Watters Gallery: fifty years on.

On the 18th of November 1964 Watters Gallery opened in a small sandstone terrace at 397 Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst. By June 1969 the gallery had moved to a new space having exhibited the work of fifty-two artists, including twelve women, an unusually high percentage for the time. These included a wide range of contemporary Australian artists, some such Henri Bastin and Maximillian Feuerring, who in 1965 had a solo exhibition at the São Paulo Biennal, might today be seen as curiosities. Some, who no longer show at Watters, such as David Aspden, Sydney Ball, Vivienne Binns, Mirka Mora, Ti Parks, Ann Thomson, and Dick Watkins, have all assumed significant places in the history and development of Australian art. Other important artists from those early days never left Watters Gallery. They included James Clifford, Richard Larter, Robert Parr, John Peart and Max Watters, Frank's younger brother. Many others including Ian Howard, Robert Jenyns, Frank Littler, Chris O'Doherty (a.k.a. Reg Mombassa), Paul Selwood, Tony Tuckson, and Vicki Varvaressos, who held their first solo exhibitions over forty years ago at Watters Gallery and continue to exhibit there.

Over fifty years Watters Gallery has earned a reputation as being prepared to show difficult art. Certainly when first exhibited much of what was shown was unlikely to be commercially viable, but that has never been an overriding principle determining work selected for exhibition. A review of the gallery's history demonstrates that enthusiasm for art, support for contemporary art, and an interest in and respect for artists has determined what was shown at Watters Gallery.

Frank Watters, born 1934, escaped work in the coal mines of Muswellbrook in the Upper Hunter region of New South Wales when he came to Sydney in his late teens. First working in various factories, and making some paintings, he eventually found work as a gallery assistant at Barry Stern Gallery in Paddington. There he met Geoffrey Legge, also born in 1934, who lived next door and who became fascinated by art. The admiration that Geoffrey felt for Frank's perceptiveness led him to suggest that they open a gallery together. Three days after the gallery opened Geoffrey and Alex were married.

The three were the inaugural directors and are, fifty years later, the current directors of Watters Gallery. Certainly the gallery would not be in existence today except for the support and accounting skills Alex brought to the partnership. As Daniel Thomas wrote in his catalogue introduction to the exhibition marking Watters Gallery's first ten years, '*For nearly ten years, from its opening in November 1964, the Watters Gallery lost money – the first year to show a profit was 1973-74* ….' Geoffrey worked as an economist for Comalco until 1974, when Frank received a grant from the Visual Arts Board to travel overseas. Frank's departure precipitated Geoffrey into running the gallery which he and Frank have done ever since.

In 1969, almost mid-way through those first ten years Frank, Geoffrey and Alex bought what had once been *The harp of Erin hotel* at 109 Riley Street, East Sydney. [Evidence of the building's early history can still be seen in the harp motifs on its upper storey.] The building, probably built in 1856, was converted by the Sydney architect Don Gazzard from two shops and a boarding-house to a two-level gallery

with polished cement floors and grey walls. A reception desk placed at the back of the lower gallery allows gallery staff to welcome a visitor without being intimidating.

Watters Gallery has always been a friendly gallery open to many passers-by who are curious about the art they are able to see through the windows. It has never attempted to discriminate and has introduced many people to contemporary art. Frank's dogs have always added to the friendly atmosphere and are very much a part of a gallery visit.

Up to date stock rooms fitted with sliding racks, probably the first in an Australian commercial gallery, made it possible to keep and show a wide range of paintings other than those in the current exhibition. The mansard roof extension, built in 1908, became an apartment for Frank. Now filled with some of his collection of art works, it has been the place for many convivial gatherings and raucous dinners for artists, writers, musicians, collectors, and curators. Frank's roof garden, several stories up and in the middle of East Sydney is an unexpected oasis of plants, native and exotic. For a time it was the home of a diamond python which had mysteriously appeared.

In the list of exhibitions held at Watters Gallery over the past fifty years there are some remarkable achievements. Many are testament to the enduring relationship between an artist and the gallery.

The first exhibition at Riley Street, from 9th to 26th July 1969, was of paintings by Richard Larter, who had had his first solo exhibition with Watters in 1965. Like others Larter continued to exhibit with Watters Gallery for the rest of his life.

