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# Integrity at any price

Many artists put a bigger value on recognition and understanding than PR and sales, and often fly under the radar as a result, writes JOHN McDONALD.

Last week I was reminded of the gulf that exists between the art world and the rest of the world, when ABC radio asked me to comment on the Mayor of Newcastle's view that funding for a new regional gallery should come from selling works in the collection. His logic was: the holdings of the Newcastle Art Gallery are valued at \$80 million and we only get to see a small selection at any one time. Therefore, we could flog off some of the stuff held in storage to pay for the renovations.

Apparently Lord Mayor Jeff McCloy, a property developer by profession, sees the city's cultural legacy as a disposable asset. He admits to having been in the city's art gallery "a few times", but doesn't seem to recognise that a collection has a broad educational value, above and beyond whatever is on current display. He seemed to imply that the gallery represented only one interest group, comparing it to the Cooks Hill Surf Club.

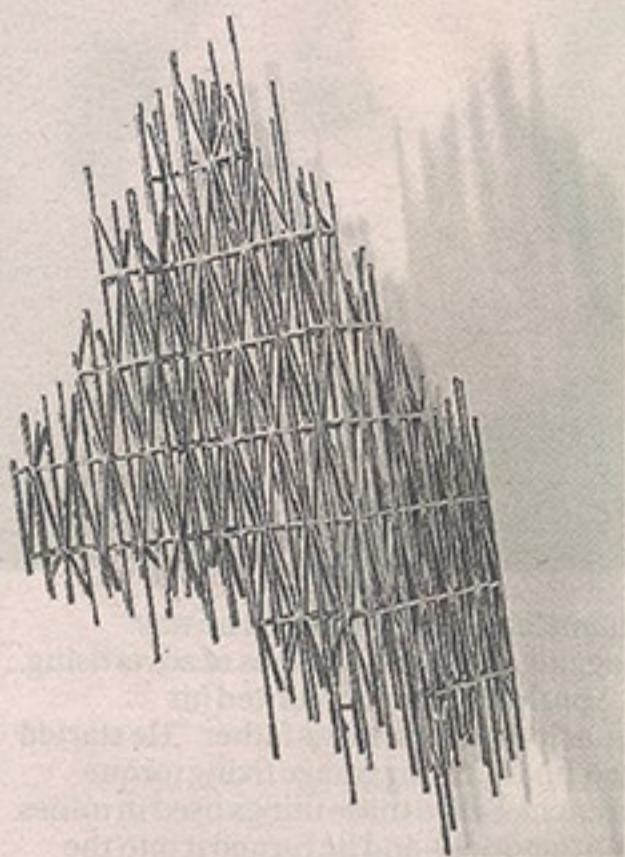
Whenever one imagines that Australia is beginning to attain a cultural maturity, along comes the old dance of three steps forward, two steps back. To view Newcastle's art collection as a potential source of revenue is an attitude worthy of the Huns and Visigoths.

In colonial times, the city fathers were concerned to create galleries and "schools of arts" as a stimulus for civic pride. If the citizens of Newcastle have any pride I'd recommend they get a new mayor while they still have an important art collection to pass on to the next generation. Since McCloy has only been in office for a few months, a small coup d'etat might be justified.

In sinful Sydney, the Art Month party continues. Night after night there are presentations, forums, openings, gallery crawls; the continuous intake of alcohol and the outpouring of conversation. It may not provide the defibrillation the art market so badly requires, but as a public relations exercise, Art Month is booming.

Success in this regard cannot be reduced, Newcastle-style, to a matter of dollars and cents. Although there are a few dealers who take a hard-headed attitude towards sales, the art business is not like any other mode of commerce. Some dealers are hopeless romantics; others are idealists. There are populists and snobs, dilettantes and entrepreneurs. Many of them define success in terms of survival rather than profit. Sales hardly enter the equation.

The dealers and the artists they show often seem to be cut from the same cloth. A painter will persist with works no one wants to buy, so long as they feel right in some private,



## **ROY JACKSON: PAINTINGS & WORKS ON PAPER**

Defiance Gallery, until March 30

## **SAVANHDARY VONGPOOTHORN: THE BEAUTIFUL AS FORCE**

## **KIRSTEEN PIETERSE: HOLDING UNKNOWN**

Martin Browne Contemporary, until March 31

mystical way. Many of the best artists have no interest whatsoever in the mechanisms of publicity and self-promotion. They crave understanding more than cash. Their dream is for someone to come into the gallery, see their work and love it. If an admirer buys anything, that is a bonus.

I'm exaggerating, but only slightly. Among the many exhibitions to be viewed this week, there is at least one artist of unquestionable integrity who has rarely achieved the recognition his work deserves. I'm talking about Roy Jackson at Defiance Gallery, who has always followed his own path, without a thought for pleasing the critics, the collectors or his dealers.

