

## Integrated Vision: A New Direction

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### Abstract

The Macquarie University Art Gallery has developed its changing exhibition program through utilising various research profiles existing within the Faculties. This has led to a revitalisation of the exhibition program in keeping it relevant and connected with the University's teaching and research — a dissemination of knowledge through a visual framework that has increasingly been recognised as a powerful teaching tool to sustain the interest of students. By example, the presentation will cover some of the exhibitions and how they have been used by the Faculties of Art and Science. Imperative to this exercise has been to invite academics into the curatorial dialogue — a distinguishing feature of the Gallery's exhibition program is that it has become more closely aligned with what's happening within the University community, while at the same time engaging the broader external community through its public events program. By placing emphasis on developing research-based exhibitions we are bridging the gap between formal and informal learning.

### Paper

In recent times, the fundamental principles of teaching and learning have undergone changes within the tertiary sector; as we witness the pendulum swinging back towards an integrated learning model, the idea of a liberal education has re-emerged. Within this climate, University Museums and Collections find themselves in a uniquely strategic position — the ontological role of objects together with their inherent narratives is being re-visioned to accommodate teaching practices in new and dynamic ways.

In tandem with the curriculum changes at Macquarie University, coupled with social equity policies in attracting low socio-economic groups to attend University, the University Art Gallery has repositioned itself as a teaching and learning facility. The honing of visual literacy skills as a

pathway for alternative ways of learning is a concept that can be linked within the art museum context — the lived and social experience of moving outside the lecture theatre and textbook analysis to seek out “object world” primary sources is a touchstone to where adaptive and communicative systems can be reestablished.

The Art Gallery's exhibition program amalgamated within the framework of the University has not only provided the impetus for working on a collaborative basis using a cross disciplinary model, but has revitalised the Art Gallery's profile on campus. In turn, this variation in curatorial practice has led to a far greater recognition of the Macquarie University Art Gallery's role as an integrated learning and teaching facility. A space that provides the infrastructure for active participation and engagement to enrich the learning experiences of students using art — at its various intersections with teaching and research — as a platform for critical discussion within a group situation.

Fundamental to the strength of this new approach is to invite academics to participate in the curatorial process. Strategically, this approach has extended the possibilities and scope of the program whilst at the same time these mutual interactions have developed the conceptual basis for programming in the future.

Using a hybrid approach in utilising existing resources, builds capacity. Promoting collaborative practices through the sharing of knowledge, skills and resources has brought a critical edge to the exhibition program. Mapping out the exhibition potential of Macquarie's research and teaching areas has, however, been a slow process. And interestingly, more than often, these relationships have been formulated and nurtured through an informal network system existing within the institutional structure. In forging these alliances, the University Art Gallery, whilst maintaining its community outreach role, is beginning to play an important role within the new learning and teaching outcomes recently established by the University. The interdisciplinary framework references additional ways of seeing and thinking about art that shares certain values and approaches

with other disciplines, which in turn enhances independent and creative thinking.

Cooperative practice using techniques that extend beyond the established modes of selection, production and presentation are relational to visual culture as an infinite and evolving source of knowledge. A more intense focus on research-driven exhibitions has also activated other sets of behaviours and contextual processes within the Art Gallery's program that challenges the idea of the singular curator's vision.

*Virtual Encounters: Paula Dawson — Holograms* (Hammond & Janiszewski, eds, 2010) is one of the gallery's most ambitious exhibitions produced to date due to the complexity of the laser technology required. The operation of the project was only made possible by the diligence of working in collaboration with the Department of Physics at Macquarie University. The exhibition had been strategically planned for the 2010 celebrations marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of laser technology under the banner of "Laserfest Sydney".

*Virtual Encounters* was a major exhibition of works by internationally acclaimed artist, Paula Dawson. Dawson's holograms, rarely seen on public display, offered the public a unique opportunity to appreciate the symbiotic relationship between art and science. It also embraced holography as a significant force in visual art practice that explored the way technology and advanced systems of communication have altered our understanding of "presence" in real time and space.

Dawson's laser transmission holograms required to be re-played using the exact wavelength to that of its original production. Illuminating eight holograms with red and green laser lights was an extremely complex and technical exercise. The laser installation team was instrumental in solving the complexities of this type of display plus a number of conservation issues, bringing the exhibition to fruition. By adopting a hybrid model, in sharing skills and knowledge, collaborating with colleagues outside the Art Gallery, these types of exhibitions are possible.

Connecting within this network of exchange, the exhibition in turn, came to represent a powerful

marketing tool for the Faculty of Science. Utilised to garner the science elements, the holograms acted as signposts in promoting a broader interest in science and its wider applications.

The formation of the annual exhibition program based upon Macquarie's research, teaching and learning principals is paramount to the program's longevity and on-going relevancy. Conveying academic research interests and ideas through the exhibition process has facilitated emerging social and intellectual modalities. One of the challenges using this new approach is to match the conceptual basis and structure of the exhibition with that of the academic's research.

