



DAWN OELRICH

Director of Burnie Regional Art Gallery, Burnie, Tasmania

It wasn't long after *The Partnership Project* first got underway that Dawn Oelrich was appointed to take up the position as new Director of Burnie Regional Art Gallery. Over the years Dawn and I had met on a number of occasions: in her role as Director of the Redcliffe City Gallery and later at the University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery. But as is all-too-often the way in the visual art sector, Dawn and I had only had the chance to meet on a professional level, with little time for 'digging and delving' towards a more informed understanding about the source of the particular passions and motivations that drive people in the visual arts.

Although both the Redcliffe Gallery and the University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery are associated with beautiful stretches of shoreline in South-East Queensland, each of them are topographically very different, with very different kinds of energy. The shoreline at Redcliffe is sheltered from the strong waves of the Coral Sea by the line of offshore islands that act as a protective barrier to the waters of Moreton Bay, while the 'Sunnycoast' is a stretch of exposed rocky headlands and rolling surf beaches. From Bribie Island

to Noosa, the Sunnycoast beaches are pristine white, whereas the beaches of Redcliffe are tinted by the wondrous rich red soil that the local Aboriginal people named Ka-win Ka-win – meaning 'like blood' – a name-place that was later retained to refer to a light-house on Moreton Island in its anglicised version as Cowan Cowan.

As a fellow Queenslander, I guess I'd subconsciously wondered how Dawn might fare taking on the far colder climes of Tasmania – but I needn't have spared it a thought. Dawn grew up in a logging camp in a very remote part of north Canada – a place where the harsh climate tests people's resolve, and where, at the time, only the hardest immigrants rose to the challenge – many of the early settlers hailed from the Ukraine and Scotland – places where challenging northern hemisphere winters had prepared them for the new country. She remembers it as a place of overwhelming natural beauty peppered by small encampments resolutely maintained by hardy newcomers seeking jobs in mining, logging and pulp milling industries.

The small settlement where Dawn spent her early



childhood was situated on the edge of the Rockies in British Columbia. So many of these remote temporary camps had sprouted up along the edge of huge lakes hundreds of kilometres long – places where the logs were floated down from where they were felled to be hauled ashore at the sawmills. In the winter those lakes were frozen solid.

She admits that yes, while she was well aware at the time of how exquisitely beautiful the landscape was, as a kid she couldn't wait to get out of there. She was aware, as were so many children growing up there, of the limited opportunities the region offered to those who wanted to engage with the changing world in a meaningful way.

Dawn's great-grandmother was a First Nations woman – a member of the nomadic Interior Salish people. When she and Dawn's great-grandfather, a man from Yorkshire, fell in love, they had to apply for permission from a French bishop to accept their marriage. Dawn's great-grandmother's name was anglicised to Marguerite Sauvage or 'savage', (daughter of Hsel hwt brin and Bwe him mit bw). Her daughter Sarah, Dawn's grandmother, married a German 'homesteader' and they raised twelve children together – that's where the 'Oelrich' came from. 'Homestead' farms were granted by the government to non-indigenous settlers who committed to clearing, 'improving' and building a house on an allotment. The Canadian government, in complete denial of the fact that the land belonged to the First Nations peoples, took on the role of dispatching parcels of the country out in a haphazard way all across the country.

As I listened to Dawn's story ghosts of comparisons flitted between the histories of non-indigenous arrivals in Australia and Canada.

Dawn's dad had worked at saw-milling and logging until the day he died at the age of eighty-three. It was a life that demanded dedication, and the commitment and purpose infected all aspects of life. On each day of their early education, Dawn and her two sisters spent an hour and a half each way travelling to the school. Every morning, five children from the settlement were dropped off by the logging camp's four-wheel drive at a lonely bus-stop on the edge of the lake. From there, the school bus delivered them to a small town called Barrier in the North Thompson Valley.

When Dawn graduated in year twelve there was a total of two hundred and forty-eight children at the school. The long hours of travelling were just accepted as part of their school day, although the kids from the more remote saw-milling camps were well aware of the fact that their distance from the school prevented them from participating in the extra-curricular activities after classes. In winter, the days began in dark, freezing mornings, and at the end of the school day, evening darkness was already descending. Occasionally there were avalanches or roads were blocked by snow, and the bus had to be turned back. On such occasions,

the kids would be billeted in the homes of volunteer families.

Memories of that early life have returned frequently since her move to Tasmania – she admits that although it's not quite as cold as Canada, there's a similar sense of wildness, and also a sense that people have had to build a certain kind of resilience, and shared values about the necessity of being able to rely on each other when needed.

