

MARGARET WEATHERALL

A LIFE OF MODELLING

I get goose bumps even now thinking of it—that first long line he would draw across the paper, so sensuous—a sweeping, beautiful line... (on modelling for Brett Whiteley)

Margaret Weatherall dressed as a Norman Lindsay artist's model for Ashton's Artists' & Models' Ball



MARGARET WEATHERALL has been a life model for 45 years—one of the best, sought after and much admired. Not long ago she participated in the Robert Hughes' documentary 'Beyond the Fatal Shore'—partly filmed at the Norman Lindsay Gallery in Faulconbridge in the Blue Mountains. She has been interviewed by Andrew Denton, appeared on a number of television programs and has been the subject of articles by many journalists—from The Australian and The Sydney Morning Herald to New Woman.

A talented artist herself, her self portrait has been hung in the Portia Geach Prize.

Margaret's working life began as a nurse but her interest in art had begun even earlier. In 1962 she was participating in an art class run by watercolourist Franklin Bennett when the model didn't arrive. A very reluctant Margaret was inveigled into being the group's model and so began her *brilliant career*. The main focus of the art scene in the sixties was Sydney, around Circular Quay and at North



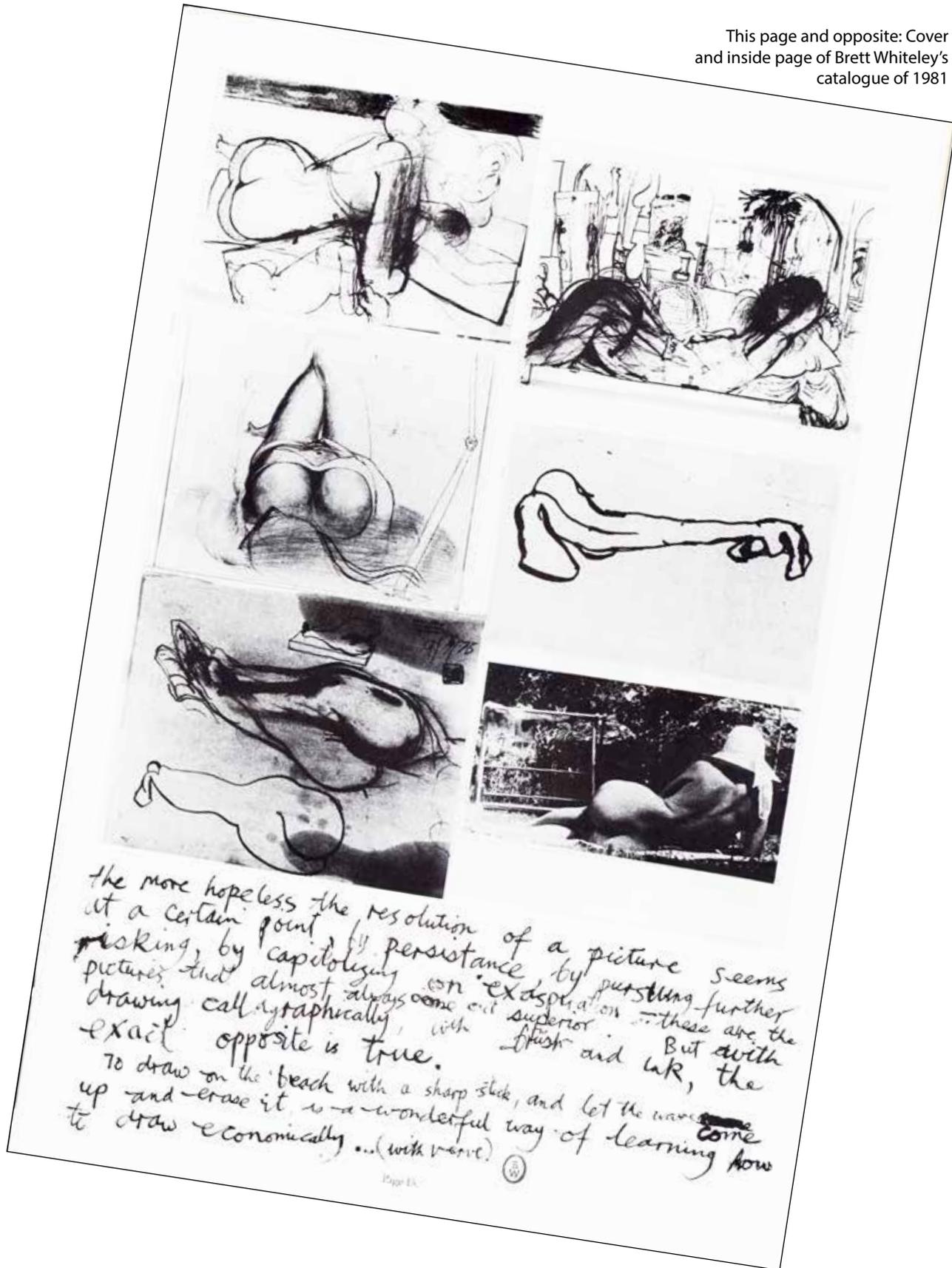
Sydney. Ashton's, then run by Dick Ashton, was in The Rocks at Circular Quay. A vibrant colony of artists rented rooms and studios in the area and there was a great spirit of camaraderie. John Ogburn was there, John Orban, David Hill, David Wilson, Ross Harvey— people who were really passionate about art.