Enthusiasm for emerging contemporary art helped launch or establish the careers of many young and unknown artists, such as Micky Allan, John Armstrong, Vivienne Binns, Tim Burns, Aleks Danko, John Davis, Margaret Dodd, Helen Eager, Sue Ford, Joan Grounds, Lorraine Jenyns, Bob Jenyns, Kevin Mortensen, John Nixon, Imants Tillers, and Arthur Wicks. As well as painting and sculpture, artists working with photography, conceptual art and other media were exhibited. The work of these artists was challenging and often unlikely to be accepted for exhibition at less adventurous galleries. Later with established careers some of these artists moved on to other galleries. Some stopped working as artists. Most played a significant part in the history of contemporary Australian art in the late twentieth century.

From the beginning Watters Gallery was prepared to exhibit sculpture, never as readily sold as paintings. Frank and Geoffrey's support for Robert Parr's idiosyncratic sculpture first exhibited in 1966 exemplifies their stance [of course they weren't supporting the work because it was idiosyncratic, they admired any work they exhibited]. In 1969 at Riley Street they exhibited the work of the American sculptor, Richard Stankiewicz who had ceased exhibiting because of his suspicion of commercial galleries. Stankiewicz saw his show at Watters Gallery as a watershed, and later appointed Zabriski Gallery, New York, as his representative and began to exhibit internationally.

Work considered outside the mainstream, overlooked, or too controversial was never a problem. Some of the earliest Australian video, installation, and performance art was shown at Watters Gallery. For instance, in 1979 they held an exhibition of the

work of Margaret Benyon, the first artist to make holograms. From the beginning Frank and Geoffrey were prepared to support art and artists in many ways. In 1967 they helped organize an appeal to support Mike Brown, then being prosecuted for exhibiting ‘grossly indecent’ art in an exhibition at Gallery A. Brown, who had fled to New Zealand, returned to Australia in 1972 to exhibit with Watters Gallery and his career continued more strongly than ever.

Although most of the new artists shown at Watters Gallery were young or emerging, these were not the criteria for selection, as Geoffrey Legge says ‘only a feeling about the quality of the work’. When Tony Tuckson, aged forty-nine and better known as a curator and art administrator, approached Frank and Geoffrey to exhibit his work he gained enthusiastic supporters. In May 1970 *Tony Tuckson: paintings [from about 1958 to 1970],* was the first of many exhibitions that established Tuckson as one of Australia’s most significant painters. Watters Gallery’s thoughtful exhibitions mounted from the Tuckson estate over the past forty years, together with several important surveys, catalogues and books, have been a remarkable achievement.

James Gleeson, a sixty-six year old surrealist first exhibited at Watters Gallery in 1981 and 1982. The drawings in these exhibitions involved a completely new direction from the work he had been exhibiting for many years. They excited the interest of collectors and curators. However in 1983 he started work on the large and remarkable paintings that confirmed his place as a great Australian painter. The friendship that developed between Frank, Geoffrey, and Gleeson, was fundamental to sustaining Gleeson’s working career into his nineties.

Other well established artists who joined the Watters Gallery included the painter Ken Whisson who was fifty-one when he first exhibited with the gallery. The sculptor Robert Klippel began exhibiting with Watters Gallery when he was fifty-nine. While the majority of Watters Gallery artists were young and emerging, exciting and innovative art, not age, was always the reason for Frank and Geoffrey taking-on an artist.

Watters Gallery has never solely been about exhibiting art. In 1966 the first of a continuing series of musical recitals in the gallery was held – a jazz concert with Bernie McGann, playing alto sax, complemented Larter’s paintings. This and other jazz concerts were arranged by Horst Leopold, who became an important jazz impresario. Poetry recitals, concerts, experimental film, dance performances, concerts devoted to the work of Erik Satie, John Cage, La Monte Young, and the young Australian composer and musician Colin Offord, and recitals of historical and modern music, often featuring the counter-tenor Hartley Newnham, reflected their enthusiasm for contemporary culture in many different forms. In a city where contemporary music was seldom heard Watters Gallery became a popular venue. World premieres of work of by Cornelius Cardew and more recently the work of Alan Holley and others have been performed.

