ESSAY : ***Why what Merv did still matters***

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"Once upon a time" – and from this point in time, it already *does* seem like a fairytale – a legend – artist Merv Moriarty had an extraordinary idea. It was an idea born from the belief that art emerges from the relationships between people and place. Merv didn't see his role as an art educator who exports ideas and forms from the metropolitan centres into the regions. No. He believed that the job of the art educator was to coax these diverse relationships into visual form. On site. In place. In communities. And into art that breathed and witnessed all the diversities of place, relationships and communities.

Ideas are relatively easy to throw around. Position papers and boardroom charts and bureaucratic vision statements are full of them. But bringing them into being is another matter altogether.

Merv put his own time, his relationships and his money on the line in order to bring his idea into being.

And we've all benefited. I've benefited – all of you in this room have benefited, whether you're aware of it or not. All of Australia has benefited – because what Merv believed in is that people in the little places matter. He believed that art matters. He believed that art comes from the particular parts of Country (and here I use the word Country with a capital "C", like the Aboriginal people have taught us, to connote that it's sacred, that it's sentient), and that art can bear witness to what makes that specific part of Country special.

And he believed that the people that live on and with that Country, who tend that Country, who are the custodians of that Country, have a particular perspective on how we deal with each other, and with place, and with the problems and crises of our times.

Merv didn't settle on the myths that art is what happens in white walled galleries filled with cocktail celebrations. He didn't settle on the myth that the value of the arts and culture could be assessed by quantifiable indicators.

Merv dreamed the Australian Flying Arts School into being on the belief that art is a verb – not a noun – not merely a finished object that we hang on white walls. He believed that art offers us a means of re-thinking the impossible into being. Of journeying into unknown spaces and places and ideas and images. Of re-imagining new ways of acknowledging and apprehending who we are, and who we might become.

And for Merv, art wasn't something that you exported from the northern hemisphere or from the metropolitan hotspots to the far-flung regions. No – Merv flew – literally – on a hunch that the fostering of contemporary art needs to be nurtured in real space. In real time. In places that are a long, long way away from spaces that can be climate controlled and aesthetically managed.

Merv's dream was nurtured by the idea that recognition of contemporary cultural diversity is what could best serve the communities and future of this massive land we now call Australia. That rich, imaginatively expansive cultural diversity defines the art of Aboriginal peoples: where you work – who you are – who you are related to – limits and extends the stories you tell through song and dance, and the images you create.

But back in the day, Merv's dream seemed like a crazy idea. Even his close mate, the great artist Roy Churcher, wasted no words. When Merv

suggested the idea to Roy, Roy simply looked at Merv and said – "You're crazy."

And it ***was*** crazy. Totally crazy. Roy had come to Australia with his wife, the great Betty Churcher, when she returned from England after training at the Royal College of Art in London. The idea was that they'd stay for six months and return to London. Betty had come from Brisbane, and she was keen to return to Europe where she could be closer to the global art centres.

But Roy fell in love with the place. They stayed. We all benefited.

Lectures from both Roy and Betty were laced through with a finely tuned, impressively informed understanding of western art. During their teaching sessions they threw big, juicy colourful slides of the works of the 'Great Masters' and lead us through them with real love and passion.

They were even daring enough to talk about mystery – about the impossible – about things like the capacity of Mary's transformation - wrapping her arms around herself as she takes in the words of the Angel Gabriel in Fra Angelico's *The Annunciation* (1443). I can still vividly remember being lead through that painting, projected massively on the walls of the lecture hall of the old Tech school opposite the Botanical Gardens where George Street ends in Government House.

Outside in the hot, claustrophobic Brisbane night, the flying foxes screamed and fought in the magnificent, tangled branches of that massive fig tree that's still there to this day. And inside, Roy took our eyes through Fra Angelico's soaring arches - to that pale, luminescent, sacred space the artist had created almost six centuries before. Roy led our eyes and our imaginations into an entirely different kind of walled garden than the one outside, where bats and possums screeched. And in this magical space, on an ordinary Brisbane summer night, Roy introduced us to a timeless

moment that lived as brilliantly then as it did at the time it was created. Roy's words alerted us to the power of Fra Angelico's imagery to lead us through into a glimpse of Paradise – one with a very different, pale, unearthly cadence than that of the rich, dense tropical paradise of the gardens beyond.

Both Betty and Roy were passionate about "the Great Traditions" of western art history. As was Merv. But each of them was equally prepared to search for the possibility of images, ideas and forms that might contradict or extend that great tradition. And here in this vast continent we call Australia, they found examples aplenty.

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And so, after a brief moment of re-think, Roy turned to Merv again. "It's a *totally* crazy idea. *You're* totally crazy … but you know…. *it could just work*".

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Merv had the kind of personality that attracted plenty of good friends like Roy. He also had vision, ambition, and passion. He was the kind of man who knew that the facts that he had (a) no surplus funds and (b) no plane license were mere details. So, when he won a painting prize in 1970, he invested the money into getting himself a pilot's licence.

And if you think that *that* would have been a formidable obstacle, there were many, many more formidable obstacles to come: Merv had to convince the federal funding body that the venture was worth supporting.

So what did he do? He wrote to the Prime Minister at the time – Gough Whitlam. Now we all know that Whitlam was a great big man with great big ambitious ideas … but even *he* was wary of the scale and ambition of

Merv's idea. Like Roy, at first the idea stumped him … it just seemed too crazy, and he refused.

