A Festival Of The Spirit

The annual South Australian Living Artists Festival is a lively grassroots phenomenon that has been enthusiastically embraced by visual artists and the art-loving public alike. While not all of its artists involved are household names, SALA serves as a model for art as broader social action. 

By Christine Nicholls

More than a decade ago the South Australian Living Artists (SALA) Festival was inaugurated as a modest one-week event. Relative to the present, SALA Week, as it was then known, supported considerably fewer exhibition venues in the state capital Adelaide and in regional South Australia. The total of 46 venues in South Australia (23 in metropolitan Adelaide and 23 in regional areas) represent less than 10% of today’s SALA activities.

The SALA Festival, as it is now known, has grown exponentially and has taken hold of the South Australian art-loving public’s imagination. Now entering its 12th year, SALA has greatly expanded its scope in terms of artist numbers, audience size, city, rural, and remote art-space venues and public profile. In 2010, this annual event, which now continues for more than three weeks, boasts more than 2,500 participating artists in some 500 venues throughout South Australia.

The brainchild of eminent Adelaide gallerist Paul Greenaway, the SALA festival is open to South Australian-based artists who work across all media, from drawing and painting to photography, printmaking, mixed media and installation, glass, jewelry, ceramics, craft, digital media, and sculpture. These days Greenaway, as SALA’s ‘godfather,’ takes a less active role than formerly. SALA is now staffed by one full-time and two part-time employees and is managed by a capable and committed volunteer Board that meets year round.

South Australian artists of all ages and backgrounds are eligible to participate. The SALA Board arranges and provides venues for artists, professional or emerging, who might otherwise struggle to exhibit their work. Unusually, SALA is a democratically conceived, grass-roots visual arts festival that caters for all comers whilst also providing a platform for established local artists with national or international reputations. Thus the event serves audiences and artists ranging from those with connections to ‘the top end of town’ to occasional gallery-goers and amateur ‘dabblers’. In order for readers to appreciate the sheer range and diversity of the SALA Festival this article will consider representative examples of exhibitions and artworks across the entire spectrum, in venues inside and outside of the mainstream art gallery and institutional system.

The Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), the state’s premier visual arts institution, mounts its own annual SALA exhibition. Included among exhibiting artists in late 2009 were Ian North, Angela Valamanesh, and Darren Siwes.

New Zealand-born Ian North’s oil painting, The Wave, part of his recent series Sail Away, is a marvelous work. The wave is a mountainous wall of water, poised motionless at the penultimate moment before breaking. The three-masted warship beneath this frothing, murky green-and-white monster is perilously on course to sail directly into what would be almost certain annihilation.

North’s use of color in this work is exceptional. The glowing sky, the boat’s hull, and the reddish-amber-orange reflection in the water all portend disaster. In terms of the craft’s provenance, the vessel evinces features of 16th- or 17th-century European ships (a Dutch schooner perhaps,
or more specifically, a tern?). Subverting such interpretation, the Indonesian flag is hovering atop its tallest, central mast. Given that Indonesian independence was proclaimed in 1945 (incidentally, the same year that Ian North was born), something is clearly afoot with respect to historical period. Semantically and stylistically this accomplished work seems to have been created from equally out-of-kilter elements. The Wave evokes a host of ideas ranging from those of ‘Empire’ and boys’ own adventure stories to art history references (observable, for instance, in the work’s Turner-esque quality). Nevertheless, and perhaps counterintuitively, given the preceding analysis, this is a work of seamless unity.

Key to understanding The Wave was North’s artist statement in which he wrote about the genesis of this series of work, immediately post-September 11, 2001. At that time, wrote North, an image simply ‘floated’ into his mind.

Humankind was indeed on the brink of sailing into ever-stormier waters. Among events following the immediate wake of 9/11 were the Iraq war, the war in Afghanistan, the (still) unending spate of suicide bombers, and, unsurprisingly, increased global anxiety. Since then humanity has been carried along by successive waves of natural disasters including the Indian Ocean tsunami that followed the massive earthquake of Boxing Day 2004, and the wave of too-easy-credit leading to the global economic meltdown beginning in 2008.

Notwithstanding, The Wave has a quality that harks back to a simpler, more innocent, if no less dangerous, time: childhood. As North writes, “...these are not edged political pictures. I used to enjoy drawing pirate galleons and smoky sea battles when I was seven or eight. The big wave could be from my bathtub of those years, when I liked to create, relative to the size of toy boats, such maritime monsters.” So, this work and the others in North’s Sail Away series are also imbued with pure escapism imbricated with nostalgia, underscored by the irretrievable loss of childhood innocence.