Watters Gallery was also the venue for exhibitions selected from the collection of the Power Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Sydney. In 1969 *The French Exhibition* included the work of Sonia Delaunay and Robert Delaunay, Takis, Jesus Raphael Soto, Henri Michaux, Hans Hartung, Pierre Soulages, and George Mathieu. In the following year *1969-1970 Acquisitions* presented more of curator Elwyn Lynn’s

purchases. That these exhibitions from the Power Institute were shown at Watters Gallery, a commercial gallery and not a public art museum, demonstrated the regard with which the gallery was held as central to the exhibition of contemporary art in Sydney.

This dedication to contemporary art was marked in 1970 when *Sunbathing with Savart* which was staged at Watters Gallery. Savart was the group led by the charismatic Robert Williams, who had already been responsible for some of the earliest performance art in Australia. The program was further developed in February 1971 when Watters Gallery was the venue for the first of several experimental works which have assumed iconic status in the history of Australian installation and performance art. *WOOM: a lightshow environmental happening* by Roger Foley [Ellis D. Fogg], Vivienne Binns and associates, was followed in 1972 with *The Joe Bonomo story [A show of strength]*, a series of performances involving many artists and students including Aleks Danko, Tim Burns, Vivienne Binns, and Imants Tillers. In December 1973 the exhibition program concluded with *Soft Riots: a night of events, rituals, readings and performances*, with Aleks Danko, Joan Grounds, Sylvia and the Synthetics, Richard Tipping, and others.

Soon after it opened, in 1966, Watters Gallery had mounted *Sydney painters* for the Auckland Festival of the Arts in New Zealand. The work of David Blackburn, James Clifford, Wendy Paramor, John Peart, Michael Allen Shaw, Max Watters and Robert Williams was included in this ambitious introduction of contemporary Australian art to a trans-Tasman audience. A later series of exhibitions similarly demonstrated how Watters Gallery and its artists were leading the way. In 1975 *Ocker Funk*, with work by Jenny Barwell, Chris O'Doherty [aka Reg Mombassa], Peter Kingston, Frank Littler, Patricia Moylan, Ken Murrey, Ken Searle and Garry Shead, toured Victorian regional galleries. At that time Watters Gallery was the leader in the promotion of anti-formalist art. A very serious investigation of such art was conducted by Brian Finemore in his exhibition *Object and Idea: new work by Australian artists* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1973. All the artists involved were connected with Watters Gallery.

A series of remarkable exhibitions in the late 1970s particularly assured Watters Gallery a place in the history of Australian art. The first of these in September 1977, *Walls sometimes speak*, consisted of posters by Toni Robertson and Chips Mackinolty and others from the Earthworks Co-op and the Tin Sheds, Sydney. Addressing social and political subjects, especially anti-war and nuclear development, women's issues, Aboriginal land rights, and Gay and Lesbian issues, this was the first time that such an ephemeral art form as the contemporary political poster had been given serious consideration in an Australian gallery. It was followed for a weekend, 23 and 24 July in 1978, by the ground-breaking *An exhibition of work by homosexual and lesbian artists*, the first time such exhibition had been organized in Australia. In October 1979 *The d'oyley show: an exhibition of women's domestic fancywork*, pieced together by the Women's Domestic Needlework Group, and in July 1980, *Mothers memories Others memories 'Half way' exhibition* a Blacktown Artist-in-Community Project co-ordinated by Vivienne Binns, exhibited more ephemeral art far outside what would be expected in a commercial gallery.

Of these exhibitions, *Some aspects of the Upper Hunter environmental exhibition*, in December 1980, showed a part of a larger community exhibition conceived and organized by Frank Watters. With the participation of individuals and groups from the Upper Hunter Valley and with the assistance of the New South Wales Department of Minerals and Energy, the exhibition staged in Muswellbrook, Scone, Denman and Singleton, focussed on the environmental effects of extensive open-cut coal mining in the Upper Hunter. Through exhibitions like these and activities such as the fund raiser to support Mike Brown, and the 1977 public discussion concerning artist's copyright organized to protest against Volvo [Australia] for its appropriation of American artist Doug Michels' *Cadillac Ranch*, 1974, Frank and Geoffrey encouraged consideration of a wide range of ethical, social, political and environment issues.

