

## ***The Littlest Forum***

If computers were available to Leonardo he'd be emailing Botticelli. They'd swap recipes for pigments or a source of low cost ultramarine. They'd discuss the difficulties finding obliging patrons, sturdy models and unblighted corpses. And Leonardo would join Facebook to chat with Michelangelo in Venice, Durer in Germany and Bosch in Holland. He'd use the internet to locate Copernicus the astronomer and Columbus the explorer. Of course he would. He'd recognize that along with other studio equipment, the computer can be a vital tool for artists, a conduit to the thinking world, to ideas, to new discoveries and to colleagues.

The time has passed when a small clique of painters or sculptors met once a week in a smoky café and quaffed absinthe before disappearing back into their silent, linseed and turpsy caves. These days it seems so *atelier* for artists to squirrel themselves away in isolation, protecting their unique vision and waiting to be discovered. We are in the age of technology and very few creative people deny the possibilities that it presents.

Artists want to communicate – it's an intrinsic part of the creative process – and in this era of globalised affairs, it's harder to be heard than ever before. When Leonardo was born in Florence it had the population of Dubbo, when he worked in Milan it was two thirds the size of Ballarat, and when he finally went to Venice – the big smoke – it boasted a population about half that of Geelong. With the number of visual artists in Australia topping 50,000, where is there room for the individual? How are these artists to connect to their industry let alone each other?

The internet seems obvious yet in some ways it's a populated world a million times larger than the one we walk around in. With its trillions of connections you'd expect to disappear in cyberspace, but ironically it can foster individuality, it can be a place for one's voice to be heard, to play, argue, be vacuous or participate in meaningful peer-driven dialogue. Real life or web life? It isn't either/or. Face to face conversations can be guarded, cursory and trifling just as the web can allow for more considered perspectives. And inside the screen, according to one's preferences, there's a world where a private forum can have a real presence for artists isolated by distance, circumstance or the solitary nature of their practice.

Of course there are plenty of internet sites to help artists stay informed: blogs, personal websites, online galleries, stores, magazines and info links – recently, 340 major galleries from 23 countries met on Twitter and users were invited to ask questions of curators working at their favourite galleries. It's all important, but in the end, impersonal, an information resource rather than a meeting of minds.

In 2008 Amanda van Gils conceived and established TLF or *The Littlest Forum*. It has since become a shared space, open yet private, communal yet industry based, critical but fair, supportive but not gratuitously so. Artists are invited to join by other members, that way TLF remains a sphere for professionals (the thirty-eight artists in this show regularly exhibit across the country). In total there are now one hundred TLF registered users from Australia and overseas and their 15,000 posts to date range in content from forthcoming shows, technical advice, unscrupulous dealers, approaching new galleries, to shared concerns, opportunities and opinions.

This exhibition celebrates the diversity of these opinions and the diversity of TLF artists. Rarely do we see such a broad range of Australian art practice in a single show or have the opportunity to appraise so many different conceptual frameworks, styles, subjects and mediums all under the one roof. This breadth of ideas rises from the dust of postmodern pluralism, but what is it that unites them? In this instance it is the forum; the online virtual theatre where all voices are heard equally.

As much as anything else, TLF connects people. It connects people who sometimes have difficulty connecting: artists in regional areas, artists who are parents of young children, artists who don't fit the mould of the gregarious, socializing networker frequenting openings and art gatherings. And artists who have ideas, opinions, knowledge and experience but, for whatever reason, are not inclined to share them in front of live audiences. And above all else, TLF is democratic – age, status, reputation, social and economic circumstance, do not come into it; mutual exchange and reciprocity do.

Recently, members were asked why they log on to TLF. Dozens responded: a sense of community, relationships formed, building a knowledge base, shared ideas, opinions, humour, process, and advice; a sense of solidarity, affinity and support; a meeting place – initially in correspondence then often in person. But one post by Deb Mostert perhaps summarizes it best: *I like to celebrate the common aims, nod in shared frustration at the trials, thoughtfully disagree sometimes but always acknowledge the richness of the human condition and the generosity of fellow artists in sharing themselves. I'm very grateful to Amanda and the forum for introducing me to a fantastically eclectic bunch of people, some of whom I am now proud to call friends.*

Robert Hollingworth