



Russell Way, *Red Cross*, stencil acrylic & enamel on canvas, 110x130cm, 2013

THE CREATIVE COAST

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Artist Russell Way put down his coffee at a café in Avoca Beach, north of Sydney, and said: 'Artists come to the Central Coast to escape the stresses of urban life and find space: space to live, space to be free, and space to create.'

When people in Sydney think of the Central Coast, eighty kilometres north of the CBD, they might think of near-empty beaches, clean air, or cheaper house prices. Now there's something else to think about: art.

The current art movement has its origins in the 5 Lands Project, an art trail between open studios along the beaches

The Coast is developing a community of artists who, with their comradeship and shared values, might one day be spoken of in the same breath as the Heidelberg School, or Hill End in the New South Wales Central West, or even the famous nineteenth century Barbizon art colony near Paris.

Abstract landscape artist Felicity O'Connor emphasizes a key aspect of the art scene on the Coast: 'The artists who've located here really are a community; they support each other's careers and take pleasure in each other's successes.'

Opinions differ as to why this community should be so co-operative and comradeship—after all, artists are not always known for caring and sharing. Art, these days, is a tough commercial market involving a lot of money, and many of the artists in the community have successful careers exhibiting in Sydney and Melbourne, while others are developing their work without leaving the Coast—something which would have been near impossible ten years ago.

Most artists agree that the very diversity of art being produced means that direct competition is rare, however. Although many of the artists create landscapes, much of this is semi-abstract, or unique to each artist so that they feel unthreatened by others working in a similar field. Moreover, because they have come to the Coast to escape the urban rat race, they are hardly keen to reproduce it in their new sylvan paradise. With a population of only 400,000 in an area greater than central Sydney, most can live close to nature, at an affordable price, and relax into a country lifestyle with few distractions. So as an art movement, this is more like a community of friends who paint. And yet the work, though perhaps not pressured, is still driven.

Artists who enjoy each other's success may sound naïve, yet everyone I spoke to agreed this is the way it is. One artist, when told her friend had just won the Gosford Art Prize, showed genuine pleasure and rang her friend to congratulate her.

This camaraderie was nowhere better illustrated than at the Cafe Camino, for a time the unofficial meeting place for the artistic world of the Coast, run by its genial host Rodger MacReady, its walls decorated with a series of oil paintings by local artist Paul Macklin depicting The Way (The Camino) in Spain's Galicia region, a medieval pilgrimage which has become a walk for people wanting to find themselves, or to experience the landscape, or who just enjoy walking. MacReady was inspired when he went on The Walk some years ago.

This large, outdoor/indoor venue was the location of artistic salons organized by artist and journalist Meredith Gilmore but sadly, the café has now closed. These gatherings did however assist the development of a community mentality among the local artists, many of whom did not know of each others' existence until recently. The string of villages that is the Central Coast has a history of cultural atomization. No doubt another cultural locus will soon be found.

The current art movement has its origins in the 5 Lands Project, an art trail between open studios along the beaches which began seven years ago under the stewardship of local solicitor Pauline Wright and artists Graeme Baulchin and Janet Hoyer Cobb. Artist Sandy James and others had travelled to Italy's Cinquetera (Five Lands) region, and seen the similarities with the landscape of the Coast. The five suburbs where most of the artists live are side by side along the coast, and visitors walk from studio to studio on the beaches, imbibing refreshments as they go. Over the years visitors from Sydney and interstate have spread the word and a community has sprung phoenix-like from an area once known as the 'Western suburbs by the sea', drawn by its physical beauty and quality of light as much as by its peaceful atmosphere.

From a community of more than one hundred professional artists, the following artists may give some small appreciation of the diversity and talent residing on the Creative Coast.

Felicity O'Connor has been involved in the art scene on the Coast since the 5 Lands project began. Based in Avoca Beach and a member of the 5 Lands Artists Inc. group, commonly known as the Avoca Group, she describes her work as focusing on what she calls internal landscapes, not necessarily corresponding to real-world naturalism, although grounded in the local natural environment. Spare but vivid and reflecting the colors of sun, sand and surf, she says: 'The landscapes around the Coast have a very strong character which draws artists to the area.' She adds: 'There are fewer distractions here, and yet it's not isolated.'

She lists among her influences Albert Tucker, John Olsen, Joan Mitchell and Idris Murphy. Like many of the Central Coast artists she exhibits both in Sydney and locally, and was selected for the Waverley Art Prize in 2012. When not painting O'Connor is a psychologist and in this work she finds herself exploring internal psychological states, which in turn interface with her art.

Cathryn McEwen, *Trust No One*, oil on canvas, 92 x 92, 2013



Originally from Adelaide, Paul Macklin comes from a background of corporate training and advertising. Although he has never been to The Camino he studied photographs, paintings and writings about it and made the decision to use earth-coloured oils for his paintings. It is remarkable that these paintings are his first use of oils, rather than acrylics.

Macklin draws every day. 'Paintings are for the public and drawings are for the artist,' he believes. In what spare time is left he dedicates himself to saving endangered local flora and fauna. He believes passionately that artists have an important role in promoting social issues.

'I love colour,' explains Meredith Gilmore during an interview at her recent exhibition at the Design Gallery in Terrigal. 'It's my starting point, choosing the colours to make the shapes that become whatever is the subject of my work.'

The subjects of her work are diverse indeed. Working mostly in pastels, which remind her of her childhood love of coloured pencils, she has crafted scenes from her recent visit to New York, semi-abstract landscapes, and naturalistic studies of animals. 'I like to constantly challenge myself,' she says, 'and not allow myself to be put in a box.'

