

Heathcote Artists

Dave Fagg

The rough brown brick exterior of Heathcote's Barrack Reserve Stadium gives little hint to the beautiful art that is created here. After following Judy Hutchins, immediate past President of Heathcote Artists Inc, through numerous winding corridors, I am ushered into a large and light-filled room. Its high ceilings and polished floorboards echo gently with the sounds of artists quietly painting.

Judy took up painting about seven years after retiring, and quickly found herself the President of Heathcote Artists Inc. She exudes community spirit and a no-fuss practicality, qualities which have seen the organisation grow in numbers over the last five years. She is a passionate promoter of art and artists in the Heathcote area, and saw a need for life drawing workshops to be brought to central Victoria.

Life drawing is the act of drawing a live human model, sometimes clothed but often nude. Judy explains the importance of life drawing: "Life drawing is such an essential skill for artists. Even if you don't end up painting images of people, life drawing gets you to practice painting form and light and shadow - all the foundations of good painting."

Ben Winspear, a local artist who conducted several of the workshops, agrees. Ben is an accomplished artist, who recently won the AME Bale Travelling Scholarship, which enabled him to study art for 4 months in Europe: "Life drawing is a little like scales for a pianist. It includes all the key aspects of art, like line, form, light, shape, and shade. It also encourages self-discipline, as you only have a limited time to create something."

However, there was a barrier to getting the workshops up and running. Hiring life drawing models is not cheap, and Judy wanted a wide range of people to attend the workshops: "We didn't just want established artists or those who are well off. We wanted people who have never painted before, and people who are keen but could never afford the fees."

A community grant from the City of Greater Bendigo enabled Heathcote Artists Inc to heavily subsidise the entry fee, and cover the costs of hiring life models, supplying paint equipment, and hiring art tutors to assist the participants. Each fortnight, 10-12 keen participants signed up for a full-day of life-drawing.

One of these participants was Louis De Castella. Louis had an existing connection with Heathcote Artists Inc through hosting their exhibitions at his winery. Louis had dabbled in painting water colours and pastels, but was a total beginner when it came to life drawing. However, by the end of the first workshop, his nervousness had been dispelled: "You forget that

this is naked person in front of you. You are so busy focussing on painting or drawing them, that everything else kind of fades out.” Louis found the workshops inspiring and encouraging: “The teachers were excellent, and as well as learning artistic skills, I also made a lot of friends.”

Wendy Schneider, the President of Heathcote Artists Inc, is overjoyed at the number of people who have benefited: “So many people have developed as artists, or have discovered a new passion. But more than that, we’ve seen new residents make connections with others who have a common interest.”

Narelle Lyle, Strong Communities Officer, applauds Heathcote Artists Inc for bringing this opportunity to their town: “So often people find they need to travel to a large town like Bendigo, or even Melbourne, but this project brings artistic excellence to just around the corner.”

Having had success with two community grant rounds, Judy is keen to encourage people to apply: “Some people say ‘oh, it’s no use applying, you won’t get grants’. But that hasn’t been our experience.” Judy recommends reading the funding criteria carefully, and then contacting council staff if you are unsure about what is required. “I’ve found Narelle Lyle to be so helpful. She has really gone out of her way to give us a hand.”