For the exhibition *Horror, Come Darkness* (Janiszewski, ed., 2009) the Art Gallery invited Associate Professor John Potts to be the co-curator on the project, injecting the exhibition with a different and fresh perspective. This alliance engendered a coherent and creative dialogue, facilitating a distinct communication system between academic staff with that of the University Art Gallery. Potts' contribution to the catalogue essay, *Hammer Horror* being one of his research interests, was compelling. Building consequential relationships with academics within the Department of Media, Music and Cultural Studies has led to further discussions about possible exhibitions in the future. For instance, we are planning an exhibition focused on the dematerialisation of the book in relation to the opening of the new University Library in the latter part of 2011, to instigate discussion about the paperback in the age of the digital book.

The "Macquarie University: Daruganora project" (Ambler, Collins, Davis, Everett, Hummell, & Humphreys, 2010) after just six months in operation, has successfully established an on-going and valuable new mode of collaborative practice between schools and universities.

The Daruganora project aims to bring high school students – from perceived low socio-economic groups – onto the University campus as a way of bridging the gap between school and university. The formation of the project team again arose through an informal network system. Working within such a dedicated and supportive

professional team has enhanced the way the project has moved forward within a short time frame.

The overarching premise is to use art as the vehicle for increasing dialogue and interaction that builds confidence amongst the participants. Outside the perimeters of the conventional gallery environment, the Indigenous Art Collection has been arranged within the walkway spaces of the Department of Media, Music and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts. Formerly, the Australian Film and Television School, the building has been refurbished to create informal learning spaces. Equipped with comfortable lounges, the digitally connected flow-spaces have germinated much group discussion amongst both University students and staff. Here, art is seen as integral to the everyday working and learning spaces of the University campus. Furthermore, encountering the Indigenous collection within this context sets up for the Daruganora participants, a corridor for discovery.

The program has been devised to engender a holistic learning experience that encourages interaction, stimulates and promotes inquiry, broadens perceptions and perspectives in a supportive non-threatening environment.

Central to the Daruganora project is to create ways of connecting students to the Macquarie campus experience, to make the students feel part of the University community that will nurture and support their individual needs and future aspirations. We have taken this opportunity to couch the Art Gallery's program within this groundswell, not only in rethinking the type of exhibitions we produce, but ways in which they transpire to widen learning and teaching opportunities.

Since 2004, three other exhibitions, nurtured under the Macquarie University Art Gallery's inclusive strategy of firmly embracing the intensive teaching and learning charter of the University, are worthy of mention. These exhibitions clearly demonstrate the Gallery's desire to utilise the research and teaching being undertaken across Faculties, as a unique resource from which to nourish and inspire its on-going exhibition

program. How many galleries generally have such a vast pool of existing and developing knowledge from which to grow creatively? How many university galleries have recognised that the intellectual activities of the campus upon which they exist can offer a fresh, distinct and exciting "difference" to the exhibiting programs offered by commercial, local, state and national exhibiting institutions? At Macquarie University Art Gallery, a new diverse identity, a new direction, a new integrated vision, has unmistakably emerged and has increasingly gained momentum.

Back in 2004, the Macquarie University Art Gallery teamed with the University's Australian Centre for Egyptology (part of the Department of Ancient History within the then Division of Humanities) and the Centre for Flexible Learning, to produce the exhibition *On Site Insight: An Australian Archaeological Excavation in Egypt* (Janiszewski, ed., 2004). The collaboration was initially generated by the desire to celebrate 25 years of Egyptology at Macquarie. The Art Gallery would assist with curatorial responsibilities, the Centre for Flexible Learning would produce a multimedia component for the exhibition, and the Centre for Egyptology would, of course, provide the research material and scholarly insight. Effy Alexakis, then the University Senior Photographer with the Centre for Flexible Learning — and the official photographer with the University's excavations in Egypt — undertook the role as chief curator, assisted by the Art Gallery's curators, Rhonda Davis and Kirri Hill.

The resulting major exhibition focused upon a season's excavation at Saqqara, some 25 km south of Cairo. The Macquarie University team, led by Professor Naguib Kanawati, were in the process of recording the largest Old Kingdom (3000 — 2125 BCE) courtier's tomb yet uncovered: that of Mereruka, vizier and overseer of priests, the highest official under the Pharaoh Teti. The exhibition animated the tomb's wall scenes by positioning them against the daily rituals of modern life in the village of Saqqara, together with detailed insights provided by both Australian and Egyptian team members. Through a tight intertwining of unique photographic images, sensitive, enlightening text, and multimedia elements, the exhibition "delved into the magic of

discovery, the rich delights of shared personal experiences, and the vivid joy of cultural contrasts — all arising through the intricacies of scholarly investigation and constant daily toil” (“On Site Insight”, 2004).

