**Mervyn Moriarty**

**Medal of the Order of Australia.**

Here’s a challenge for you Jan Strudwick. Like you, our founder Merv Moriarty was a gifted Queensland artist, who was very good at landscapes. He was an original member of the post-war ‘Half Dozen group’, including Jon Molvig, Margaret Olley, Margaret Preston and Roy Churcher. He held exhibitions across Australia and was a multiple finalist in the Archibald, Sulman and Dobell prizes through the sixties. Later in life, he developed a revolutionary and scientific colour wheel to help artists develop skills like his own luminous sense of colour and space. All that’s not what he got this award for, however.

It was his inspiration as a teacher of generations of local artists. Like you, Jan, in 1971 he won a local art prize... maybe a bit bigger than we can afford for you. Imaginatively and audaciously, he used his prize money to teach himself to fly. Inspired by Queensland’s iconic Flying Doctor Service, he took himself up country to teach painting to the people in the bush – the graziers, stockmen and rural workers, and their families. he visited established art groups, and set up new groups, flying himself to every corner of the State.

Moriarty set a demanding schedule, personally flying to 20 - 30 regional and remote centres across Queensland and Northern New South Wales up to 4 times a year for 12 years. On at least one occasion he had a narrow escape, where he and his plane ended up in a cornfield. The demand for his service was enormous. Locations he flew to included Dalby, Kingaroy, Rockhampton, Gladstone, Mackay, Dysart, Blackall, Monto, Charleville, Quilpie, Longreach, Winton, Julia Creek, Mt Isa, Normanton, Mornington Island, Thursday Island, York Island and Weipa.

He was no fly-in-fly-out one-day wonder, either; he knew that proper art teaching demanded sustainment, so his workshop visits were up to a week or more, and he set the participants ‘homework’ in the form of teaching plans, resources and booklets to keep them learning and improving until his next visit, perhaps a year ahead. Moriarty himself wrote and produced 23 of these technical lesson books and he also organised city exhibitions for his regional students.

He took fellow artists like Roy Churcher with him on his tours, to spread the personal load, and give his customers the benefit of working with other celebrated professionals. One such, the late Bela Ivanyi, then a young, up-and-coming artist from Cairns, credits Moriarty with changing his life by giving him the experience of teaching with the Flying Art School. Bela wrote for this application...

“Needless to say, that started my most exciting and rewarding occupation in my life! On my first visit around Queensland, I realised the enormous influence Merv had over the whole state. He single-handedly gave rise to a fresh awakening to Art in Qld, including its most remote areas.”

Many other of Moriarty’s far-flung students went on to have successful careers as professional artists in Queensland and beyond, such as Davida Allen, Robert J Morris, Beverley Budgen, Anne Lord, Glen Henderson, John Honeywill, Katherine Brimblecombe-Fox, Carol McCormack, Robyn Bauer, etc., etc. Countless more continue to enrich their country communities as lifelong local artists... including my brother-in-law, grazier Bob Nason, still highly admired in Toowoomba and the Maranoa.

In the words of contemporary visual arts leader Chris Saines, Director of QAGOMA:

“The fact that he is an artist in his own right is a large part of the reason he has been so successful as a teacher. His determination and resilience alone, and the extraordinary way in which Moriarty tirelessly contributed ‘on the ground’ to building a more creative Queensland, is an outstanding legacy to have embedded in the Australian arts landscape.”

The last word belongs to part of that legacy, Glenmorgan artist Carol McCormack:

“I hold Mervyn Moriarty personally responsible for any artistic ability I have today and am eternally grateful. When life seemed to turn away from the artistic goals I held as a child, down came Merv from the skies…"

John O’Toole AM

Former Chair, Flying Arts Alliance

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