

Emerging venture by established artists Art Collective WA

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After making a splash locally within just six months of opening in July 2013, Art Collective WA is poised to take its flock of established WA artists to new markets in 2014, in fitting 'collective' style. This unique venture emerged somewhat from the ashes of numerous commercial gallery closures in Perth in recent times. Over a sobering 12 month period some of WA's most prominent and successful commercial galleries decided to permanently close their doors, leaving the artists they had represented for decades, in the cold.

"The Collective really began as a response to the five major commercial galleries in Perth closing," Art Collective WA Director Felicity Johnston explains.

"Diane Mossenson from Mossenson Galleries/Indigenart, started a conversation early in 2013 with various WA artists in order to come up with a new model to ensure they could still show their work.

The original idea was actually more about making space for artists to store their work, rather than exhibit it, but that has changed over time into this new model which is really a cross between an ARI (artist-run-initiative) a contemporary art space, and a commercial gallery."

With the support of Diane and Dan Mossenson, Art Collective WA set-up shop in July 2013 in one third of the couple's Indigenart space at 115 Hay St Subiaco.

◆ Felicity Johnston and Merrick Belyea with his exhibition, *From Above, the City is a Target*, at Art Collective WA in Subiaco. Photo Lyn DiCiero.

"Dan and Diane helped us get started, giving us our first three months of operation rent-free," Felicity goes on. "But we're not part of Indigenart or Mossenson's at all - Art Collective WA is an entirely separate, independent enterprise."

And this enterprise, in contrast to Indigenart and other established commercial art spaces in Perth, is set up as a not-for-profit, membership-based organisation (an incorporated association) with a current board of eight member-artists.

Membership is by invitation, and is open only to established WA artists with at least ten years of continuous exhibiting experience. Original founding member artists include Eveline Kotai, Jo Darbyshire, Trevor Vickers, Casper Fairhill, and Sarah Elson.

While there are no fees involved, members fulfill organisational responsibilities to reap the collective benefits.

Artist Merrick Belyea's show, *From Above, the City is a Target*, fills the collective's February/March 2014 exhibition slot, and as Art Collective WA's board chair, he's well positioned to comment on its burgeoning structure.

"I've always shown my work in a range of places. Even after I started showing with (commercial gallery) Gallery East, I always maintained links with local artist-run spaces," he says. "I think that's partly just to bring myself back to earth."

"Sometimes in the commercial gallery world, you can get caught up in the saleability and the self-promotion game, whereas I've always found, in artist-run-spaces it's just about the artwork. You're really promoting the work rather than the person, and personally I find that grounding."

"With Art Collective WA it's artist-run, in terms of the board, but with a commercial gallery focus through Felicity Johnston, as director. But I'm finding this is keeping me quite honest as well because I come here and install the show, paint the building and have a real hands-on association with it - which is different to a commercial gallery where you hand in the work, attend the opening, and pick up any unsold work at the end of it."

Belyea's hands-on involvement is an experience shared by all Art Collective members (currently approximately 25 in number) who have given their time and efforts in many and varied ways since the inception of the Collective.

These efforts by members see them traversing less familiar artist-terrain, as they swap canvases for calculators to decide how to spend the organisation's funds, and how to prioritise future activities.

With a bank balance financed through a combination of artwork sales (40% commission), government funding (including special project funding from WA Dept Culture & the Arts; the Australia Council for the Arts and

◆ *The Bombing of Paris*, oil on board by Merrick Belyea.



◆ *The Bombing of Galatz*, oil on board by Merrick Belyea.

Creative Partnerships Australia), as well as through philanthropic donations, the Collective has diversified income streams.

"Membership organisations work differently to commercial businesses," Merrick Belyea comments. "And the idea of this Collective is to help every member continue making a living from their art, so it's very much about each individual contributing in some way, so it's not just about *my* career, it's about me helping everyone else while they help me."

And although the Collective's membership base will remain relatively modest in number to avoid unwieldiness, Director Felicity Johnston emphasises this will not necessarily preclude the showcase of non-member artists in future.

"While our membership is made up of established WA artists, that's not to say we won't show other artists who may not fit that criteria in the gallery," she says.

"The reality is we do need to grow financially, and until we get a strong corporate partner we are vulnerable," she adds.

As this innovative new enterprise negotiates this sometimes-risky, formative territory, its steadfast collective spirit remains decisive.

"We actually *want* our artists to be poached by other galleries, and take WA artists out of WA too," Johnston concludes, signalling this new wave of collaboration and partnerships may well open new doors for these WA artists, as well as for the wider WA visual arts sector.