

# *The South Australian School of Art History Project*

Report presented to the Friends of the South Australian School of Art Annual General Meeting, August 27 2009

As Chair of the South Australian School of Art History Project, I am very pleased to present this report to the Second Annual General Meeting of the Friends of the South Australian School of Art. At the inaugural general meeting last year, I was able to report that much hard - and often invisible work - had been done by the Committee, including the development of archival information about South Australian School of Art's scattered archives and an online 'snapshot' project, profiling 15 former staff and students of the 1960s & 1970s. This year I can report significantly more progress, but before that good news, a brief 'sketch' of the project's background is in order.

Following modest celebrations off he School's 150 year anniversary in 2006, it was proposed that 'an Honours student should write up the history of SASA'. The suggestion that a novice researcher could adequately research and compile such a document in 3,000 to 10,000 words galvanised my determination, along with others from the School's broader community - alumni, past and present visual artists and design staff, secondary sector arts educators and a University of South Australia librarian (previously the Arts Reference Librarian) - to take on this challenge. Somehow, with no resources available from a highly successful but financially strapped School, we aimed to produce a more appropriate, comprehensive and permanent record of the School's illustrious history.

We knew this would be a long term project but we were not aware that unfortunately, many documents and artworks had been lost or dispersed during the School's move from Underdale and in numerous other amalgamations and re-locations. In 2007 the Committee therefore undertook two simultaneous and 'doable' projects. These are:

- **Project 1:** the development of an ongoing bibliography of material relating to the School. This information would assist in the development of a longer term initiative, a general history of the South Australian School of Art.
- **Project 2:** a publication specifically examining a key decade in the School's history when it was located in Stanley St., North Adelaide during the 1960s and 1970s. This was a particularly vibrant and influential period.

In particular, the second publication is our current priority and will bring together many voices and points of view to reflect upon the diverse achievements and influences of the School, its staff, students and graduates at a time of great political and social change.



Art school staff, 1926



Sculpture class with Max Lyle

Since the School has been very supportive of the project but unable to assist with funds or staff workload allocation, all work has been voluntary, and necessarily slower than anticipated. Nevertheless, we have proceeded steadily; committee members are committed and have given generously of their own time. The committee comprises of past and present members of SASA/UniSA staff and the secondary arts education sector: **Jack Cross**,

**Jack Condous, Max Lyle, Ann Mather** (UniSA Librarian), **Geoff Wilson, Barrie Goddard, John Copeland, Alb Smith, Virginia Jay, Ron Corso** and myself. Head of School, **Professor Kay Lawrence** presided at two initial meetings and remained supportive of the project. Positive relations continue with new management under **Professor Mads Gaardboe**, Head of AAD and **Associate Professor John Barbour**, Associate Head & Director of South Australian School of Art. We have also been aided in this endeavour by **Ann Newmarch, Winnie Pelz** and through the unstinting support of administrative officer, **Denice Daou** who has worked for the project outside working hours. Thanks to all of you.

With this combined support we have been able to uncover the location of valuable material through responses to online and mail requests for information about SASA's scattered 'genealogical' records. In 2008- early 2009 we were also able to compile an on-line series of fifteen 'snapshots' – photographs, images and brief recollections of past staff and students who were involved with the School during its Stanley Street years; this is an ongoing project. Access to the website has been temporarily interrupted during the new Schools' amalgamation but watch the spaces below for new developments:

- **History of the School of Art, Architecture and Design**  
<http://www.unisa.edu.au/artarchitecturedesign/about/history.asp#sasa>
- **150 year anniversary of the South Australian School of Art (SASA)**  
<http://www.unisa.edu.au/artarchitecturedesign/about/SASA150years.asp>
- **South Australian School of Art (SASA) History Project**  
<http://www.unisa.edu.au/artarchitecturedesign/about/historyproject.asp>
- **School of Art History Project - Stanley Street staff snapshots**  
<http://www.unisa.edu.au/artarchitecturedesign/about/historyprojectprofiles.asp>
- **Friends of the South Australian School of Art**  
<http://www.unisa.edu.au/artarchitecturedesign/about/friends.asp>

At the time of writing, an article on the SASA History Project by highly esteemed writer, **John Neylon** for the *Adelaide Review* was in publication.



Class of 1976 (photo: P Greenaway)



Stanley Street (photo: P Greenaway)

Historical research of quality takes considerable time, expertise and money and we have been battling on with a serious lack of resources. Therefore, the impetus for inaugurating the Friends of the South Australian School of Art came directly from the SASA History Committee and was first and foremost launched to raise funds for this project. To this end, and led by **Jack Condous**, the Friends has energetically raised awareness of the historical significance of this School- and has also raised some seed funding – from its growing body of members. It is important to state that the History Project remains the number one priority of the Friends as determined by the Friends Committee. It is reassuring to report that AAD management (**Professor Mads Gaardboe**, Head of AAD and Associate Head & Director of South Australian School of Art, **Associate Professor John Barbour**) continue to be most supportive of the Friends and the History Project.