The exhibition was initially displayed at NSW Parliament House, Sydney, between September and October 2004, and due to its enormous success, it was presented at Macquarie University Art Gallery in May 2005. Various associated public activities and events — such as lectures, artefact workshops and panel discussions — were held at both venues. The overall outcome was inspiring and far-reaching — it was recognised that such internal collaborative shows — integrating Faculty research and teaching — could become the distinctive hallmark of the Macquarie University Art Gallery.

In 2008 another significant collaborative exhibition was developed, this time in partnership with marine biologists, led by Associate Professor Rob Harcourt, within the Faculty of Science. Titled *Beyond the Breakers* (Harcourt, Vididi, & Alexakis, 2008), the exhibition was again curated by Effy Alexakis, with the assistance of Gallery staff. The display essentially utilised scientific photographic images, marine mammal recordings and moving footage. Images and research undertaken by Rob Harcourt and post-graduate student Francisco Vididi, were central to the show’s creation. The exhibition cleverly utilised photography “as both a scientific tool and as a means of articulating that which lies well beyond the mere objective recording of specimens”. As such, “vibrantly luminous images of whales breaching, streamlined dolphins gliding, sudden underwater encounters with seals and vast Antarctic landscapes peppered with penguin colonies” (Harcourt, Vididi, & Alexakis, 2008, Introduction), were sharply contrasted against the planet’s on-going environmental challenges.

In the show’s catalogue, Professor Frank Talbot, Chairman of the Sydney Institute of Marine Science wrote:

This exhibition is about exuberant life in the sea, and also about exuberant and hardy researchers . . . One cannot help

but be stirred by the abundant life celebrated in this exhibition. But like so much on our earth, it is fragile . . . If we appreciate the wondrous beauty of the marine world, we might act to change our ways and ensure our grandchildren, and our grandchildren’s grandchildren, also gaze upon them too in wonder. (Harcourt, Vididi, & Alexakis, 2008, Foreword)

Such sentiment was not lost on the viewing audience or in the critical and popular coverage the exhibition received (“Rob Harcourt”, 2009). Exhibited between October 2008 and January 2009, the display and its associated events confirmed that an on-going integrated vision between the Faculties and the University Art Gallery was certainly a mutually beneficial combination.

In mid 2011 *Selling an American Dream: Australia’s Greek Café* (“Selling and American Dream”, 2008; “Snapshot of Aussie Greek café culture”, 2008), will be presented at the Macquarie University Art Gallery. This exhibition is curated by Leonard Janiszewski and Effy Alexakis — a partnership bringing together the “In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians” National Project, the Department of Modern History and the Australian History Museum within the Faculty of Arts, and the University Art Gallery.

The exhibition’s premise is that Greek cafés in Australia were a “Trojan Horse” for the Americanisation of this nation’s eating and socio-cultural habits from the very start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They initially introduced American commercial food-catering ideas, technology and products and later influenced the development of cinema, commercial architecture and popular music. The Greek café helped “transform” Australian popular culture.

Transnational in scope, the exhibition marries unique historical and contemporary photographic images, posters and documents from Greece, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, Egypt and the USA, with the personal stories of café owners and customers. Three-dimensional and multimedia elements are well featured.

Originally opening to critical and popular acclaim at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, in 2008, the exhibition subsequently was hosted at the Migration Museum, Adelaide, in 2009, and the Northern Territory Library, Darwin, in 2010 (Simic, 2009; “Australia’s Greek cafés”, 2009; Langford, 2010). Its display at Macquarie is part of a national tour. At the Macquarie University Art Gallery however, greater emphasis will be placed upon aesthetic developments of the Greek café — its introduction of Streamline Moderne, an Californian form of Art deco architecture and furnishings; its introduction of a modernist aesthetic to food-catering establishments by utilising artists, designers and sculptors such as Leonard French, Douglas Annand and Clement Meadmore; and the recognition of its role in the development of modern Australia in work by artists such as Russell Drysdale.

Of course, having embraced the Faculties as sources for exhibition development, the Gallery’s acquisition policy is also being informed through the University’s teaching and research. A recent acquisition best exemplifies the new approach. This year, internationally renowned sculptor and sound artist, Nigel Helyer, was appointed as Artist-in-Residence at Macquarie University under the auspices of the Macquarie University Art Gallery and the Faculty of Arts, through the Department of Music, Media, Communication and Cultural Studies. The work developed during the residency, *Padme* (Sanskrit for lotus) was acquired as part of the Macquarie University Sculpture Park. Using solar cells for power, the sculpture gently emits sounds that mould and immerse themselves within those found in its natural environment around the campus lake. By combing science and sustainability with a creative aesthetic of sound and form, the work reflects a number of research interests within the University.

In developing an integrated vision utilising the teaching and research being undertaken within the University’s faculties, Macquarie University Art Gallery has become more relevant within the institution, and more “distinct” to the broader community it serves.

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