Darren Siwes’s photograph, Gold Female, from the series Oz Omnium Rex Et Regina, also on display at AGSA’s SALA exhibition, depicts a recognizably Australian gold coin, close-up. The words “Mary I, Australia 2041” are emblazoned upon its shiny surface. The future reigning monarch bears a distinct resemblance to a local, high-profile Aboriginal woman, leading viewers not only to question Australia’s current (and to many, anachronistic) constitutional monarchy, but also its legal legitimacy. In terms of natural justice, the obvious question arising is, “Why not an Indigenous monarch, or at least, an Indigenous head of state?”

Angela Valamanesh’s finely crafted, minimalist installation of stoneware ceramic works, About being here, was also among the finest exhibits of AGSA’s SALA. Evoking the dry, eroded landscape of the Australian interior, the artist’s restrained, subtle color use and the silently passive quality of the individual works lend this installation considerable authority.

A little further down Adelaide’s main boulevard, North Terrace, the Flinders University City Gallery’s 2009 SALA Festival showed Not Absolute, which featured collaborative works by Catherine Truman, Judy Morris, Ian Gibbins, Vicki Clifton, Gabrielle Bisetto, and Rachel Burgess. This exhibition also garnered significant critical attention. Not Absolute’s central curatorial focus was on the human body and our need to explore our (often limited) knowledge of our own embodied status. This research-based conceptual project brought together artists and neuroscientists who collaborated to create oddly compelling exhibits.

Gabriella Bisetto’s Twelve Hours of Breathing, for instance, comprised a huge PVC bag filled with the artist’s exhaled breath. Bisetto’s gargantuan, transparent ‘bottled breath-bag’, suspended from what seemed to be a remodeled mattress base, brought to mind certain philosophical writings about breath and breathing, drawing attention to our general lack of conscious awareness of these processes. As Luce Irigaray has written, to cultivate one’s conscious connection to one’s breath is to cultivate one’s relationship with ‘Spirit’ in a very direct way (Irigaray, 2004). Twelve
Avril Thomas, *New Life*, 2009, oil on canvas, 77 x 61 cm. Flinders Medical Centre Gallery, Adelaide.

*Hours of Breathing* also presented a strangely intriguing testimony to the limits of human bodily capacity and endurance in terms of ‘the outbreath’. While *Not Absolute* presented some outstanding works by established artists of the calibre of Bisetto and Catherine Truman, the real discovery of this exhibition was that of neuroscientific researcher Judy Morris’s significant gift for drawing—and in equal measure, drawing attention to the interior structure of the human body. Morris’s diptych drawing *Thoracic: Series 3*, part of a collaborative multi-media installation with contributions from Ian Gibbins and Truman, was an exquisite work in which the artist’s technical mastery and her ability to convey the exhibition’s central *ibématique* revealed an inner bodily truth. Morris’s *Recto-Verso: Series 1* evinced a similarly high skill level. This extraordinarily modest artist’s unique and unforgettable ‘voice’ needs nurturing. Morris is a major talent and one can only hope that she will be offered a solo exhibition in an upcoming SALA Festival.

In 1959, C.P. Snow, in his influential Rede Lecture, *The Two Cultures*, spoke of the necessity for practitioners working in the humanities and the sciences to communicate with one another, to share knowledge and to work more closely for the common good. Snow regarded the split between the sciences and the arts and the two groups’ more often than not non-conversant relations as byproducts of a flawed education system. Significantly, Snow regarded the situation as a hindrance to finding much-needed solutions for many of the world’s problems. Unfortunately, the situation as described by Snow has not changed significantly in the 50 years since he first presented his ideas. *Not Absolute* took some categorical steps in healing this longstanding rift, by providing the opportunity for these differing disciplinary approaches to build bridges.

Traveling south to the Flinders Medical Centre, Bedford Park, where Flinders University also maintains a presence in the Promenade Gallery of this large, regional hospital’s long walkway, works from Avril Thomas’s exhibition *Theatre Works: An Artist’s View Inside Operating Theatres* were displayed under the SALA Festival’s imprimatur. Thomas’s oils on canvas included *As One*, showing doctors working together in an operating theater, deep in concentration and with obvious dedication. Thomas’s *A New Life*, where a woman medic holds a newborn baby (only just emerged from caesarean section), is a joyous work. These uplifting works were ‘pitch perfect’ for the specific venue.