Now for the good news! Renowned scholar and art educational 'legend', **Dr Jenny Aland PSM**, has been undertaking intensive research into the History Project – on a voluntary basis - and her hundred plus hours have seen considerable progress on uncovering (deeply submerged) archival treasures and collating previously lost sources. It has been a great pleasure to work closely, sometimes daily, with Jenny, who is a powerhouse of energy,

enthusiasm, knowledge and professional research skills. We could have nobody better to embark on researching this difficult and largely unresourced project. Jenny is well known to most Friends as an outstanding teacher, lecturer, arts administrator and scholar whose Masters Degree focused on the early years of SASA. Her enthusiasm for and dedication to the project (as a former Stanley Street student) is much appreciated by all.

The following is a brief summary of Jenny's achievements to date, with specific reference to Project 2: the Stanley Street years:

- Preparation of a Bibliography listing books, journals, magazine articles, newspaper cuttings, government and state records, theses and relevant ephemera: artworks, photographs, graphics, designs as relevant to the research focus. This preparation has also involved the close analysis of the contents of these items.
- Analysis of the contents of SASA Prospectuses and Annual Reports published between the mid 1950s and the late 1970s.
- Analysis of documentation produced by the various groups (and the significant individuals within them) that were active during the 1950s, 60s and 70s i.e. Progressive Art Movement (PAM), Women's Art Movement (WAM), Experimental Art Foundation (EAF), and the CAS (Contemporary Art Society)
- Review of the contents of *Kalori*, the magazine of the Royal South Australian Society of Arts as published during the 1950s to the early 1980s.
- Re-scanning the significant number of photographs taken in 1963 by Alan Sierp of staff and students at work at the school when it was located at the Exhibition Building, North Terrace. This group of photographs also documented the inspection of the new site at Stanley Street in July 1963 by a group of officials that included leading British art critic and educator, Sir Herbert Read, the Principal (Alan Sierp) and other officers from the Education Department.
- Conducted a video-tape interview with Kym Bonython (14<sup>th</sup> July, 2009) during which reflected on his time as Director of Bonython Galleries, 88 Jerningham Street, North Adelaide: the artists he showed and the influences these exhibitions may have had on the work of staff and students at the nearby Stanley Street campus of the South Australian School of Art.
- Development of a preliminary Table of Contents for the planned publication of a document outlined above as Project 2.

Jenny's work on Project 1, the preparation of a Bibliography of all material relating to the school has also been ongoing. The intended outcome of this research will include an online database and associated print material. "

I also wish to mention the wonderful work of UniSA librarian, **Ann Mather**, in working closely with the project. Recently Ann has unearthed some previously 'lost' documents and Jenny is painstakingly working her way through these 'blasts from the past'. In historical terms, this 'archaeological' exercise is significant for both the Stanley St project and ongoing research on the School's longer history. Heartfelt thanks from the SASA History Project Committee – and the South Australian arts community – to Jenny and Ann. Former Head of Visual Art Theory, **Dr Neville Weston** is also assisting with information. And, as always, Jack Condous' unfailing support and energy in this enterprise is much appreciated.

One year ago we were not aware that the School would have undergone a merger with the Louis Laybourne Smith School of Architecture and Design into the new entity, Art, Architecture and Design within the University of South Australia. At this stage, it seems to be a positive 'partnership' with many potential synergies and the South Australian School of Art name is enshrined in legislation and remains a part of, if not to the forefront of this newly 'blended family'. This benign environment is not the case, however, with many other art schools being amalgamated throughout Australia at present. As I write, Melbourne's arts community and all living past and present arts ministers are in uproar about The University of Melbourne's rationalisation of the Victorian College of the Arts. The South Australian School of Art has also experienced many mergers and changes of name since 1856, one of the most torrid being the amalgamation into Torrens College and the move from Stanley Street North Adelaide to Underdale in the late 1970s. Adrian Geering noted:

It was thought that the role of the School of Art would become infringed upon, threatened and destroyed...that the amalgamation would sap the vitality and dissipate the creativity appropriate to the education of professional artists and designers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Geering, A., 'The Formation of the Torrens College of Advanced Education', *Essays on Art and Education*, Torrens College of Advanced Education, 1979, p. 43.

I am pleased to report that despite the best efforts of corporate bureaucracies, this didn't happen, although it has often been hard going for the School's students, staff and administrators since that time. In fact, what the History Project already tells us is that the School is a veteran survivor of the forces of darkness, be they in suits or academic garb. Moreover, despite adversity, it has built a proud local, national and international reputation and elicits verifiable student satisfaction of the highest order. And unlike an increasing number of Australian art schools, it still maintains disciplinary and interdisciplinary studios within its pedagogical framework.



Scott Heinrich (Visual Communication)



Linda Lou Murphy (aka Patterson) *Drawing Breath*, 2006

I will conclude, therefore, in an optimistic spirit with a reminder from **Professor Mads Gaardboe** when he launched Art, Architecture & Design on 1st June this year. He noted that; 'a university that is only 18 years old is...celebrating 259 years of creative education'. He also paid 'homage to a school in Germany that only lasted 18 years. A school that also brought together the arts, architecture and design'. This was the Bauhaus, founded in Weimar in 1919. Despite its now superseded modernist ethos, that's not a bad genealogy to think about.

We have a great team established; now we need serious financial support to continue this valuable research to publication stage. Please contact **Jack Condous**, President of the Friends, about opportunities to be a lasting part of this project.

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**Chair/Convenor, South Australian School of Art History Project Committee**  
**27 August 2009**