Comparisons notwithstanding, the demands of growing up in a logging camp in northern Canada seemed, to me at least, to be almost completely incompatible with the desire to work in the visual arts sector. "How did you get the idea you wanted to be a curator?" I asked.

Dawn relates how she'd always made drawings and painted from early childhood. There were family members who were painting landscapes in a representational way, and by her first year of high school she was already completely captivated when she'd read Janson's *History of Art* from cover to cover several times. Although art galleries were a long, long way away, she'd closely study images from the history of western art through slides in the classroom. When she finally mustered the confidence to announce to her family that she wanted to become a curator, she describes how they were horrified for three major reasons: 1. It would mean that she had to go to university; 2. That, in turn meant she was going to have to live in a city, and 3. It would mean she'd be doing lots of hanging around in the dubious company of artists. Unabashed, she persisted in chasing down her dream.

I asked her how she'd managed to get the funds together to do such a thing.

After high-school she'd taken a gap year to work in the sawmill. Her Dad's best friend was the head sawyer – a man called Mr. Koblen. One of the men on the late shift had lost his fingers in a saw accident and Mr. Koblen needed a fill-in fast. As Dawn explains it, she got lucky when he offered her the job. At this point of the narrative I was having difficulty understanding why she seemed so nonplussed by the idea that filling in for a guy who'd paid a very high price for his role in that kind of dangerous work was a stroke of luck. She was, after all, eighteen at the time. I was also struggling to fathom why she seemed to be skipping lightly over a situation that seemed to me – to say the least – to be one that might make extraordinary demands on a young woman just out of school. But Dawn didn't miss a beat in the explanation, recalling the process with an impressive precision.

She explained to me that when a log comes into the mill it has to undergo several processes where every amount of care is taken to ensure minimum wastage in the most efficient turn-around time. The logs come into the sawmill cut to specific lengths, but then the bark has to be removed to make a square profile; a guy feeds it through one end, and then the sawyer has to make

a series of decisions about how to cut it depending on the size and shape of the timber. After it's gone through the 'barker' it moves on to the head sawyer, then to an edger and a bandsaw, until eventually the finished product goes out on a green chain. Once it's completed into its particular profile it finds its way to various destinations around the world; evidently some of the western red cedar found in Bunnings hails all the way from the forests of Canada.

The mill ran two shifts – Dawn took the night shift where she was paid the handsome amount of seven dollars fifty cents an hour – the same rate of pay as the men – at a time when most girls her age were being paid one dollar fifty cents an hour to work behind a counter.

The money she'd made that year was enough to pay for her university studies with enough left over to fund her trip to Europe. At the age of nineteen she met two friends at university who were keen to visit Oktoberfest; she decided the time to leave was right, and took off before completing her course. But by the time they'd all done a stint of working in London the idea of moving on to Munich had palled – she figured that if she'd wanted to meet the kind of drunk Canadians she was sure Oktoberfest would be over-run with, she could have stayed at home. Instead, she headed off with Titian and Tintoretto in her sites, and then roamed further afield to study the art at a great number of those museums, galleries and cathedrals of Europe Janson had prepared her for.

In the big cities of Europe money ran out fast. However, the region of northern Canada she'd grown up in had prepared her with skills a-plenty in anything to do with snow, and so she found herself in high demand teaching skiing at Grindewald near the Eiger. While visiting near-by Geneva she met an Australian girl who remains one of Dawn's closest friends, and together they travelled to Marseille and on to Carcassonne and then out across the Loire Valley. When the money eventually dried up, Dawn returned to Vancouver in 1978 to be met by a heavy university debt that she endeavoured to whittle down by working at a range of hospitality jobs across Canada. All the while her thirst for travelling burned away in the background, and after meeting and marrying her Australian husband in Vancouver, they moved to Sydney. Eventually, after raising two children, Dawn got the chance to complete her degree in a Bachelor of Business with a keen focus on Arts Management at the Queensland University of Technology.

While she was working towards her degree, the family had moved to the bayside suburb of Redcliffe. One of Dawn's local friends had tipped her off that the local Council was rumoured to have a substantial art collection stored somewhere in the basement of the Community Centre underneath the library. The first major practical step she took towards returning to her long-held dream of being a curator began with a cold-call to the Council and a request to view the collection,

followed up by a foolscap page of notes describing what she'd found. The collection dated back to 1957 and included a number of impressive works. She told the Director of Cultural Development at Redcliffe that she believed he had a 'very good collection' – one that was estimated at the time to be around three hundred and sixty five thousand dollars – and that what the collection really needed was someone who'd document it, make sure it was looked after properly and, most importantly, would bring the works out to the light of day for public viewing. She must have done an excellent job at persuasion, because after that meeting she was hired for two days a week as the first Director of what later became the Redcliffe Regional Gallery. She continued to lobby hard, managed to get funding to build an appropriate storage system for the works, and later was successful in convincing the Council that it needed to build an art gallery.

