



Spotlight

people, arts & heritage

A community is a collective artwork

The art and social practice of Susan Thomas and the Broken Hill Art Exchange

Susan Thomas at the Broken Hill Art Exchange located in the Grand Hotel building. Beside her is a painting in which she explored the representation of complex and dynamic three-dimensional space in the two-dimensional plane. Full story inside. PICTURE: Dan Schulz

arts and culture

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A drawing workshop conducted at the Broken Hill Art Exchange.

PICTURE: Supplied

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Dan Schulz

Susan Thomas didn't think she'd ever return to Broken Hill to live when she left in 1981. She was 18 years old and had distanced herself from her place of birth, seeking to satisfy that youthful desire for a more worldly education.

It wasn't until she'd begun an artist residency in Vermont, USA, during which she lived and worked with a hundred other artists, sharing and exchanging knowledge about artistic practice, that she realised this was the kind of educational experience she'd been seeking - an education that couldn't necessarily be found at the institutions and universities that she'd dedicated so much of her life to.

"What I noticed was there was a lot of tension between how universities were being run," she said, "Art schools were closing down - senior lecturers were not liking the way art was being taught and resigning. It seemed to me that there needed to be some kind of parallel to the university system and I would have liked to see an alternative to that system."

Susan had studied a Bachelor of Design at the University of South Australia and honours in Fine Art at UNSW when she began a PhD at the University of Western Sydney. It was then that Susan realised Broken Hill was a 'no brainer'. Her research had focussed

on the relationship between private and public space and "when it came to thinking about public and private space, Broken Hill was perfect - privately it was where I grew up, it was my family, and then publicly it had these systems set up to allow people to live together in community."

It is a town that really shouldn't exist, Susan said, "as a mining town it had such fierce beginnings, originating from a monoculture of mining and from that there were so many things that branched off, whether that was environmental land-care, unionism, workers rights and the arts."

It was in this spirit of social experimentation that Susan became a founding member of the Broken Hill Art Exchange, which began with a small advertisement in the local paper in 2001. "I remember being shocked, it seemed like maybe a hundred people turned up!"

The collective began by meeting at Susan's Argent street house to exchange ideas, practices and thoughts. "None of us knew what we were doing, we were just following our nose and making it work using whatever resources were available. Hardly any of us had cars or mobile phones, we'd just see each other down the street and say, 'Hey! Let's have a meeting'. We shifted around, meeting in different peoples houses, and then Robinson college became a strong supporter in the early days."

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Brian Fenton

By Andrew Bruggy

Three types of blokes at the speedway,
the bikies, outfits and tankies,
Don't infer this bloke the latter, for he
will show the blessed crankies.

Brian Fenton fed the dinosaurs they say,
his mates do call him "Fossil",
But all jokes aside people, this bloke's
history is nothing short of colossal.

Building the local speedway, with a
group of mates; that's all,
No external funding, but they certainly
did have a ball.

Stories of powder monkeys and 44's full
of creosote,
For where did it come from? Folks, these
boys will never gloat.

FFS, LFC, Nutty, Slider and fishing
trips away,
Bullsh*t, yarns and what have you, this
mob would lead a saint astray.

A piece of advice please, how to get
through that tight bend? a young bloke
did shout,
"Flat-out into it, and in the middle, try
to find your own way out".

He says of the five senses, smell, taste,
sight, sound and feel,
You only get these at one place, for the
speedway is the real deal.

Life member of squash & recipient of
the coveted Paul Harris Rotary award,
Brian has done it all, and by family,
friends and all, is adored.

One story you must hear about aligning
a chimney for a fireplace,
Rifle pointed vertically BOOM, plumb
bob not needed in this case.

Skipper of scouts for many years, Brian
wouldn't change anything for quid's,
Relationships I tell you, respecting men
grew from these very kids.

Never ever ask him questions like if he
remembers an old event,
"I am not a bloody hundred", so look out
as he may vent.

You can catch Brian any time at Probus
with his Monday crew,
To have a chat and listen, you'd better
get in the queue.

If one was to ask Brian, what are his
life goals?
His very own coffee cup sums it up
"Grab life by the bowls".

If you'd like to submit a poem for
publishing consideration, please
email to editorial@bdtruth.com.au

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It was then the collective moved to a 1950s abandoned shopping mall in Duff Street in South Broken Hill, which continues today as an artist residency space where artists apply to stay, gaining access to a studio space, and are assisted by the Art Exchange to run workshops and engage with the community, equipping them to better use their time and engage more thoroughly with the town.

The Art Exchange is now located in the Grand Hotel on Argent Street, a vast building that once served as a pub and a hotel, with sample rooms where travelling merchants could exhibit their products to residents for purchase. This year the Art Exchange is celebrating a monumental 20 years, "everyone seems surprised its run for this long considering it's all run by volunteers."

