \$25,025

Purchases by the TRAG Foundation: \$33,550

Purchases by the Friends of the Gallery: \$12,793

As a result of *Wish you were here*, further donations have made their way into the collection. The generosity and the support of artists continually astounds me, as does the philanthropy of the community. The Gallery has just hung a recent acquisitions show in the permanent collection gallery. Some of the *Wish you were here* works are included, alongside more recent additions to the collection. As a direct result of *Wish you were here*, artist Michael Zavros has donated a large painting to us to accompany the acquisition of his *Wish you were here* work. Euan Macleod has painted and donated a companion work to the piece acquired from *Wish you were here*. John Wolseley has also gifted a further work, and philanthropist Mr. Patrick

Corrigan AM has also donated a couple of Wolseley prints and drawings to add to our collection of his work.

Frankly, I don't know why I didn't think of this idea earlier!

Thank you.