

Education to employment in the arts: a personal journey

Emma Cox

Abstract

This paper outlines the personal journey from education to employment in the arts for Emma Cox, now a Program Coordinator at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). The paper describes the role and function of public programs at the NGV and the value and place of arts education within the broader mission of the gallery and its operations. Anecdotes and insights into working at a major public art institution will be given, including discussion of target audiences, programming initiatives, approaches and highlights.

I graduated in 1999 having just completed my honours year in Visual Arts at Deakin University. The year was the most rewarding of my time at university. I completed seven oil portraits for the assessment as well as an accompanying exegesis and was told by my supervisor, the artist Deborah Walker, that if I wanted to pursue a career as a professional artist I could. That was, perhaps, all the impetus I needed to studiously procrastinate about an artistic career, or indeed, plan to trip around Europe for an undisclosed period of time.

Nevertheless I achieved closure to that period of tertiary study with two things the following year (before said tripping around Europe): a solo exhibition at Roar studios, in Fitzroy Melbourne, as well as inclusion in the Hatched Graduate exhibition. Both were enormously exciting and affirming experiences. In the years that followed I worked and volunteered in various roles within the arts and other places and built up some experience working in administration and educational programs for a charity organisation.

I have continued to paint (albeit in a very part-time capacity), my practice having given way at the moment to full time work. I undertake commissions for portraits and paintings from a home studio; rather than exhibiting I am represented by a freelance dealer and curator, Anne Harari, who works through her home and a website and represents other artists such as David Lancashire and indigenous artist Brian McKinnon.

One of the many good things I gained from my arts education was an appreciation of learning within the art museum. We visited the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) on numerous occasions and used the general collection or exhibitions as departure points for discussions on Australian art history, contemporary art, indigenous issues, photography, portraiture.

In my position as Program Coordinator at the National Gallery of Victoria I develop, research, organise, manage and deliver public and gallery member programs appropriate to various target audiences. I have worked there for 3 _ years, starting just before the grand reopening of our St Kilda Rd site.

Public Programs is part of a broader department that includes Education Schools Programs, which are responsible for the curriculum based programs for primary and secondary school students. Public Programs is made up of four Program Coordinators, one Senior Program Coordinator, an assistant and an administrator, as well as the head of the department of Education and Programs. Youth Access is another arm of the Education and Programs department, which runs a program for disadvantaged youth. The annual Top Arts exhibition (which hangs the best of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), or secondary school graduate art, similar to the Hatched concept) is also curated and administered through our department. The NGV Voluntary Guides have also recently been made a branch of Public Programs.

The NGV's key values are access, excellence and integrity and our mission statement is to 'illuminate life by collecting, conserving and presenting great art'. Our departmental mission is to bring art and people together.

As a department, our objective is to support and promote the NGV's exhibitions and collections, embrace and cater for broad and specific interest areas in the arts and reach the widest audience possible – with access being our key objective. In the 2005-06 financial year over 74,000 people attended public and members' programs. If that number were to include guided tours, it would be over 112,000 people. In the current financial year to date, our stats are at 84,000, which includes the last half of the 2006 Melbourne Winter Masterpieces exhibition, always the busiest time of the year.

The NGV's collection is encyclopaedic and represents ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, pre-Columbian antiquity, Asia, and Indigenous cultures of the Pacific. We hold a vast collection of prints and drawings (nearly 16,000 works in total and including rich collections of Durer and Blake), photographs, decorative arts, glass, furniture, European paintings from 1200, Australian art from colonial times to Indigenous works and contemporary art. At any one time we have between 10 to 12 temporary exhibitions, both departmental and travelling or paid exhibitions, as well as the permanent collection to devise programs for.

At the centre of our initiative in Programs are the exhibitions and permanent collection, as well as broader festivals and events (for example, we had a program as part of the recent Melbourne Commonwealth Games Cultural Program).

Our target audiences include tertiary students and alumni, youth, gallery members, tourists, families, young professionals, seniors, special interest groups, regional galleries, culturally diverse groups, all abilities, arts industry and the corporate sector.

The large exhibitions tend to encompass all target audiences and program types. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to coordinate the program for our Picasso: Love and War exhibition last year, which included the full gamut of programs:

- symposia/ seminar
- lectures and short courses
- floor talks
- film program
- readings
- practical art workshops
- NGV Kids program
- Music and performance
- Guided tours
- Introductory talks (co-written with the curator and delivered by programs staff)
- Breakfasts
- Members exclusive events
- Visits and outreach
- Art After Dark

The Picasso program kicked off with a Gala evening, which included a lecture by the Director of the Picasso Museum in Paris, and the world's pre-eminent Picasso scholar, Anne Baldassari, which sold out at 650 attendees.

The Picasso public program, spanning all 100 days of the exhibition, also included a historical film program, including a mini Jean Cocteau film program; an 8-part concert series of Spanish and French music of the period, coordinated in consultation with the Victorian College of the Arts' School of Music; and a series of short talks by curators and academics on different areas of Picasso's work and the time.

Obviously budget and sponsorship play a large part in determining a program in its scope, but so too does the content of the exhibition. For example, I also devised programs for our recent Juan Davila exhibition which, although a fairly major and important pay exhibition, given themes of disavowed colonial invasion and the psycho-sexual, did not call for many family activities! We did however have a very illuminating talks program over the summer, which included, amongst others, Professor Roger Benjamin, Director of the Power Institute in Sydney talking on Juan Davila's changing style, and Dr David Hansen, writer and former curator at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, providing an introduction to the concept of postcolonialism in Australian art. This exhibition was quite an interesting case in point in the sense that exhibition attendances spiked on days we ran programs – people were really seeking that extra 'bridge' of information.

