

**The remote outback town**

**of Wilcannia hasn't been**

**the subject of too many**

**good news stories in the**

**papers lately, but since**

**the new arts centre**

**opened last year there's**

**been plenty to celebrate.**

by ANNETTE EASSIE

Thanks to a grant from the Regional Arts Fund, three artists-in-residence programs at the Wilcannia Arts Centre last year have brought a new lease of life and activity to the town.

# the wilcannia renaiss

**WHEN WEST DARLING ARTS BROUGHT ARTISTS BADGER BATES, Geoff DeMain and Peter McGlinchey to work in Wilcannia, the response from the local community far exceeded all expectations.**

But it has not been an easy road — and many times it seemed as if the dream of a thriving arts centre in Wilcannia would remain just that! In this remote, isolated and predominantly Indigenous — Paakantji — community, with a proportionally high number of the population identifying as artists or pursuing some form of art practice, the need to support, nurture and sustain local arts and artists has long been recognised by West Darling Arts' Regional Arts Development Officer, James Giddey.

Arts activities happened from time to time, a workshop here and there, but there was no continuity and no time to foster art and its inherent value to its community. James recognised that a long term approach needed to be adopted and a solid infrastructure developed — securing a suitable and 'user-friendly' art space as well as a 'support team' who would manage the space, coordinate its programs and tend to those crucial areas of administration and, of course, funding.

Just over three years ago the Wilcannia Arts group, a sub-committee of the West Darling Regional Arts Board, was born and highly successful workshops held with artists Geoff DeMain and Peter McGlinchey through funding from the Regional Arts NSW Country Arts Support Program (CASP) and the Waste 2 Art projects. The art space followed soon after when an old fibro, 'bit like an old CWA,' shed with a tin roof was noticed to be empty. The building belonged to the Uniting Church and the timing coincided with the arrival of the 'Flying Padre', Reverend John Blair (so-called because



*L-R Badger Bates, Leatta Hunter, Jonathon Whyman, Vicki Dutton and Bonita Kennedy at the opening of the Wilcannia exhibition, at the Geo Centre, Broken Hill, 10 March 2007. Photo: Boris Hlavica*



10

**April**

28 – 29 April

Baerami Bush Dance and Campout  
Traditional acoustic music and dancing in Baerami Hall, Wollombi National Park, DENMAN Tel 02 6571 1208

28 – 20 April

Ironfest An arts festival with a metal twist: World Jousting Championships, medieval | colonial re-enactments, live music, stalls, metalwork displays & workshops, LITHGOW Showgrounds Tel 02 6353 1638 Website www.ironfest.com.au (see p.21)

28 April – 20 May

My Family & Other Animals  
Solo exhibition of paintings by Nicole Vandersteegen. Raglan Galley COOMA Tel 02 6452 3377

Until 29 April

Mental Health Nurses  
From 1895 to the present day, at Kenmore Hospital Museum, GOULBURN, Sat & Sun 10am–4pm. Contact Tel 02 4827 3412

he gets around in a Cessna 182). Thus began a new partnership and the perfect home for the Wilcannia Arts Centre which officially opened its doors for community use in June 2005.

The next challenge was to develop the centre as an outlet and opportunity for creative practices. The centre provided the art space for studios, workshops facilities, meetings and exhibitions but it needed to attract people through its doors and to maintain interest long enough for its value within the community's economic, social and cultural life to be truly recognised. This dream was realised

# sance

when a Regional Arts Fund grant was approved to run a three-year artists-in-residence program throughout 2006, 2007 and 2008.

There is a point (sometimes more than one!) in every project's story where a mixture of bad luck and misfortune test out even the best of intentions and plans. For Wilcannia Arts, this came just before the first three week artist-in-residence when the church and adjacent artists' accommodation space were desecrated and severely vandalised. There is also a point in every story when these obstacles create a turning point and catalyst from which the project strengthens and gathers the momentum needed to confront its future challenges. For Wilcannia Arts, this came through the community's united response to this set-back. The concentrated activity of the clean-up and the enormous volunteer efforts by Murdi Paaki CDEP workers, council staff and Wilcannia Arts members created great community interest and commitment and demonstrated a community involvement and sense of ownership that could have taken years to generate. It also led to the building being re-clad with corrugated iron so that "nobody could kick the hell out of it!" as James said.