It was the best time then, says Margaret. One year Ashton's decided to hold an Artists and Models Ball—it was the only time they did it—I was dressed as a Norman Lindsay model

and I recall David Hill being there, dressed as a pirate with a stuffed parrot on his shoulder!

The Julian Ashton Art School, as it is known today, was originally the Sydney Art School, founded in 1890 by Julian Ashton who was a trustee at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and an art teacher. On the death of Julian Ashton in 1942 the name of the school was changed to Julian Ashton's and in 1933 it moved from King Street to its present home in The Rocks. Some of the school's best

This page and opposite: Cover and inside page of Brett Whiteley's catalogue of 1981



known alumni include John Olsen, Michael Johnston, Brett Whiteley, Nigel Thomson and Salvatore Zofrea.

The props provided at the art school in the 1960s for the models left much to be desired, as Margaret recalls, smelly kapok-filled cushions, dirty old curtains, but painted on canvas they looked rich and elegant. In fact, in 1989 the antique casts, easels and studio furnishings at Ashtons were classified by the National Trust as a cultural living treasure. Margaret made all her own costumes and treated her work as a performance. Payment was a pittance and still largely is today, but students were respectful. There could be no smoking or eating during a session. If you arrived late you had to wait till an interval in the sitting. *How times have changed*, says Margaret. *Today they all have their mobile phones and even hold them up to capture the model as they draw!*

Margaret was a popular model at the Fashion and Design School at what was then East Sydney Tech, once the old prison and now COFA. She would pose dressed sometimes in a striped navy and white top, a Jantzen costume from the 1920s, high cork-soled shoes and a sunhat. These students were a very different breed, highly competitive and dedicated, dressing in clothes they had designed and made themselves and looking straight out of Vogue. *And they could draw*, recalls Margaret.

They were better than any of the artists at drawing.

But times were rapidly changing in Sydney. Rents were on the increase and the developers were moving in and buying up all the properties until then occupied as studios by the artists. The artists' colony would soon disperse.

Margaret recalls modelling for the Pitt Street Painters in what is now the Arthouse Hotel, the site of the first technical college in Australia where students had once worked by gaslight. The old studio is now a bar and in an effort to retain the historical link, the hotel has introduced the idea of having a model in the bar room, the former studio, and anyone who comes into the bar can, if they wish, draw. This innovation has no appeal for Margaret. There was once a 'Smoking Room' set aside for shoppers in the original building. The Pitt Street Painters eventually moved to Erskineville to a warehouse bought for the purpose by Jane McGowan who was later awarded an OBE for her contribution to the art community.

Modelling at NIDA was another unusual experience, posing amongst the stage props, against tables laden with a banquet of colourful polystyrene food, massive curtains hanging high above. And then there was political cartoonist Larry Pickering, famed for his over-the-top calendars featuring satirical caricatures of political figures, for whom Margaret posed for the body of a naked Margaret Thatcher. Pickering continues today to shock and antagonise. And there have been some of the greats of Australian art, among them Joshua Smith, Arthur Murch, John Kilgour, Jan Riske, David Rae, Dick Ashton, Wendy Sharpe and Vince Vozzo.

Probably the most memorable experience was modelling for Brett Whiteley. A serious admirer of Whiteley, Margaret was eager to work for this artist who had not long returned from England and was the darling of the art world. Whiteley worked from a spacious upstairs studio in Reiby Place which was also the gallery in which he would hold his exhibitions. Margaret decided to write to him, saying that she had been modelling for ten years and he was the best artist and she was the best model and didn't he think they should work together? Obviously something about her letter caught his attention and three weeks later Whiteley's assistant rang and asked her to come in.