The Broken Hill Art Exchange is difficult to pin down to any one purpose, but that is the point. "The Art Exchange is a space that keeps changing and the beauty of it is that we can turn quite quickly, like space invaders - we see a gap and we jump into that gap and start developing it. For example, we had a strong emphasis on youth music at one stage and did a lot of performances in Bells Milk bar which at the time was under threat of closure. We conducted youth performance acts there and it was packed to the rafters a lot of the time. We then broadened that out to other cafe performances and sound recording workshops and that space kind of got filled, so we didn't necessarily need to continue that."

For Susan, an abstract painter, the development of an art collective is a social practice that is linked to the way she thinks about her art practice. "I approach everything from a painters mind, using elements and principles of design - proportion, weight, contrast, tension, repetition, all of those



Susan Thomas at the Broken Hill Art Exchange located in the Grand Hotel building. Beside her is a painting in which she explored the representation of complex and dynamic three-dimensional space in the two-dimensional plane.

PICTURE: Dan Schulz

principles between line and tone, light and shade. It's about creating a balance but a dynamic balance."

Such a philosophy suggests that a community is a collective artwork, and the same principles of experimenting with form and shape can be considered in the creation of organisations and groups. The role of the Art Exchange is to experiment with such relationships, bringing people of different disciplines and cultural backgrounds into an exchange, and hybrid of contexts. One of Susan's intentions with the Art Exchange was to broaden Broken Hill's definition of contemporary art practice, "there wasn't a lot of abstract artists in Broken Hill and, if you mentioned the arts, a lot of people immediately thought it was painting because we've had so many painters here and a lot of galleries focus on painting. Broken Hill wasn't thinking of art as music, writing, performance or video art."

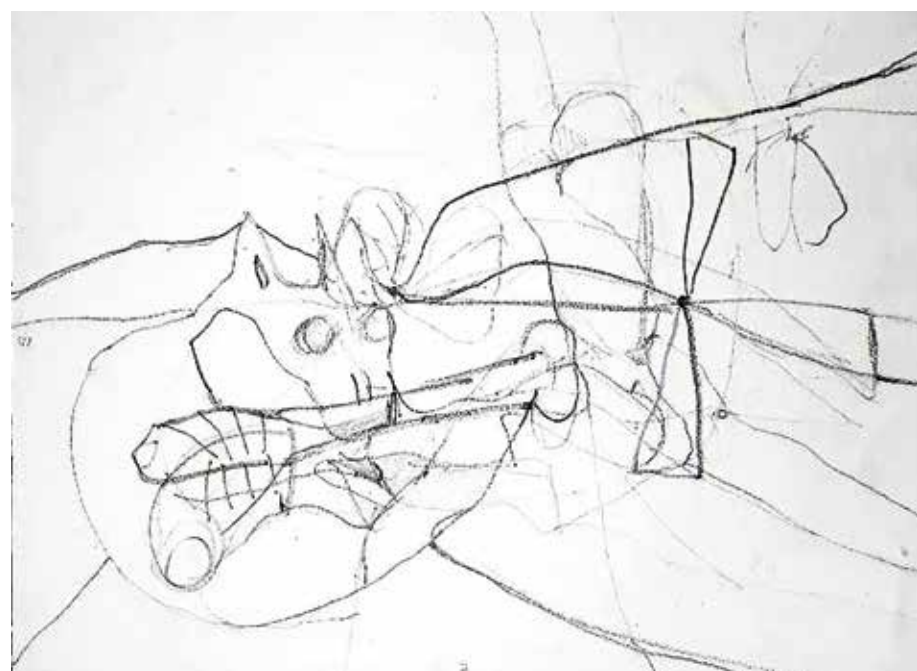
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As well as broadening the definition of art by introducing new mediums to Broken Hill, the Art Exchange has also been developing relationships with industries such as health. Most recently, a partnership with the Royal Flying Doctors Service has brought together health and arts in a way that felt new to Susan, "whenever we've engaged health before its fell into the category of art therapy. This program with the RFDS has a strong recognition of art as well being, and people as creative beings rather than immediately alienating everyone by claiming this is a treatment for mental health. It was almost shocking how creative this community is and how thirsty everyone is for being able to express and learn new things."

The Art Exchange will be celebrating its 20th year in September through its annual event, The Desert Equinox, an art competition with a thematic focus on the elements of Fire, Water, Earth and Air which has been running since 2012. Using the city of Broken Hill as a gallery, participants of all ages and artistic disciplines are encouraged to find their own exhibition place for their work. An independent panel of judges tours the city to find a winner in each category.

As part of such a dynamic and ever-changing organisation, and having seen the town change over the last twenty years, Susan Thomas is excited for the future of Broken Hill and the artistic community's ability to respond to new opportunities and challenges. "There's no end goal to this - it's just moving and transitional. It's not a mathematical equation as such, it's not systematic in that way, it's more energetic and working within the resources we have."

And it is this that provides the kind of dynamic educational space that Susan had sought in her travels abroad, eventually landing that vision in her hometown of Broken Hill. ■



An 'automatic' drawing by Susan Thomas exploring the multiple viewpoints of an outdoor scene.