

From Garage to Parliament House

27 artists working in a garage in Bega are collectively setting the standard for arts and disability practice in regional NSW.

by MATTHEW PERRY

“His voice ... Oh such a beautiful, friendly voice! It helped me when times were so hard for me,” says artist Michael O’Dea about the singer Kamahl, his long time muse and the source of inspiration for a large series of portraits. Michael’s art works have just been included in *32 Pieces*, an exhibition of selected artworks celebrating the achievements of artists with a disability at Parliament House in Sydney in June.

Having seen photographs of Michael’s paintings, Kamahl agreed to open the exhibition. A Quick Response grant from the Regional Arts Fund contributed to costs for Michael O’Dea and fellow artist Phillip Skillen to travel to Sydney to attend the exhibition opening and also to broaden their arts practice by spending a day at the Art Gallery of NSW.

Michael’s life long dream to meet Kamahl came true at the exhibition opening and Michael was able to have some special moments with the singer. A highlight was when Michael asked Kamahl, “Why don’t you sing us a song?” Kamahl graciously complied and sang a very moving acapella version of ‘Nature Boy’.

Michael and Phillip are supported in their art making by The Art In The Garage Project which is part of Tulgeen Group’s TES Access Service. The project provides an art making environment for people with a disability living in the Bega Valley Shire. It employs five practicing artists as educators who all passionately share a philosophy of supporting an art making process that encourages the creativity of individuals to shine. The Art in the Garage Project currently supports 22 artists with disabilities who all work in totally diverse styles and mediums.



Michael O’Dea with one of his portraits of Kamahl

The project has been running since 2000 and has had fourteen widely acclaimed exhibitions showcasing the works of the artists as a group and as individuals in various regions of NSW and the ACT (including the latest, a show at Mogo Raw Art and Blues Gallery featuring work by four artists supported by the project: Graham Henkle, Caroline Lawler, Michael O’Dea and Jeffery Young).

Art In The Garage artists have become known for their joyous and irreverent art works that challenge the whole concept of disability. Significantly, the project is partially funded by the 30% commission that is taken from all art sales.

The project uses an old converted garage as its studio. The very limited work space never gave us the option of providing group educational situations but we have used what we initially perceived as a disadvantage

to great effect. The artists have all benefited enormously from the intensity of ‘one-on-one’ art making sessions and their individual creativity has flourished beyond belief.

The Art in the Garage project is about to make a quantum leap in its ability to provide creative options to a larger cross section of people. Funding has been sourced to build three new art making spaces adjoining the original garage studio. This will provide diverse opportunities for print making, ceramics and sculptural works set in a courtyard featuring art works created in the project. ■

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Michael O’Dea with Kamahl at the opening of *32 Pieces* at Parliament House in June.

The Regional Arts Fund is an Australian Government initiative to support the arts in regional, remote and isolated Australia.



**Australian Government
Regional Arts Fund**

October

26 October — 4 November

📍 Jacaranda Festival Garden displays, art and craft exhibitions, music, dancing, entertainment **GRAFTON** Tel 02 6642 3959 www.jacarandafestival.org.au

27 October

🎵 *Jazz in the Vines* David Campbell, Doug Williams and the Mix, Wanderlust and Miroslav Bukovsky, Bonnie J Jenson, Boom Band Krewe, and Daryl Aberhart Plays John Scofield. Tyrrell’s Vineyard **POKOLBIN** Tel 02 4930 9190

27 — 28 October

📍 *Tallangatta Fifties Festival* Celebrate the 50’s in Australia’s home of Rock ‘n’ Roll. **TALLANGATTA** Tel 02 6071 2621

27 October — 25 November

👁️ Selections from the Ken Hines Cultural Heritage Collection / Coulundra Art Gallery QLD. From one of the country’s largest private art collections. **COWRA** Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6340 2190