

## ARTIST ARTISTS Robert Hollingworth

With the increasing "professionalisation" of the art world and thousands of artists staging hundreds of exhibitions around the country, guest blogger **Robert Hollingworth** wonders if there's an alternative to the gloss and pop of the contemporary group show. He takes a drive to Benalla...



"The arts industry" seems to be going through a bit of a crisis. Viewed by many as luxury territory like cars, clothes and travel, people have stopped spending, and books, publishing, theatre, film and the visual arts seem of late to be doing it rather tough. It's possible that the arts overall is entering a phase of serious shake-up and the ones agitated the most are not artists as such, but others who also derive income from this source. Is this such a bad thing? Over the last thirty years I've watched "the arts industry" grow. Out of a national economic strategy came the burgeoning rise of arts professionals and, exceeding artists in number, I have watched them hijack the arts community. To my eye, the emphasis gradually shifted away from art towards entertainment: spectacle, novelty, colour and movement. This is the realm of event production, not art.

Meanwhile most artists are no better off now than they were before this industry emerged. There are many more artists of course – the arts industry generates them – but if some of these also fell away along with the questionable "industry" we might not necessarily be worse off. It might then be possible that artists – and those who have art as their primary focus – to once again take charge of things.



Right now at the Benalla Art Gallery there's an exhibition conceived and curated by artist **Robert Hirschmann**. It consists of forty senior or mid career artists exhibiting side-by-side – a rare thing in itself. But what makes this show even more interesting is that each artist has been asked to include a work of art drawn from their own personal collection and this work hangs beside the artist's own work. As if this isn't unusual enough, the exhibition includes no take-home list of works, no reproductions, no catalogue and no justifying essay of smart artspeak.

I am reminded of Pinacotheca Gallery in the late 1970's when **Bruce Pollard** held back-to-back shows in his large warehouse space with no advertising, no paraphernalia or fanfare and no official openings or invites. Word spread because the art was good and you came to see it or you didn't; that's all.

However ARTIST ARTISTS did have an opening party and many of the exhibitors drove the two and a half hours to the regional gallery (a few flew in from Sydney) and stayed overnight at the local Comfort Inn among other places. It was an extraordinary event, the first time I've experienced important artists like Jan Senbergs and Dale Hickey mixing it up with others such as **Bruce Armstrong, Kim Westcott, Rick Amor, Steven Harvey, Robert Doble, Simon Strong, Brent Harris, Andrew Browne** among many others.

What transpires from this show is that forty artists enter a kind of dialogue by showing their best work together in a display of generosity and mutual respect. And with the inclusion of a valued item from their own collection, a tiny window to the artist is revealed. Many have chosen to exhibit beside a work which is clearly an influence, if not an inspiration. **Savanhdaray Vongpoothorn's** large perforated canvas of pink verticals, *Lifting Words*, hangs adjacent to a contemporary Laos Textile; **Leonard Brown's** abstract green and red stripes, *A Transfiguration of Sound*, hangs beside his 17th C Byzantine Chalice cover, a textile cross of wine red with paler grids. Rick Amor has chosen a small work of Paul Boston's and his own large work is a huge deviation from his figurative paintings. In blacks and greys it is almost entirely abstract and is a clear nod to Boston's monotone geometric forms which hangs beside it.



**Jenny Christmann's** *Self Portrait* 1993 is a ball of wool one metre across and stands in front of Gunter Christmann's *Autoportrait* 1993, a painting of this same object. Kevin Lincoln's work, *Mask and Discarded Letter* hangs behind a display of four tiny carved Lega Masks from the Congo. Kim Westcott hangs beside five works on paper by **Peter Booth; Andrew Brown** – Louise Bourgeois; **Brent Harris** – Kiki Smith. **Peter Sharp** and myself have chosen to hang beside Aboriginal works, **Paddy Bedford** and Emily Kngwarreye. **Bruce Armstrong** includes an etching by Francisco Goya. **Paul Selwood's** wall-sized rusted steel work is seen in direct relation to a 1964 Clement Meadmore sculpture.

To visit this show, it's a journey by train, bus or car. But in some ways this prolonged time out travelling through the countryside can be seen as an adjunct to the show. A bit of country air puts the noise and clatter of art-as-industry into perspective, and visitors will see something that manages to sidestep the hype we have come to expect of many major exhibitions. It's well worth the trip.

ARTIST ARTISTS - [Benalla Art Gallery](#), Bridge Street, Benalla, Victoria until 25th September 2011