It is not the path of true happiness that Jackson has followed, but he is remarkably happy with his first showing at Defiance -

one of the few venues not participating in the Art Month festival. Many have suggested that Jackson's *Paintings & Works on Paper* is his best and most convincing exhibition, and I tend to agree. There have been times in the past when his pictures have seemed repetitive and slightly predictable. This time, his lines and smudgy forms are bristling with energy. Every mark has its own character.

Jackson works in the interstices between figuration and abstraction, beginning with a landscape or an interior scene, before taking the image to pieces, bit by bit. If one looks at his paintings long enough, one can see figures, words, buildings and other motifs in fragmentary form. There are layers of imagery, with dark brushmarks overlaid on a web of thinly scratched lines.

The subjects of these paintings range from the bush at Wedderburn, where Jackson lives, to Greece, where he has travelled regularly. His pictures relate to these places in only the most general manner, taking the motif as the starting point for a highly introspective process of laying in an image, revising, erasing and overlaying, until the work has attained the required density and complexity. This is nothing less than the density and complexity of lived experience, which occurs in time and is filtered through each person's subjectivity.

For Jackson, it is not sufficient to provide a snapshot of life, in the manner of a realist painter. One feels that for him, the whole point of painting is to attempt to capture those aspects of experience that transcend the visual; to go beneath the surface of appearances and convey some tremulous, emotional engagement with the world. This is an inexact process with many risks and false steps.

In the largest work in the show, *First, from the Clinamen Series*, Jackson has narrowed down the odds by arranging a grid of small paintings on a large piece of plywood. Each component has a self-contained feel, but together they add up to a powerful mosaic of half-glimpsed forms in which the eye is never allowed to settle.

In the *Sifnos* series, he comes closest to pure figuration, including identifiable images of houses and trees. The colour is also more vibrant - bright yellows, reds and greens, as opposed to the earth tones of the Wedderburn pictures. There will be a retrospective of Jackson's work at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra in September this year, and the strength of these recent pictures should ensure a large, interested audience.





Vivid worlds: *Panagia tou Vounou* (above) from Roy Jackson's *Sifnos* series; Kirsteen Pieterse's *Journey 5* (opposite page).

One hopes the relevant curators are among the attendees, because Jackson has reached the point of his career when some serious attention is overdue.

Jackson was a mentor for Savanhdry Vongpoothorn when she lived for six years in Wedderburn. Nowadays, Vongpoothorn is in Canberra, where she continues to paint in a style that owes an equal debt to her Laotian background and to the Australian landscape. The thread-like detail in Vongpoothorn's *The Beautiful as Force*, at Martin Browne Contemporary, is reminiscent of textile design, but the affinities with contemporary Aboriginal paintings are also very strong.

Like the indigenous artists, Vongpoothorn creates immersive canvases that are simultaneously vistas of the cosmos and views through the lens of a microscope. Her works are maps of experience and aids to meditation. When one examines these paintings closely, it becomes apparent that the surfaces are not flat, but punctuated by tiny, regular perforations – added by Vongpoothorn's patient father, a former Buddhist monk.

Although each work in this show has a distinct personality, the odd one out is *Latsamy*, inspired by a stay in Jaipur. The bright colours in this painting are a response to the artist's vivid impressions of India, with patterned, circular forms hovering like bubbles of condensed energy.

Vongpoothorn has collaborated with poet, Leon Trainor, on a book called *In Country*, which pairs words and images in a way that brings an added dimension to each body of work. Art and poetry have traditionally been close companions, but a distance has grown between them over the past century. This project helps bring the spheres back into realignment.

The other exhibition at Martin Browne is Kirsteen Pieterse's *Holding Unknowns*, a series of elegant sculptures made from stainless steel and acrylic. Pieterse's works play with cloud forms and landscape, yet they are as tightly constructed as architectural models. The works are repetitive to the point of obsession but possessed of a appealing purity and clarity.

Russian artist, Vika Begalska, has just completed a residency in Sydney where she has undertaken work for the Janet Clayton Gallery and Alaska Art Projects. Begalska's show at Janet Clayton's – *Podes and Antipodes* – which finishes today, after only a 10-day run, is startling in its rawness.

Begalska has created a series of large, crude expressionist portraits based, I believe, on images taken from the internet.

There is a tremendous spontaneity and recklessness about these pictures, which form a contrast to Begalska's other works, mainly short films, performances and video projects that document social situations and make specific interventions. Begalska may seem to be a 21st-century reincarnation of Russian anarchism, but she is fundamentally an artist without boundaries.

"Why bother imposing restrictions on yourself," she seems to be asking, "when society – or at least Mr. Putin – will do it for you?"