When not painting Gilmore has interviewed over 300 Central Coast artists for Coast FM radio. Her role

Margaret Fortey, *Escape into Nature*, oil & wax on canvas, 192cm x 155cm 2014



in the shaping of the local art milieu has been seminal and she has become an icon of the scene.

John Butler's acrylics have often been dark, imbued with the brooding gestalt of the area's rainforests. He has developed semi-abstract pictures of extraordinary power with fine lines and subtly etched shadows. His work has the ability draw a viewer closer, involving one in the work rather than presenting a surface texture emphasizing detachment.

A doctor working in youth mental health, he shares journeys with clients that can be difficult but rewarding, and believes that this influences the mood and timbre of his art. His art continues to evolve, recently exploring vivid colour, and subtleties of perspective, in semi-abstract landscapes. His wife Gael curates a gallery which exhibits both local and non-local artists, an example being the Sydney printmaker Christopher Newman.

Mike Rubbo is a multi-faceted artist—feature and documentary film maker, painter and printmaker. He worked for thirty years with the National Film Board of Canada and now lives in North Avoca where he creates linocuts, oil paintings and solar-plate prints, many of which express his love of bicycling.

One of his features on children has won him an Emmy. 'Art on the walls is a stabilizing influence on children,' he avers. 'The past is an inheritance which we pass on to the next generation.'

Some of his documentaries focus on social issues, such as the battle to save the iconic Avoca Cinema, in constant danger from developers. 'The community should be able to decide what kind of local cinema it wants,' he says. Rubbo regards himself as a village film maker and artist. Recently he has begun organizing a series of backyard film screenings of mostly art-house classics.

One of the interesting aspects of the Coast scene is the number of successful women artists. Margaret Fortey's works often respond strongly to world events, most recently to the sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic Church, and the process by which young women are freeing themselves from the shackles of the past.

Working with pigments and making her own colours, much of her work is on silk, although she also produces linocuts and etchings.

Trained at the Sydney Gallery School, she came to the Coast 34 years ago and has become something of a mentor and role model to younger artists. She exhibits regularly in Sydney, but most of her work today comes from commissions. Like most of the Coast colleagues she does not strive to live the mythic artistic lifestyle but works from her comfortable suburban home which she shares with her husband, a teacher.

Helene Rosanove, *Embroidered Landscape*, vinyl print on alu-panel, 80x120cm, 2014 (winner Gosford Art Prize)



'The art scene here has blossomed since the 5 Lands event,' she says. 'I'm flat out keeping up with it these days.'

Entrepreneurs in the art world have tended to be separate from artists. Cathryn McEwen is both a professional artist and an organizer whose recently launched baby, the Art Studios Co-operative, has started life as a centre for studios, teaching and exhibitions.

'Central Coast taste has been conservative,' says McEwen, 'and we'll bring a taste of more adventurous art. Our artists won't paint so much for the market as for innovation and to challenge themselves.'

A Canadian who has worked in Europe, she trained at the prestigious Queens University in Ontario. 'My work emphasizes body language and the titles of the paintings are often autobiographical.' She is concerned that some mature women artists are considered too old to be 'emerging' in funding-body jargon, and yet are still developing and finding the form and substance of their work. 'On the Coast, they'll find a context in which to emerge at their own pace.' Her recent work has emphasized the body in water.

A slightly different approach is epitomized by Robyn Pedley who considers that artists need to be entrepreneurial about their own work. She is the Artist

Felicity O'Connor, *Watermark*, oil on canvas, 5'x4' 2014



in Residence in a new gallery in Wyong which is already notching up considerable sales, presenting the work of a variety of artists. 'People like to meet the artist,' she says.

Influenced by shapes and forms, she layers colours over time. Some of her works refer to the wide open spaces of her childhood holidays in Victoria's Mallee. These ideas contrast with the luminous blues and greens of the nearby ocean, leading to a unique perspective of water, above and below the surface.

'Art is not my career, it is my life,' says Russell Way. Yet a significant career he has had. Originally from Canberra, he has exhibited in many major Sydney galleries, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, and won awards for set design at the Opera House. Now, the Central Coast is his stomping ground.

His partner, Helene Rosanove, is also a considerable artist. Formerly a resident of Chicago for five years, she has exhibited in the USA, in Melbourne and Sydney. In 2009 she won the Photography section of the Gosford Art Prize.

'Regional areas are warmer, more receptive,' she says, 'and not so governed by trends. People on the Coast tend to pursue their own goals, and this leads to diversity, originality and innovation.' She loves the area for its warmth—in the people, as in the climate—and for its potential for growth.

Little by little the infrastructure needed by a creative industry is being established. There are now three artists' centres, Pablo's Arthouse in Green Point, the Art Studios Co-Op in North Gosford, co-founded by Cathryn McEwen and sculptor Leasha Craig, and the Arts Barn in Kariang. There has long been a Gosford Regional Gallery with its Gosford Art Prize.

Numerous small groups of artists, such as the Plein Air Group, also flourish, and at a time when art galleries are

closing in the cities, here there are new galleries, such as the Wyong Gallery of Darren and Robyn Pedley and Gael Butler's Design Gallery. A Fashion Week is now an annual event, and there is a multi-arts festival at McMasters Beach.

Artists' colonies have long existed, but often not for long, so it is early days for this one, but the signs are good. Like all artists joining rural colonies those of the Coast seek the elixir of creative freedom and, just possibly, they can convey some of that excitement back to the cities. Are they escaping a pressured life to some imaginary Shangri-La? No, they say, we're escaping to, not from. And as for the cities, they can come to us.

Clem Gorman