

ART SANS FRONTIERES

Gang Gang Gallery

The Realities of Going Virtual

It's an industry which is built on interpersonal relationships, the social gatherings, the friendships between gallery owners and artists and friends, admirers and collectors over years, indeed over lifetimes. Arrive on opening night and there's the familiar hubbub, the familiar faces and the familiar clinking of glasses. This is when most sales are made and commissions put in place. And now, suddenly, the party is over.

SUSAN COCHRANE describes the experience of a comparative newcomer to the gallery scene where everything seemed to be going so well but who is now faced with the realities of becoming virtual. *Art sans frontieres*. Virtual galleries in the hundreds, if not thousands, are sending art out into the ether to find new buyers; gallery walls are no longer required and physical spaces are closing down. These are exciting but also perplexing times.

STOP EVERYTHING AND CLOSE THE DOORS for an indeterminate future. A confronting and bewildering situation has faced art galleries, necessitating cancelling exhibitions and events, coping with the disappointment of artists and audiences.

During the time that the COVID-19 pandemic's invisible menace hovers and threatens economic disaster, it is essential for small businesses to maintain a positive attitude and initiate survival strategies. But without the different streams of visitors to its gallery space – artists and art lovers, the curious and connoisseurs – how does a private art gallery project its exhibiting artists and events into a stimulating virtual world?

Before the pandemic's forced closures, private art galleries in urban and regional locations focused on on-site and person-to-person experiences, tending to use digital space as an adjunct for documentation purposes. Typically, a gallery's online presence would include its website with exhibition calendar, artist CVs and artworks for sale, along with monitoring activity on its social media platforms, in particular Facebook and Instagram. With the arrival of COVID-19, galleries faced a dilemma: whether to lie low and economise on effort until the crisis has passed, or make a definitive turn towards digital platforms envisioning an equally desirable and potentially beneficial audience engagement strategy.

To observe the expansion of its exhibitions and events into a virtual gallery, this article offers a case study of the

Gang Gang Gallery, located at Lithgow in regional NSW. Declaring 'Art Should Have No Limits' as its motto to defy the crisis caused by the pandemic, Gang Gang is endeavouring to reach out beyond a passive online gallery presence, to become an interactive virtual art space in constant communication with artists, makers and audiences.

"Unless art galleries dramatically change their business model they will not survive," said Sharon Howard. "We had to back away from where we saw the gallery going in 2020 and look at all options. Actually, due to COVID-19, we realise we can move in other directions and find new openings to be creative." Apart from its drawcard exhibitions, Gang Gang Gallery had become a hub making art accessible through adults and childrens art classes, and attracting wider audiences to high calibre monthly concerts, poetry recitals and by linking up with special events such as Ironfest, the Sydney Writers Festival (in association with Varuna), and the Art of Lunch.

First a sketch of the background to set the scene. Gang Gang Gallery opened its doors in October 2017, with its owner Sharon Howard providing the business acumen, artistic sensibility and energy force. Eight years earlier, Sharon and her husband Ross had purchased the substantial but rundown building in Lithgow's Main Street which, in its gala days c1910-60, had housed the town's live theatre and refreshment rooms. Sharon says she has always been inspired

by the artist's visual imagination. Her vision for Gang Gang Gallery was to inspire people with the changing art on view, as well as creating a space which would reach out to diverse audiences. "We are constantly looking at ways the gallery can reach broader audiences for its artists and provide a meeting point for art lovers", she says.

Lithgow was a blank space on NSW's art map with Lithgow Council's cultural grants focus on its industrial heritage of mining and munitions. Yet the town is strategically placed as a regional hub on the cusp of the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury and Lithgow LGRs. The Bells Line of Road connects the Hawkesbury townships and Bilpin's orchards to the Central West, while Lithgow's hinterland valleys are populated with long-established pastoral properties.

The Howards saw Lithgow's lack of a contemporary art space as an opportunity – as the Greater Lithgow area was ill-served, a gallery could become a new pole of attraction for artists and audiences. As the idea of how the gallery would operate matured, and while the premises were being refurbished, Sharon dedicated her efforts and networks to engaging with established artists from the region who might be interested in exhibiting here.

For two years to late 2019, Gang Gang Gallery went from strength to strength. The gallery space proved versatile and its exhibition and event highlights proved the Howards' predictions that the region needed an active art space was

right. They operated with the underlying philosophy that, "it doesn't matter where art is in your life spectrum, you can have access to it".