The old building in Reiby Place is no longer there, but Margaret can recall its every detail: the heavy glass doors at the entrance, the beautiful parquet floors, the white painted room with white sheets covering the windows, the tidiness and simplicity. Whiteley's desk was covered with packets of pills, vitamins were lined up on some shelves and in a separate room entered by what appeared to be cupboard doors were kept his beautiful papers.

With Margaret posing on cushions or the brown velvet couch, and Christian, Whiteley's assistant, having brought out his special drawing papers, Whiteley would begin. It is that moment Margaret recalls so vividly, the moment when with a sensuous stroke he would set down the first beautiful, sweeping line.

Whiteley worked with the paper on the floor, on hands and knees, drawing with his whole body. One after the other a sheet of paper would be put down and he would produce his elegant drawings. When he had worked for three or even four hours, the



drawings would be set out on the desk and each one would be carefully stamped by Christian then signed by Whiteley and all would be whisked away by his assistant, never to be seen again in the studio. Christian is unusually described by Whiteley on his exhibition catalogue as the Studio Overseer.

On her first day some buyers were brought into the studio while Margaret was posing, adding all the more, she thought, to the ambience of the great artist working in his atelier! Whiteley's white Mercedes was parked in the street nearby and Christian would keep an ear out for a whistle to let him know if the 'brown bombers' were about. Once alerted, he would hurry down to move the car.

Whiteley played Bob Dylan while he worked, very loud and all day. Japanese food would be brought in for their lunch. One day he was hobbling as he walked up and down and complained, *My Gucci boots are hurting me! Then why not take them off?* was Margaret's practical response. Some days when Margaret knocked at the door of the studio there would be a gruff *I can't work today!* and Margaret would go away. One day when she arrived wearing a jaunty red beret and a red knitted coat he immediately painted her portrait. She has no idea what became of that painting.

In the six weeks she worked there, Margaret recalls only having one fight with Whiteley and that was about one of his pornographic paintings. There was a sizeable market for these works. This one was propped up in the studio and Margaret grimaced at the sight of it—a grotesquely contorted woman with a cut off penis in her mouth squirting semen. *You don't like that, do you?* said Whiteley. Margaret found this particular work extremely repugnant, as repulsive, she told him, as the work of the German artist she had seen on television a week earlier who had cut off his penis and had sliced it like sausage and separately framed each sliver. That comparison outraged Whiteley. He kept a stack of 'men only' magazines in the studio and would use these as reference for his figures. Margaret has always been non-judgmental about this subject matter and simply notes that the work of many of the old artists included pornography, Rembrandt included.

It was a memorable experience working with Brett Whiteley and being part of that Reiby Place exhibition in 1981, although identifying the drawings for which she posed from the catalogue images is virtually impossible, except for a couple which are identified as 'Margaret' or 'Margaret back'. She thought his hands *ugly—stubby and freckled*, but his hair was *a gorgeous tangle of golden curls*. Margaret has her own theory about Whiteley's untimely death in 1992. Two decades later, in 2013, one of his paintings ('My Armchair') would sell for almost \$4 million.

Margaret continues to be in demand, although she is less willing to make the 3-hour journey from the Mountains into Sydney, particularly when, as she has observed, students today are less appreciative and a model's remuneration has barely improved since the sixties. Posing outdoors brings its special challenges, sitting for long periods in the heat of the sun, suffering sunburn on a tender white body, bitten by ants and a target for the ubiquitous Australian bush flies.

For a while she would pose for the workshops held in the garden of Norman Lindsay's former home and now National Trust gallery in Faulconbridge. But *I finally objected to the arrangements. I would be posing nude on a sheet on the grass for the workshop participants while mothers and their children, or men with their cameras would be passing by, stopping to peer at me or to take photos. I'm certain that Norman Lindsay would not have approved.*

Carolynne Skinner

CHILL OUT

WEARABLE ART AWARDS

The last of these awards was held in Katoomba in 2004. Chill Out was held alongside the Winter Magic Festival which falls annually at the winter solstice. Below is Margaret Weatherall in her Chill Out costume (photo Adrian Baljeu).

With patron Jenny Kee, coordinator Helen Markstein, compere Robert Anderson and judge Janet De Boer of Textile Fibre Forum, these parades, competitions and exhibitions organised by Carolynne Skinner of Creative Blue Mountains were for several years a hugely popular and important community art event in the Blue Mountains.