*Theatre Works* is a project that could have easily backfired, because people are so often fearful about entering hospitals, regardless of circumstances. Thomas’s well-constructed works addressed this by unveiling the ‘secret business’
that goes on inside operating theaters in immensely reassuring ways. The Flinders Medical Centre, by opening the doors of its operating theaters to an established artist and subsequently exhibiting her artworks in the hospital gallery, has courageously contributed to offsetting anxieties about surgical procedures. Avril Thomas’s works encourage confidence in the professionalism of people working in the Australian medical system (no small feat because, as is the case elsewhere in the world, the Australian health system is increasingly subject to public censure).

In undertaking this project Flinders Medical Centre thus took a calculated risk, a brave move in a society that increasingly discourages risk-taking of any kind, artistic or otherwise. This is particularly the case in the medical arena, so all involved in this inspirational project merit the highest praise.

At the Adelaide Experimental Art Foundation (AEAF), SALA Festival audiences enthusiastically greeted Bridget Currie’s sculptural installation *Regulators* and Paul Sloan’s illuminating *Psychic Souvenirs*, curated by Melentie Pandivovski. There is nothing forced, false, or sentimental in Sloan’s ‘memory snapshots’ (‘snapshots’, it needs to be noted, only in the metaphorical sense). In *Psychic Souvenirs* Sloan has captured the essence of certain earlier, formative experiences in his life, rendering them in material form to create a museology of the mind.

Currie’s Japanese-influenced, minimalist, conceptual work, *Regulators*, comprising a recently felled olive tree propped up by plywood stakes, was accompanied by a distinctive fragrance. *Regulators* not only made reference to Japanese gardening practices in which nature and culture seem to engage in perpetual mortal combat, but was also evocative of the repetitive, regulated cycles of life, death, and renewal, where, in reciprocal deadlock, the dead buttress the living and vice versa. Through this uprooted tree so plangently borne by the flimsiest of support structures, Currie expressed something of life’s struggle. Currie and Sloan both created works that augur well for their artistic futures.

Next door to the AEAF at Adelaide’s JamFactory Contemporary Craft and Design Gallery 1, the SALA Festival offering was a retrospective exhibition of ceramic works decorated by Pitjantjatjara artist Nyukana (Daisy) Baker. The JamFactory’s shop-window display featured Sandy Elverd’s witty, accomplished installation *Domestication*, comprising *faux* kitchen implements skillfully woven from kangaroo grass and thread. Elverd’s droll, positively endearing works (despite the fact that the kitchen utensils and cutlery appeared to have been fashioned from dry animal dung!) confirm her status as one of Australia’s most innovative and fascinatingly left-of-field contemporary artists working in the field of non-functional craft.

Traveling north to the Soda and Rhyme Jewellery Design Gallery, jeweler and metalworker Sue Lorraine’s delightful, tactile, technically flawless *Stick Insects* brought together the artist’s love of natural history, science, technology and popular culture as well as her research interest in museological display practices. These brightly hued, whimsical little critters, fashioned from Cuisenaire rods and wire, meld Lorraine’s meticulous workmanship and artistic preoccupations with her fascination with insect life of all kinds. Visitors to this SALA exhibition were, to use the words of one afficionado, tickled pink by Lorraine’s gorgeous little creepy-crawlies.

Continuing in associative mode, well-respected Adelaide artist and author of *The Art of the Ant*, Annette Vincent, opened her Wattle Park Studio Garage Gallery for the duration of the 2009 SALA Festival. A New Zealander by birth, Vincent is among that rare species of professional artist who have managed, like Ian Gibbins and Judy Morris, to bridge the arts and sciences.
Vincent's background as a biological scientist includes considerable experience as a professional scientific illustrator. This was evident in her vivid and engaging *Where do I fit in?* a relief etching in which she made use of gouache, pen, black ink, and pencil. In this work she revealed individual differences among various genera of ants, especially in their abdominal and head shapes. The ants' detailed, accurately rendered, though wonderfully comic-book appearance, and their euphonious apppellations all seemed directly derived from *Asterix The Gaul* (especially the heroic nomenclature). Genus names included 'Crematogaster' (for an ant with a distinctive heart-shaped abdomen, or gaster), 'Opisthopsis', and 'Iridomyrmex.' This is biological science illustration at its exciting best, with particular appeal to children and young adults aspiring to careers in the biological sciences.

