

Helen Turner's passion for art and her sense of community has sustained an innovative artist-in-residence program, while her passion for property development has kept her Perth gallery on the move. Turner Galleries is in its second building and its scope is expanding too. The gallery has just hosted an exhibition of contemporary art from South Africa and Turner has plans for ventures with other Indian Ocean neighbours. She talks with **Jane Raffan** about her personal philosophies, her Art Angels program, the Perth scene and her plans.



JR: How did you become involved in the gallery business; did you have mentors?

HT: The gallery opened in October 1999. It was the combination of two of my serious interests in life – art and property development. At the time I was studying fine art as a mature age student. The course was nearing its end and there was much discussion over coffee with other emerging artists of starting a studio space together. That joint vision didn't materialise but it became a very singular focus for me.

An old church building that was for sale attracted my attention and I thought it was the perfect place to develop those ideas. After discussion with my friend and architect Brian Klopper, we devised a plan to renovate the church, making it a contemporary exhibition space and building four strata title units at the rear of the property, utilising one as an office and one as accommodation for an artist in residence programme. The other two were to be rented commercially to provide operating income for the gallery.

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It was a step into the complete unknown. I had come from a background of education - I was a special education teacher. I was a single mother with three beautiful daughters to raise, a full time mature age art student and property developer and it just seemed like the right time to follow a new dream.

HELEN TURNER TURNER GALLERIES PERTH

I think I made a fairly conscious decision to try to run the gallery in a unique way. The philosophy combined the principles of an artist-run space with a commercial twist. I may as a consequence deliberately not have asked for too much advice or guidance from others preferring to develop my own model.

JR: Turner Galleries' Art Angels Inc. supports an artist-in-residence program funded by 100 patrons. It also has the added incentive for patrons to 'win' works acquired with 40% of their buy-in money. Collector groups are not uncommon, but works are usually shared amongst individuals, and the 60% philanthropic angle is unique. Why did you adopt this strategy; how do you decide which artists to fund; and what has been the most satisfying element of the venture?

HT: Art Angels is a patronage group financing a residency program that celebrated its 10th year in 2010. Over that time we have sponsored 30 artists from interstate and overseas, investing almost half a million dollars for them to live, work and exhibit in Perth and supporting local artists by purchasing their work. In return for this assistance, the resident artists make limited edition art works for each of the Angels. Each year the patrons receive three artworks exceeding the value of their sponsorship contribution and they may also win an acquired work.

The philosophy was to create a giving system that also gave back. We select and invite artists whose work is nationally recognised and that we are personally drawn to and who have not previously exhibited in Perth. The most satisfying element of the venture is the wonderful calibre of artists we have been able to bring to Perth, the exceptional exhibitions this has given Turner Galleries the opportunity of showing and the wonderful people we have had the pleasure of befriending and working with.

JR: The Art Angels program would suggest that you feel strongly about a gallery's responsibility to support contemporary artists. What are your views on galleries' responsibilities to their clientele, and a gallery's place in the broader community?



HT: I feel very strongly that the role of a contemporary art space is one of education and the provision for opportunity, both for the artists to communicate their understandings and ideas to the public and for the broader community to learn from their exposure to this visual art. Experiencing contemporary art is looking at our future and reflecting on our past and trying to find our place in the present – asking the questions and trying to uncover the explanations for the way things are as they are. It makes us think and feel. The gallery is a conduit for the process of understanding our world.

JR: What was the impetus for your decision to have an exhibition of South African art? What were the biggest challenges, and do you have plans to show more work by South African artists in future schedules?

HT: The impetus to bring the South African artworks to Perth in a group exhibition came from one of our Art Angel supporters who owns a travel business, Wildlife Safari, operating in Africa, India and Arabia. He was keen to sponsor a residency and jointly promote his business. We thought that with a large South African expat population in Perth, and this being a challenging and exciting idea, we would work together to make it happen. We researched a number of artists and galleries and I was fortunate enough to be in Cape Town for the soccer World Cup 2010 and visited Stevenson Gallery. There was an immediate rapport with Andrew da Conceicao and over the next few months the exhibition proposal was developed and agreed upon resulting in seven exceptional artists exhibiting at Turner Galleries in December 2011 and Conrad Botes coming to Perth for a four week residency from Cape Town.

The whole project went very smoothly. The biggest challenges were placing your faith in people that you have met only briefly, dealing with systems through customs and meeting the financial expense. The experience was invaluable and we would definitely consider more work by South African artists and in particular Conrad Botes, who would like to return and do a solo exhibition. We have begun discussions with the Perth Centre for



Photography about a curated touring photographic exhibition including South African photographers and our Art Angel sponsor is already talking about an artist from India as a new venture.

JR: Does the demographic amongst buyers of South African works differ markedly from your buyers of Australian art? Do you have an opinion on whether your buyers differ markedly from the clientele of other WA based galleries of contemporary art?