A large part of the Council's collection had accrued as a result of their local art competition. The well-known Redcliffe Art Prize was among the first of its kind in Queensland, and during the 1950s and 60s the seaside village ambience plus the excitement of the competition drew large numbers to view the exhibition of the finalists. The competition also had the support of the Schonell family who sponsored a prize for works that featured the subject matter of children, and the popularity of the prize among artists was raised by the calibre of the judges – William Dargie came to judge it one year. But by the time Dawn arrived the energy around the prize had settled into a comfortable annual activity. She estimated that an injection of more challenging contemporary work might shake things up a little not only for local artists and audiences, but also in terms of regenerating interest in the Regional Gallery's activities among artists and audiences further afield. With Ross Searle, who had been hired as a consultant to write the Collection Policy, she recalibrated the terms of the competition to create the 'Fifteen Artists Award', where fifteen artists who had a connection with the city – through teaching or workshops or who already had work in the collection – were pre-selected and invited to enter work into the exhibition/competition. There was, inevitably, resistance from some of the local artists who felt that maintaining the status quo was just fine, but the new format brought a challenging, sophisticated profile to a regional town that had developed rapidly into a city.

By the time Dawn left her position as Director at Redcliffe City Gallery in 2003, the Award had brought the work of 73 leading contemporary artists to the region, and was attracting larger audiences to the exhibition; the idea of taking a new twist on an old style of art prize had breathed new life into it. She'd worked at the gallery for 8 years, starting in 1995, overseeing the building work towards the opening of the art gallery in 2000, and, in search of a new challenge, she left her position at Redcliffe to take up a new position at the recently opened University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery.



Emeritus Professor Paul Thomas AM, the inaugural Vice Chancellor of the University of the Sunshine Coast, was a visionary leader who encouraged staff to forge strong links with the relevant sectors of their various communities. For Dawn, this was a welcome change from the more controlled management practices of local government. When Dawn took up the role of Director of the Gallery, the university had a limited collection, even though it did house a number of works from a range of private collections. However, in 2012 the collection received a generous boost when renowned local architect and benefactor John Mainwaring donated his private collection of 86 artworks to the university. In 2016 Dawn was awarded the “Distinguished Companion Award” for her commitment to the University of the Sunshine Coast’s art collection and campus life.

Over those years of service as a gallery director Dawn had also maintained contact with a range of art communities regionally remote areas. In her various roles in outback Queensland she was regularly reminded of the kind of inner strength of character she’d known and experienced in remote Canada. She’s got a storehouse of memories of people she’s spent time with in places like Springsure and Emerald and Winton; places where local people are keen to support the cultural aspects of their lives when they can manage to take time away from the demands of life on properties.

So even before Dawn made the move to Burnie, she had been attracted by a range of values and experiences that ran deep in what she’s come to value. Although she’s always been drawn to, then dedicated to, cultural aspects of life, she’s also quick to note that there’s a mistake in thinking ‘culture’ has to be introduced to communities that may not overtly appear as ‘cultured’ in an artificial or refined way. In explaining this, she refers to Thomas Hardy’s novel *The Woodlanders*, that extolls the presence of qualities of ‘honesty, goodness, manliness (sic), tenderness, devotion’ that exist ‘in their purity now in the breasts of unvarnished men’.

Dawn expresses a keen desire to extend on the considerable achievements The Burnie Regional Art Gallery has already made towards enmeshing and enriching its local communities through its collection and programming, and she’s excited about building on the success of the Burnie Print Prize – an award launched in 2007 that’s recognised as the second richest print prize in Australia after Fremantle, and one that attracts printmakers from right across Australia. Her understandable enthusiasm for the landscape is evident in her words: “With an icy blue Bass Strait on our doorstep, Cradle Mountain looming behind and row after row of hazy grey mountains to the east and west, this is a place to breathe deeply, to think and rest your mind”.

But she’s equally cognizant of the work that needs to be done. She believes a regional gallery can provide a

heartbeat to the community – one that grows it and that grows from it. She knows that regional galleries offer communities something that extends their humanity. And she knows that the visual arts are as vital to these communities as are work and sport. In her own words, she believes that “artists are expert at being ahead of their times – the images they call forth broadens and deepens the experiences of this world we live in for all of us”. Dawn’s early experiences growing up with dreams and aspirations in a remote region have continued as a deep wellspring of influence to the present.

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