The idea of an artist flying thousands of kilometers in a twin-engine plane to tiny outback airstrips in the hope there would be enough people sufficiently interested in art to drive the hundreds of kilometres to get to some shearing shed or CWA hall to spend one or two days together to make and talk about art? Try to imagine that coming into being if you're spending most of your days in an office, pushing paper.

But Merv persisted.

Just take a moment to think about this: the sheer distances; the weather; the reliance on the goodwill of locals to billet you while you're there; the feeling in the little twin-engine cabin while you bounce along above the rising heat of those salt-pans; the exhaustion of doing flight after flight every two days or so over a period of around two weeks.

And for what? Who benefited? Art sales? No. High wages for the artist-teachers? No. Prestige? Certainly not.

But for certain, it did a great deal to satisfy a sense of adventure. A sense of doing something that had never been tried anywhere before. *Anywhere.* And a sense that there would be more than a fair share of surprises.

Before Gough eventually agreed to fund Merv's idea, he sent his mate, artist Clifton Pugh as a kind of art-spy to fly with Merv and come back with a viability report. Pugh had won the Archibald that year with a portrait of the great leader. So, Clifton Pugh took on the bidding of Gough (who would ever dare to refuse him?) and he returned utterly convinced. It *had* worked. The generosity, eagerness and complete dedication of outback people to the ideas; the conversations; the art produced; the communities reinforced; the assumptions that were challenged; the approaches that

were introduced; and Merv's ability to keep all the balls in the air and triumph were proof enough – Gough stayed true to his word, and the federal funds for support were granted.

But alas! Like the stories of the Brothers Grimm, there are never any 'happy endings'. When Whitlam lost his seat in 1975, that funding dropped out too.

Like so many great enterprises in the Australian art world, the ongoing expectation that artists and arts organisations should plea for funding takes more than its toll on time and energy. It can erode your convictions, your patience, your sense-of-self and your belief that what you're doing matters. Throughout Australian history, our cultural landscape is scattered with the dead bodies of artist-in-the-making - individuals whose promise and dreams were left to shrivel in vast, silent deserts of apathy.

But Merv continued to juggle the balls – to seek out support and sponsorship while flying, teaching, learning, making art, sharing, and carrying the weight of support and nurturing: connecting the cultural dots across the vast spaces beyond the Great Dividing Range in a fragile two-engine rattle-box fuelled by courage, passion and a sense of adventure.

By the 1980s, small teams of 2–3 art tutors were travelling that same route. I was the first female painting tutor to follow in the big-booted footsteps of Merv and Roy. I arrived after returning to Australia after two heady years traveling: I'd been in Afghanistan in 1979 when the Russian tanks rolled into Kabul; I crossed the border into Iran after the Shah had been deposed, when Ayatollah Khomeini had returned and when the world's axis in relation to what we think of as "the Middle East" changed forever.

So… after I'd returned, I was ready and eager for any other adventures that might have me.

But I have to be completely honest: the legendary impact of Merv and Roy on the outback lives of mostly women was one better imagined than described. The Australian Flying Art School also had a covert reputation as a 'relationship destroyer' across the outback. As those women found ways to express their emotional, intellectual and creative voices, to connect with each other, and to tune into frequencies that called from beyond the often gruelling demands of their workaday lives, their involvement in the empowering aspects of art often had disruptive effects too .

Make no mistake – there were men among the students, too. But the biggest proportion of AFAS students were women – and it's reasonable to imagine that there would have been more than a few disappointed women waiting in those tin sheds at the end of dusty runways when I arrived instead of Merv and Roy.

Eventually, the demands of escalating bureaucratisation, and the sense that the real blood of the organisation was being usurped by others in more powerful positions got the better of Merv. But by the time he left AFAS, he'd made around 1250 trips to at least 25 different locations from Queensland to the Torres Strait Islands. On an average year he'd be making four tours, each tour lasting two to three weeks. Over those 12 years visiting remote Queensland and New South Wales Merv had flown his plane over 4 hundred thousand kilometers.

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Times change and so do organisations. But it's worth remembering the past. And in the realm of what we call "the Australian cultural world", it's worth remembering how so many of the best things came into being through the passion and conviction and hard work of artists.

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On the occasion of this memorial event, it's particularly worth remembering Merv's convictions about the power of art to forge communication and community.

Merv's art teaching opened artists to the exciting possibilities that other worlds could be created from within their own workaday rational world. He made them recognise, through art, aspects of themselves that they don't get to recognise in the 'four cornered world' of everyday reality. He made them realise that the creative realm of artists is not limited, reduced, or disadvantaged by geographical location. He made us all realise that this geographical distance could, in fact, be of enormous value in seeing the broader world from other perspectives.

So here we are now, gathered together in a room of paintings celebrating Merv's enduring legacy. What might it be that changes the way we communicate with each other in spaces like these, surrounded by the presence of art?

Painting requires a slower form of looking – one that follows passages of action and movement and that takes in, with time, languages that go beyond words. Often, as viewers, we share that experience of looking with those who stand alongside us as we connect through our wonder, at times our incomprehension.

It's OK to feel overwhelmed by art. It's good to be taken into realms where you realise the truth: that you're not really in full control of making sense of things at all. It's good to be able to turn to others in either sheer wonderment, or bafflement or curiosity to ask – "what do YOU think about this?"

These are the kinds of conversations that continue in our subconscious long after we've left the presence of the images we stood before. They can haunt us in the best possible ways. Art can infect us all with dreams that

there are always new possibilities of seeing and responding to the worlds we share.

For your part in all this, Merv, we thank you.