

Gallery a drawcard, but fig fencing repels



Phillip O'Neill

NEWCASTLE Art Gallery turns 35 this year. The gallery's home is one of Newcastle's more elegant buildings.

This summer it is showing the *Australian Modern Masterpieces*. You shouldn't miss it. You'll see the best 20th-century art from the Art Gallery of NSW in Sydney hung side-by-side with the best from Newcastle's collection.

The marquee players are all there – William Dobell, Arthur Boyd, Margaret Olley, Sidney Nolan, Grace Cossington Smith, Russell Drysdale, John Olsen, Brett Whiteley, and their ilk – surely the most significant art team ever assembled in this city.

Gallery director Ron Ramsey told me last week that he was thrilled with good attendances, and he expects these to continue until the exhibition closes on March 4.

It is the perfect start to a milestone year for the gallery as it starts a \$21 million expansion to its under-sized Laman Street building.

Last year the gallery was awarded \$7 million in federal regional development money. As owner, Newcastle City Council has committed \$5 million. And public donations have been generous. The missing donor is the NSW government.

The former Labor state government dragged its feet. Hopefully, the O'Farrell government will understand that the residents of NSW's second-biggest city deserve more than footy grandstands to underpin their social and cultural lives.

There is an argument that regional galleries earn their keep. One in four Australians over 15 years of age visits a gallery at least once a year. Admittedly, this average number disguises the fact that gallery goers are twice as likely to be women than men, and have higher incomes.

But this means that gallery goers are keen to travel out of capital cities to take in a regional exhibition, stay a night or two, enjoy a restaurant, buy a local something, and so on.

Victoria's regional cities, notably Ballarat and Bendigo, lead the way in milking the art tourist. When the



CAGED: The wire compound around the figs does not encourage tourists to explore further than the gallery.

Australian Modern Masterpieces premiered in Bendigo in October last year; state and local tourist agencies put together hotel packages, rail travel promotions, and so on.

Predictably, though, such bleeding obvious initiatives are absent from the current Newcastle show, save for some clever cross promotion by the Newcastle and Maitland galleries in the Sydney press. There is nothing on offer from our hotels or restaurants. And not the slightest interest from CityRail.

So, like everyone else, Sydney visitors arrive at the Newcastle gallery by car. Finding a parking spot that allows time to take in the exhibition is the first hurdle. The second is the caged compound around the Laman Street figs. A third, for us, was the media scrum for the latest fly-in tree expert, another of the eternal life sect.

Perhaps one day the sect will understand that urban landscapes should have life spans that stretch way, way beyond that of any mere

human, meaning that long-term thinking and planning must take priority.

Irrespective, arriving at the gallery at the moment is not an enchanting experience. I doubt if Sydney visitors are being seduced to explore this city beyond the gallery.

My guess is that the \$8 admission fee is all that leaves the visitor's purse save for bottled water at the Wallsend servo on the way out.

Still, I've never been a fan of the idea of art for economy's sake. And I'm sure the artists on display would have agreed during their lifetimes.

There is much to look at in this collection. It is large and multi-themed. What ties the artists is their search for a way to paint Australian landscapes and people as a nation grew into adulthood.

The artists lived their lives through two world wars, flitting back and forth to mother England, picking up European art trends, bumping into each other a lot, and chronicling Australia as an urban nation struggling with its past in a difficult-

to-live-in continent. Russell Drysdale's 1947 painting of the central-west town of Sofala, in decline after the gold rushes, alongside his mate Donald Friend's painting of the same streetscape, sketched on the same day, are examples of the powerful historical record that these guys assembled.

And, of course, William Dobell's Archibald-winning portraits of Margaret Olley, and of a strapper, delightfully capture the people involved.

But look closely too at Dobell's self-portrait, done when he was a young man in London in 1932. He looks hauntingly at us, the custodians of his home town eight decades on. He asks us, what are we making of his patch? Our civic leaders and activists should stand before him, and answer honestly.