HT: Contemporary artwork from South Africa is socially and politically challenging and not for the faint hearted. Although there was interest from one Australian State Gallery – for Serge Alain Nitegeka's painting – that sale did not eventuate. There were, however, many expat South African viewers through the gallery who knew the artists personally or had work in their private collections by these artists. One artist even has a brother living in Perth, which was a complete surprise to us on opening night. We feel uplifted by the calibre of the artists (three of whom were in the 2010 Sydney Biennale) in the exhibition but disappointed by the lack of sales. If there is a division amongst collectors in Perth, it is due to the nature of the work collected. The galleries specialising in Indigenous artworks would be supported by a different group of collectors from those showing non-indigenous contemporary work. There is also quite a divide between galleries showing more traditional works attracting an older audience and more adventurous contemporary works attracting younger viewers.

JR: Do you allot a percentage of your exhibition calendar to exhibiting work from interstate artists, or is the process more organic? What is your charter/philosophy for taking on new artists?

HT: Most of the residencies are offered by invitation to eastern states artists and the programme has three resident artists per year. We have had Angela de la Cruz from the UK and Conrad Botes from Cape Town, South Africa and Stephen Eastaugh from Argentina. However we primarily show Western Australian artists. In 2006, the year that the gallery was being moved and renovated, we took three Western Australian artists to Sydney and Melbourne. Some former resident

Above left:
Matthew Hunt
Continental Shelf 2010
scraperboard
30.5 x 22.9cm

Above right:
Graham Miller
Rhonda & Chantelle 2007
archival digital photograph
80 x 100cm
Edition of 6



Above:
Marion Borgelt
 Turner Galleries interior.
 Exhibition:
 Marion Borgelt 2009
 Photo Eva Fernandez

Below:
Andrew Nicholls
Lillith, (portrait of Josie)
 2010-11
 archival ink pen on arches
 aquarelle paper, 171 x 76cm
 (over 3 panels)



artists, such as Marion Borgelt, returned for further exhibitions with us and we maintain contact with many previous resident artists.

It is important to stay alert to changes and new and original ideas in art. You have to keep pushing your own boundaries and maintain vital interest in the developments and changes around you.

JR: *Have you had investors stop acquiring or dispose of works since the changes to SMSF regulations introduced as a result of the Cooper Review?*

HT: I have, in the past, owned a large number of works in my own self managed fund; however, due to the lack of logic and the constraints and demands of the operational requirements of Self Managed Funds, I sold all of the works at market valuation to myself in February 2008. I can now enjoy the work on a daily basis free of constraint. There is a lot of disquiet regarding the regulations and the effect the introduction of these regulations has had on collectors and investors. I feel there is a need to review the Cooper review.

JR: *Aside from the South African population and clientele, what other influences does your gallery's Perth location have on your business? Has the mining boom impacted the Indigenous v non-Indigenous art markets differently in your view?*

HT: The mining boom in Perth probably makes all business proprietors feel a little more confident about Western Australia's economy and future. I wouldn't say that the boom has translated into greater art sales. Collectors are still being cautious with their money. With regard to the sales of Indigenous art, it is my perception that there has always been a focus by the large mining companies based in the North West to support and acquire works from the Indigenous artists and communities in the vicinity of their mining sites. My challenge is to broaden that interest to other contemporary artists and their works.

JR: *What weight do you place upon successful sales at art fairs for an artist's career? What*

particular value for Turner Galleries do you see in attending art fairs?

HT: Turner Galleries has been represented at the Melbourne Art Fair since 2006. It is very important for artists and galleries to be represented at a national and international level with their peers. It is the financial cost that makes me very reserved about taking the next necessary step into an international arena. Perhaps that is why I have focused to date on making things happen here in Perth.

We would, however, like to develop an international presence for our Western Australian artists. I travelled to Dubai in March 2009 thinking Art Dubai would be a very exciting Art Fair to take part in and indeed it is a very exotic destination. Unfortunately, this was just after the financial crash and I felt it more prudent to focus on the home front. However, Dubai is still in the pipeline and the idea of building reciprocal relationships with international galleries would be mutually beneficial.

JR: *In addition to your own Art Angels program, do you pursue any other philanthropic ventures or sit on any boards, trusts or foundations?*

HT: Yes, I have a Private Ancillary Fund – The JEM Foundation – which for many years has donated to the Royal Flying Doctor Service, The Smith Family and research into respiratory diseases at the University of Western Australia. I don't sit on any art boards, although if I wasn't running a commercial gallery I would be very interested in doing so.

JR: *What are your other passions, and do they influence your art business in any tangible way?*

HT: My other passion is real estate, which does support and influence my gallery business. Five years ago when the original church building presented too many challenges for showing larger scale works, I bought and renovated an old warehouse/garage in Northbridge and moved the gallery there. My other interest is travel and this affords many opportunities to meet artists and see wonderful international exhibitions, the most recent of which was Anish Kapoor's outstanding work *Leviathan* for Monumenta – Grand Palais Paris.

February 29th to March 25th
MAT COLLISHAW

March 28th to April 22nd
ARIEL HASSAN

April 26th to May 27th
ANGELA & HOSSEIN VALAMANESH

Image: Ariel Hassan, *Monotomie*, 2011, wallpaper, dimension variable