Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2104

Maxwell, Helen

Occupation Art Collector, Curator

Summary

Helen Maxwell is a freelance curator, art valuer and consultant. She is best known as a curator of contemporary art in Canberra, where she lived from 1979 to 2014. Helen now lives and works on the south coast of New South Wales, where she organises art projects and exhibitions.

Details

Helen Maxwell is a Canberran who has not been afraid to deliver her own brand of desires through showcasing contemporary art in the ACT since 1989. As an assistant art curator with the National Gallery of Australia in the department of Australian Art, Maxwell was inspired and, more importantly, determined to branch out and create her own breed of gallery.

The first incarnation of Maxwell's distinctive spirit was aGOG, standing for Australian Girls' Own Gallery and, as the name suggests, made a stir by showing women's art only. The small 'a' for Australian was an equally deliberate point being 'slightly anti-nationalistic' in flavour. Speaking about the decision to exhibit solely women's art, Maxwell said she felt very strongly about it at the time: 'A number of people objected to it, argued with me and said it was sexist. But there were also many supporters to whom I will always be grateful and for me it felt right and that was important. I felt that the opportunities for men to show their work was still much greater than those for women.'

Setting up in a space in Leichhardt Street Studios, Kingston, Maxwell was amazed at the rapid response she received from artists, eager to exhibit: 'You know the first exhibition was organised before I even knew whether I was going to open.' From the beginning she was committed to bringing in artists from across the nation. While acknowledging it would have been easy to stock from the abundant local talent pool, Maxwell wished to deter any potential for parochialism and instead perhaps push the community's boundaries.

Personal politics is another prerequisite in Helen Maxwell's selection criteria when choosing an artist to exhibit in her gallery: "When I look at artists' work, the work has to be political, not necessarily overtly (though it may be) or in your face, but it needs to express an artist's personal politics. It has to demonstrate at least a stance that they are taking in their life. At the same time they have to know how to use their medium to successfully express their views."

After ten years of running aGOG, Maxwell decided to shut up shop in 1998, and move to a larger space and broaden her product range – the result was Helen Maxwell Gallery, a large open warehouse space in Braddon near Canberra's city centre. This new gallery enabled Maxwell to show larger, more financially viable works, and heralded a change in opening up to male artists as she felt the urgent need for a women's only policy had abated.

Helen Maxwell Gallery now offers a monthly rotation of new exhibits, showcasing contemporary art from Australia and the Pacific and has a stockroom of both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art. Some of the artists represented are Jean Baptiste Apuatimi, Vivienne Binns, Yvonne Boag, Tony Coleing, eX de Medici, Annie Franklin, Shayne Higson, Judy Horacek, Marie McMahon, Kate Lohse, Sue Lovegrove, Patsy Payne, Franki Sparke, Neil Roberts (1954-2002), Wilma Tabacco, Paul Uhlmann, Ruth Waller, Megan Walch, Judy Watson and Robin White (NZ).

As well as running a successful, socially engaging enterprise, Helen Maxwell has also been an active member of Canberra's cultural community, as a member of the ACT Cultural Council, and has served on the Interim Board of Management of the Canberra Museum and Gallery during its initial planning stages. She has also taught Curatorship (Theory and Practice) in the Art History Department at the Australian National University and has joined in sponsorship with the *Canberra Times* in offering the paper's Artist of the Year Award.

This entry was prepared in 2006 by Roslyn Russell and Barbara Lemon, Museum Services, and funded by the ACT Heritage Unit.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

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