Professor Phillip O'Neill is the director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

The new year calls us to focus on the light

Baptism offers a sense of clarity and purpose, writes Felicity Amery.

"SEEING the light" is what we all hope for those that we love and those for whom we feel responsible.

This is especially the case when it comes to our children and grandchildren.

We look with dismay at some of the predicaments they end up in through poor choices, yet we continue to hope.

Some years ago, as a prison chaplain, I encountered Tom. He was a 21-year-old inmate co-convicted of a double murder.

Over a period of some months I listened to and began to learn some of Tom's story, of his fears and pain,

his dysfunctional relationship with his separated parents, but also of his special relationship with his grandmother.

As Tom recounted particular parts of his life and childhood there emerged for him a picture of a person who, despite living interstate, had always shown warmth, love and a special concern for his well-being.

He also began to see in his grandmother something that was desperately missing in his own life.

Six months later I found myself looking at Tom and his grandmother standing next to each other, while I pronounced the words, "Tom, I baptise you in the name of . . .".

For Tom, somewhere, somehow, the light had come on.

His request for baptism could not rewrite the wrongs and fateful

choices of the past, or change the fact that a large part of his future life would be spent in jail.

But he wanted his life to be different. He wanted peace, and to see himself differently; as a loved child of God.

In the first week of the new year, the Christian church celebrates the baptism of Jesus.

For Jesus, baptism marked the beginning of a new phase in his life where he focused his efforts and energies on working with the marginalised and the dispossessed, as loved children of God.

What the Roman empire and leaders of society at that time deemed as "rubbish" and "expendable", Jesus declared as the centre of God's concern.

For Jesus, baptism was an act of decolonisation, offering clarity of

thinking and purpose, enacting God's interests rather than the interests of the rich elite or the colonial power of his day.

Like baptism, this new year provides an opportunity for us to turn away from darkness and the many wrong messages that have colonised our minds.

It is a call to focus on the light, choosing to care for the neglected and abused parts of our world.

Noticing ourselves and others in a new light as loved people of God.

Reverend Felicity Amery is the chairperson/executive officer of the Hunter Uniting Church Presbytery in the Uniting Church in Australia. Article submitted on behalf of the Churches Media Association.



City rejuvenation

News that three vacant buildings in Newcastle were to receive a transformation attracted interest from our online readers.

I recently visited Perth, and spent a day in Fremantle. The way they have developed the marina area there should be applauded. NCC and the NSW Govt should take note of what can be done. It's a working harbour, has an operating heavy rail line with all the level pedestrian crossings you want. And the clincher for me was the little creatures brewery, with a fantastic adjoining brewery restaurant!

Frog Stomp

Let's hope SOF are still busy with 14 fig trees so this development can go ahead. The centre of our city is an embarrassment.

Tilda

One floor of the former CBC bank will become a restaurant and cafe, will the remaining five floors still be vacant. How many floors will the yoga festival use and for how long. Nothing much changes in Newcastle except the buildings get older.

intouch

In other words the old David Jones building will become another dilapidated version of The Store. This city is full of monuments to complacent administration that not even an earthquake could rouse from its stupor.

Cathy

Hang on, what's all this? Things going ahead in the east end WITH the rail line still functioning? Who'd have thought! Now how about taking some of the inappropriate housing development proposed for the outer suburbs and continue to build the residential population of the CBD. Purpose built student accommodation maybe? Door to door travel to the Uni by train. Revitalisation anyone?

No. 4

That's great. Just what Newcastle needs, another liquor outlet.

GeorgeJ

Too bad local brewer Murrays didn't move in on this space first. They have set up shop in Manly instead.

Duggo

ONLINE poll



JOIN the conversation ...
 theherald.com.au
 LIKE US on Facebook Newcastle Herald
 FOLLOW US on Twitter twitter.com/newcastleherald