The polymath Vincent has undertaken postgraduate studies in advanced intaglio etching at the University of Colorado. The artist's skill in this domain is apparent in her *Drying Wetlands*, where she represents a disturbing panoply of ghostly, gnarled, dying trees—disagreeable symptoms of our drying wetlands and of a landscape completely out of balance with the natural cycles of life, decay, and death. In this finely etched work Annette Vincent deploys a limited palette to striking effect, emphasizing the premature senescence and death of trees that were, not so long ago, healthy, living organisms. Vincent depicts the dead or dying trees with their roots exposed, limbs strewn asunder, a grim reminder of Wallace Stevens's statement, "...what is dead lives with an intensity beyond any experience of life."

A number of schools also mounted visual art displays for the duration of the SALA Festival. *Celebrating Country: Kinship and Culture*, held at the Seymour College Centre for Performing Arts, Glen Osmond, was both ambitious and successful. It included some first-rate student work as well as almost 200 Indigenous artworks from more than a dozen remote art centers. Significant among these was an impressive array of incised and decorated boabs from the Warringarri Art Centre in the Kimberley region, and the colorful and energetic...
works from Warlukurlangu Arts Centre in Yuendumu. Of particular note was Margaret Turner Napangardi's painting Majardji Jukurrpa, depicting women's hair-string skirts, worn in yilpinji, or 'love magic' ceremonies. Local Yuendumu schoolteacher Ormay Nangala Gallagher's Yankirri Jukurrpa (Emu Dreaming) – Ngariyikurlangu, depicting rock-hole country to the north west of Yuendumu, east of Mission Creek, was another vivid, well-executed work. Nangala's work is associated with Jangala Jampijinpa/Nangala Nampijinpa Dreamings, relating to emus (yankirri), bush turkeys (wardilyka), and bush raisins (yalakiri, solanum centrale), a staple food for the latter two species, which grows in profusion on the same site—where all three species compete for limited resources. Lola Nampijinpa Brown's striking Tingari work evoking the well-watered and therefore precious tract of land at Pikilyi, associated with the bush banana and cockatoo Dreamings, was another accomplished offering from the same celebrated Yuendumu-based visual arts cooperative.

A committee of volunteers worked on the Seymour College project for months in advance of the SALA exhibition. The driving force behind it, Heather Klose, a former Collegian and a teacher at the school, undertook a lengthy odyssey to remote art centers in Australia's north and northwest, selecting works to display and

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ountry towns, including Riverton in the wine-growing region of the Clare valley, in mid-northern South Australia, also hosted their own SALA exhibitions. Robert Hannaford, one of South Australia's leading artists, showed work at the Riverton Light Gallery, along with other local artists Alison Mitchell, David Gibb, Lise Temple, Jim Dunstan, and Roland Weight. Hannaford's oil-on-canvas, Path of Water is a work of Zen-like simplicity and beauty.

Even sleepy little Moculta (according to the 2006 census population 299, although since then the population has halved) situated in the Barossa Valley, another South Australian wine-growing district, hosted its own small-scale SALA exhibition. Art lover and SALA Board member Stephanie Grose observed that the Moculta event engaged virtually the entire community, engendering significant local and civic pride. Grose writes, “The Moculta Community Hall’s large, very visible, locally-crafted, galvanized iron SALA sign was a reflection of the true spirit of community arts in South Australia. Inside, paintings, drawings, jewelry, steel sculptures, and craft including beautiful papier-mâché masks and a clothesline hung with embroidered t-shirts made up the exhibition. Three generations of one family were represented. Two small, embroidered textile works by Patricia Rose were seductively beautiful. As well as us, several other visitors were there, including a crying baby!”

Countless businesses, both large and small, metropolitan council galleries, community centers, courthouses, vineyards, cafés, and shop windows in both metropolitan and rural South Australia also proudly presented their own mini-SALA exhibitions. Not only is the annual SALA Festival probably unique in the world but also almost all South Australians seem to have caught the SALA contagion. Que viva la SALA! 

References


Dr. Christine Nicholls is a contributing editor for Australia for World Sculpture News and Asian Art News. She is based in Adelaide, South Australia, where she teaches at Flinders University, specializing in Indigenous Australian art.