The region's artists came forward, some well known, some talented but under-exposed, some young and emerging. Chris Stevenson moved her herd of gregarious and contemplative cows from the Cox's River into GGG on giant canvases. Rebecca Wilson brought the heroes and villains of Hill End to life in her series of narrative paintings of that historic town. Rachel Szalay unrolled ten-metre long paper scrolls with vigorous drawings rendered in coal of mines imposed on landscape. David Newman-White showed oversize, intuitive portraits of elder citizens. Other popular exhibitions featured local artists' responses to Lithgow's urban heritage and celebrated the 150th anniversary of the ZigZag Railway.

Encouraging youthful and emerging artists commenced with recognising that for several years in succession Lithgow High School's art students had achieved high representation in NSW's ArtXpress, leading Sharon to give some 2019 students pride of place at Gang Gang Gallery. Artists on the autism spectrum may have ultra sensitive perception and uninhibited talent. Even at his early career stage, Will Hazzard's dynamic brushstrokes capture the alert gaze and energy of beloved cockatoos.

Simone Slattery and Anthony Albrecht with Sharon Howard right





From December 2019 through January 2020, catastrophic bushfires created widespread devastation with fire zones from Lithgow to Bilpin, across to the Blue Mountains towns of Mt Victoria and Blackheath. The Greater Blue Mountains tourism industry, which counted 5 million visitors annually, started to implode as the wave of tourists retreated. No-one expected that the COVID-19 pandemic was just about to break, bringing hospitality and entertainment businesses to their knees. The forced closures of art galleries and music venues would wrench apart the connective tissue between artists, performers and their audiences.

Refining and upgrading Gang Gang Gallery's online gallery was the first response to the forced closures and breakdown of the cultural eco-system. Sharon believed that, in addition to the gallery being the mediator between artist and viewer/buyer in its physical space, the virtual platform could stay in touch with its followers and expand its reach to wider audiences.

The first big event on the Gallery's 2020 calendar was the Hands on Clay exhibition, an integral part of the Clay Gulgong Biennial, which is the nation's largest ceramic arts event. Over 800 participants were disappointed when the April event was cancelled abruptly. With a very short turn-around time, Gang Gang went ahead with the Hands on Clay exhibition, re-conceiving it as a virtual exhibition visit via YouTube (<https://oakbrooknsw.wixsite.com/mysite>), complete with opening address by Bernadette Mansfield. Subsequently, artists' online presentations were added to introduce participating artists, their genre and to highlight some creative processes, such as Rebecca Verpoorten-Laws, Lise Edwards, Anne Edwards and Michael Conolan, with more to come.

Sharon tested the efficacy of Facebook page 'likes' of selected pieces in the exhibition by placing ads selectively on Facebook. She was amazed when Kwirak Choung's gold-dusted ceramic vessel went viral with over one million hits, a huge result in anyone's terms. The Hands on Clay artworks were offered for sale from Gang Gang's virtual gallery, with several artists selling a number of pieces.



To extend the skills of Gang Gang's community of artists who are shy of the virtual domain, Sharon teams up with video producers, encouraging artists who wish to become more confident with presenting themselves and their artwork on professionally produced YouTube videos. As artists see how effective a short online presentation of themselves and their artwork is, for example the videos of those in the Hands on Clay exhibition, they will be more enthusiastic about joining in. The resulting clips are also intended to stimulate others towards innovative creative activity. By continuing to back the organisers of Clay Gulgong's 2020 Biennale event and re-imagining the Hands on Clay exhibition as a virtual one, Gang Gang gained a new social media following of the 800 participants who had booked for Clay Gulgong, with other national and international adherents to significant ceramics events. The ripple effect was underway.

Gang Gang Gallery's virtual presence is a direct response to the COVID-19 crisis, which suspended the gallery's normal face-to-face operations and compromised its own and its artists' activities and incomes. As the vision expands to more artists communicating directly with audiences through virtual links and major works from exhibitions being for sale through the virtual gallery, a gallery shop is planned which will offer a range of quality objects by local artists and makers. Gang Gang Gallery's physical art space re-opened recently with Timescapes and Soundscapes, a multi-disciplinary event which explored visually and aurally the impact of the fires and the story of our times. The gallery will continue to journey in new directions by enlarging its virtual zone and exploring other avenues to connect artists with audiences.



Susan Cochrane

- From Hands on Clay exhibition
- Opposite page:
- Top: Lise Edwards: Women who play with fire - lifesize ceramic
- Below left: Chester Nealie: Large Pot
- Centre: Anna Culliton's Hand Full of Wombat
- Below: Susie McMeekin's Small Blue Vase
- This page top: Lise Edwards, Women who play with fire, lifesize ceramic
- Below: Bill Samuels: Tea Bowl
- Below right: Sarah O'Sullivan: Pleutorus