In its earliest days, when there were few similar commercial galleries, Watters Gallery was an obligatory visit for anyone interested in keeping abreast of the latest contemporary Australian art. The gallery's audience has always been wide-ranging, including dedicated art aficionados, artists, collectors, curators, students and casual visitors, and some of the women working in near-by brothels. It was also always a good place to meet and talk with others similarly interested, including Frank and Geoffrey. Their interests and the various performances in the gallery attracted a wide audience. Among these the author Patrick White must be the best known. White's interest in art and support for young artists led him to buy works which he believed should find their way into a public collection. Work by Micky Allan, David Annesley, Jenny Barwell, Henri Bastin, John Davis, Bob Jenyns, Richard Larter, Frank Littler, Chris O'Doherty, John Peart, David Rankin, Ken Searle, Michael Taylor, Imants Tillers and Ken Whisson were purchased by White and donated to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Without any consultation with the director or curatorial staff, White made these gifts to improve the state collection as he saw fit. Certainly the selection provides an insight into White's taste and might one day be the basis for a fascinating exhibition.

Another great tastemaker to purchase work from Watters Gallery was Lucy Swanton, a director of the Macquarie Galleries from 1939 to 1956. She became a great friend to Frank, Alex and Geoffrey. Devoted to her interest in travel and contemporary art, much of Swanton's collection was donated and bequeathed to the National Gallery of Australia. Three of these paintings, by Richard Larter, Michael Taylor and Tony Tuckson, were purchased from Watters Gallery in the 1970s. They are extraordinary works illustrating not just her remarkably adventurous taste, but also the gallery's place exhibiting the very best of contemporary art. Other very influential collectors whose patronage deserves recording are John Lane, the proprietor of the eponymous menswear shop in Double Bay, whose acute perceptions meant he was much consulted by his wide range of wealthy clients; and Hugh Jamieson, partner in the Sydney law firm Allens Arthur Robinson, who bought for himself as well as convincing his firm to establish what is now a well-known collection. His first purchases for the firm were works by Richard Larter, John Peart and David Rankin, all acquired from Watters Gallery.

Like many long established galleries by the 1980s Watters Gallery had trouble managing a regular exhibition schedule for its stable of artists and could not take on new artists. A solution was found in establishing a new gallery to be run by Zoe and

Jasper Legge, Alex and Geoffrey's children. The Legge Gallery was opened at 183 Regent Street, Redfern, in May 1990. The area, like East Sydney when Watters Gallery first moved there, was rather edgy but up-and-coming. It was the sort of place in which young artists would feel comfortable, and a lively exhibition program mirrored the early days of Watters Gallery. However, in 2009, after nineteen years and in the less certain financial times, Legge Gallery amalgamated with Watters Gallery.

In 2009 Wally Barda, an architect and artist exhibiting with Watters Gallery since 1979, extended the existing building to create a larger office and more stock rooms. These additions allowed the original Don Gazzard space to remain unaltered. In 2009 Jasper Legge joined Frank, Geoffrey and Alex as a director of the gallery, but his sudden death in 2010, left them, once again managing a large and diverse group of artists. The artists coming from Legge Gallery introduced a new youthfulness at Watters Gallery. The welded steel sculptures of James Rogers, the satirical prints of Rew Hanks, Fiona Fell's ceramic sculptures and Steve Harrison's vessels, and painters such as Vivienne Ferguson, Joe Frost and Derek O'Connor, all continue the Watters Gallery tradition of introducing new and exciting art.

A visit to Watters Gallery has always been, and is, a pleasure. While greeted from the desk there is never a sense of being watched or pursued to be sold something. After wandering around the gallery enjoying the exhibition you can discuss the exhibition, questions can be answered, or you can leave unobtrusively. If you wish to see something in the store, or ask about an artist, especially their current work, there is always someone knowledgeable to talk to. All the staff are passionate about art, most have been working at the gallery for a long time.

Watters Gallery marked its tenth anniversary in 1974, its twenty-fifth in 1989, and now its fiftieth.

The people who have supported Watters Gallery over the years – artists, the art enthusiasts, collectors, curators, and critics, – have enabled it to keep going for the long time that it has. Their help and encouragement is a continuing and important factor in the success of the gallery. Frank Watters and Alex and Geoffrey Legge have welcomed a wide variety of people into the gallery, and their lives, and made many friends. Watters Gallery has earned its place in the history of Australian art.

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September 2014