On this solid basis, the first three artists-in-residence have been a resounding success, utilising a model which truly resonates with this community. Workshops were unstructured and open to whoever wished to participate or simply observe artists making art. Activities were held both in the Arts Centre studios and in the community. Local artists no longer practising were encouraged to visit the studio, watch the artists, talk to the artists and gradually build their confidence and purpose to start 'making'.

## April

Until 29 April

👁 *Minutes to Midnight* Australian Photographer Trent Parke's dark, sensual and apocalyptic vision of contemporary Australia. **DUBBO** Regional Gallery  
Tel 02 6801 4444  
Website [www.wpcddubbo.org.au](http://www.wpcddubbo.org.au)

Until 29 April

👁 *Three Rooms* A private collection exhibition featuring still lives and landscapes by notable artists. Tweed River Art Gallery, **MURWILLUMBAH** Tel 02 6670 2790  
Website [www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery](http://www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery)

Until 29 April

👁 *Gallipoli — A Turkish view* Photographs and relics from the Gallipoli Campaign. Tweed River Art Gallery, **MURWILLUMBAH** Tel 02 6670 2790  
Website [www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery](http://www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/artgallery)

Until 29 April

👁 *Sydney Prints*: A look at works from 45 years of the Sydney Printmakers Group. **TAMWORTH** Regional Gallery  
Tel 02 6767 5459  
Website [www.tamworth.nsw.gov.au/gallery](http://www.tamworth.nsw.gov.au/gallery)

It was imperative that Badger Bates be the first artist-in-residence, as a former Wilcannia resident, an Elder of the Paakantji people and the mentor for the program. Both Geoff DeMain and Peter McGlinchey have also worked extensively in Wilcannia and the experience strongly reflected in their works. Each of the artists took on a strong mentoring role at the same time as developing their own work. All three worked in the Darling River environs and incorporated river material and images in their residence work, a very symbolic message to the whole community.

During the last three months of 2006, almost non-stop activity at the Centre resulted in an unexpected number of visitors and participants to the Centre and an astonishing volume and quality of work. There were 770 visits to the Centre by 390 people: students, adults, community residents, tour groups, tourists and CDEP participants, resulting in sixty-six lino cuts; forty-eight prints from the lino cuts; sixty jacaranda seed pods painted by children and attached to a tree in the grounds; three large charcoal drawings mounted on canvas; a body of smaller drawings using the theme of the three evils; three drums sculpted using carved and hollowed out pieces of red gum with the stands coated with coloured mud from the bottom of the water-depleted Darling River; a number of large scale sculptures; fifteen small assemblages and furniture made from found natural and man-made materials.

Sue Reynolds, Project Manager for the Wilcannia Artists-in-residence program, says she finds it almost impossible to capture the true essence of this project on paper or in words, "except one word, 'magical'!"

As Badger Bates looks at a thirty year old photo of Wilcannia Mission School children he makes special mention of those who are now producing art at the Centre. Another photo shows the motel owner making lino prints next to the nuns, next to an archaeologist. He is thrilled that the 'younger people' want to take part and that they are working alongside their uncles, their aunts and their mothers.

There are many stories to tell and many perspectives to share. With six more residencies and regional and metropolitan exhibitions planned over the next two years, this is just the start. ■

**Annette Eassie is the Manager of the Regional Arts Fund at Regional Arts NSW**



**CONTACT Sue Reynolds Tel 0429 985 703  
Email [sreynolds@loadednet.com.au](mailto:sreynolds@loadednet.com.au)**

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

An Australian Government Initiative



REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND

REGIONAL ARTS FUND