My practical visual arts education has given me, within my department, a unique approach to my work and the way I approach educating people about art. I believe that practical workshops are a great way of engaging people in art. There is nothing like visiting an exhibition or favourite work of art to get the creative juices flowing!

The individuals within our department have different areas of knowledge, and that spread allows us to more readily reach different target audiences. We have an Asian art and textiles scholar; an ex primary school art teacher who specialises in Family and Children's Programs, another who knows a lot about decorative arts and European art and music history. Though we all work across all areas of the NGV's collection and exhibitions, I have had a special focus in establishing regular practical art workshops for adults, often linking in professional artists to take programs and share their knowledge.

Sketching in the Gallery is a program I have devised and manage. It is a regular practical program where, on the first Friday of the month, I invite a different artist to come and take a group of adults on a sketching session in the gallery. Each month we also focus on a different area of the collection or an exhibition, eg. 20th century sculpture or Oceanic art. A committed group now attend the program and they find that the regular session is great for their practice and that booking into a program is one way of being disciplined about it. Learning from different artists also gives them a range of approaches.

A recent highlight program (and one, I admit, in which I had a keen personal interest) was a Portraiture Masterclass program, in association with the 50th anniversary of the Everard Studley Miller Bequest (through which the NGV has acquired many of its portraits). I invited the artist Peter Wegner to come and take a day-long session on painting a portrait from a live model.

Other practical workshops and practical short courses I have coordinated include a still life painting short course in the manner of Caravaggio (linked with our Caravaggio and his world exhibition of 2004); a Drawing Intensive: Drawing Faces portraiture workshop for kids that I also delivered; practical painting workshops associated with the Picasso exhibition (admittedly somewhat audaciously entitled 'Paint Like Picasso', and in a rather rewarding and pleasing turn of events, delivered by one of my old art school lecturers); and a newly established Learn to Paint short course for absolute beginners. I have also coordinated tailored programs for corporate groups – 'team building' type days involving a gallery tour followed by a practical group painting workshop.

Prior to my position as coordinator I worked as the Programs Assistant in the department. Research was a large part of this role along with special projects that didn't quite fit into

anyone else's job description! One of the most interesting and different projects I worked on was a special project between Parks Victoria and the NGV called The Altered Land environmental trail. Working with the curator of Australian Art and rangers from Parks Victoria, we wrote a gallery trail which looked at the ways artists have captured the Australian landscape and changes that have occurred over time. Additional extended labels were added to approximately 45 works throughout NGV Australia, from colonial paintings through to the work of contemporary artists such as Fiona Hall, and a printed booklet was also produced.

Working for a large art museum affords the opportunity to meet and collaborate with some pretty amazing scholars, artists and arts professionals. In 2005 Dr Gail Feigenbaum and Dr Charles Salas, both directors from the Getty Museum's Research Institute were in Melbourne and I had the opportunity to liaise with them and coordinate a public lecture California Dreamin': The Getty Research Institute in Context.

Additionally, in that same year, we ran the inaugural Joseph Brown Oration, an event to mark the gift made to the NGV by Joseph Brown of his expansive collection of Australian art. The lecture, Australian art and the Immigrant, was presented by Bernard Smith.

We are also open to new partnerships and proposals for programs that will fit in with our key goals and missions. For example, Kodak Australia recently approached us with a proposal to host a public lecture with National Geographic photographer Steve McCurry (perhaps most famous for his photo of the Afghan Refugee Girl with the amazing green eyes). This became a free public lecture and book signing that we ran in the Great Hall and attracted around 600 photography fans, and gave us a good opportunity to promote the NGV's photography collection, study room and exhibitions.

We have a new association with Orchestra Victoria, who through their community outreach programs, presented a free public concert with us last year and will present three free public concerts in 2007 with full 60 piece orchestra in the Great Hall. The July concert, to coincide with our 2007 Melbourne Winter Masterpieces exhibition (this year, featuring the Guggenheim collection), will showcase a modern American repertoire.

Our next big project, aside from the program for the upcoming Guggenheim exhibition, is the Sites of Communication symposium, a two day forum to be held at the NGV in September. This will be the third in a series of symposia; the first two were held at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2003 and 2005 respectively. The series has sought to investigate the ever-evolving role of the art museum and provide a forum for art museum professionals to discuss contemporary issues. This year's program will focus on the role of new technologies, theories of learning, partnerships and collaborations and the spatial dialectics of art museums.

All this makes the art museum a dynamic and fascinating place to work for a part time artist.

Biography

Emma Cox (nee Busowsky) has been a Program Coordinator in the Public Programs department of the National Gallery of Victoria since January 2006. Prior to that she was Programs Assistant in the same department, a role she held since the reopening of the St Kilda Road site in 2003. Emma completed a BA – Visual Arts (First Class Honours) at Deakin University, Rusden in 1999, which focussed on contemporary portraiture. Since 1998 Emma's work has been featured in various Victorian and interstate exhibitions, including the Hatched Graduate exhibition at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2000. Emma lives and works in Melbourne.