

“Some gallery in the metropolis gets a whole bunch of works and sends them off to a regional gallery for a month or so and everyone feels they have done something for their country cousins.”

“It’s far more interesting if you could find the work and get a whole bunch of things from a regional centre and bring them to the city and reverse that flow.”

McDonald sees newcontemporaries as an opportunity to challenge gallery and museum conventions and to showcase new and emerging artists.

“(Newcontemporaries is) doing shows that fall through the gaps between what the museums do and what the commercial galleries do. Commercial galleries won’t do these type of shows because they don’t see any real commercial appeal, museums won’t do these type of shows because they don’t seem quite important enough. They don’t have that veneer of avant garde respectability that they want.”

‘Walcha, City of Art’ is precisely this kind of show. And, McDonald says, “It is one of our more adventurous shows of the year.”

As McDonald has found, in the tiny town of Walcha there is a thriving arts community and a small town that has enthusiastically

John McDonald, Walcha

by JANE SHADBOLT

SYDNEY’S QUEEN VICTORIA BUILDING IS A KITSCH VALHALLA where you can shop all day, die and be reborn to shop again in the opal shops, the t-shirt shops, the tourist shops – the type of places that sell toy koalas fashioned from kangaroo fur, toy kangaroos fashioned from cow hide and toy sheep, more reassuringly, fashioned from sheep. Peculiar visions of a rural Australia that exists only as far as Circular Quay.

It seems a strange place to find a real bit of regional Australian life, but right now, tucked away in the corner of the mysterious third level of the QVB there is a little bit of Walcha, a small northern NSW town. ‘Walcha, City of Art’ is currently on show at newcontemporaries, an unusual exhibition space that perches somewhat incongruously above the clocks and the shops in Sydney’s multi-shopping polis.

The newcontemporaries gallery is the recent undertaking of John McDonald, outspoken art critic and one time National Gallery curator. It is a non-commercial enterprise founded by an unlikely collision of civic arts-mindedness and government regulations. Epoh, owners of the QVB, needing a certain amount of the building to be dedicated to public use, made the gallery available to fulfil their community obligations. It opened under John McDonald’s directorship last August.



June

29 June

🎵 Conquest, instrumental ensemble, the Sydney Conservation Students on tour under the direction of David Miller OAM. Presented by Music Shoalhaven. 2.30pm School of Arts NOWRA. Tel 4421 3089

29 June

🗨️ Poets & Songwriters Salon, a chance to share and connect with other creative souls. Open to singers, songwriters and poets in the community. **WAUCHOPE** Community Arts Hall. \$5 entry. Contact Camden Haven Community College Tel 02 6559 6699 Email chace@tsn.cc

29 June

🏠 Berrima School Craft Market, includes 80 stalls. Held at the Southern Highlands Country Markets, **BERRIMA**. Contact George Glumuc Tel 02 4683 1639 Email juliangluma@smartchat.com.au Website www.stallholders.com/shcm.htm

July

👁️ Tea Cosie Show, more or less functional works by various artists and designers. Precinct Gallery, **BERRY** Tel 02 4464 3402

embraced them. McDonald is also enthusiastic about this unusual concentration of artists in the Walcha area.

“It’s a show I’ve wanted to do for a long time, largely to do with ideas of regionalism in Australian art.

“For the last few years there has been a big buzz about regionalism. The way this is generally interpreted is that some gallery in the metropolis gets a whole bunch of works and then sends them off to a regional gallery and plonks them on the walls for a month or so and then (the works) go back and everyone feels that they have done something for their country cousins. It’s far more interesting if you could find the work and get a whole bunch of things from a regional centre and bring them to the city and reverse that flow.

“In a way, it’s precisely what happens in the wider world of art. Australia is really seen as the country cousin of international art

As McDonald points out, *“It is extremely unusual that any local council would invest money in works of public art. It started with some development money that came through the Armidale City of Art program.”*

“To me, (Walcha) is a model place.... country towns are struggling and suffering so much at the moment with post offices and essential services leaving. Banks are being closed down and replaced with a gigantic sign telling you how much the bank loves you while you have to travel a hundred kilometres elsewhere to do your banking.

“With all those things changing, this is another option. And I think a lot of other places could learn from that as the nature of country life changes. Walcha has managed to do something, without much strain on the ratepayers, that is very imaginative and very, very different from any other regional centre.”

and the **new** regionalism



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in general. If there is an international exhibition we are always the grateful recipient of international art by big super stars but we are rarely invited to give anything back. We get a little bit of token representation here or there.”

It is this idea of regionalism that McDonald would like to question. *“The show is against tokenism and against that kind of very narrow minded idea of regionalism.”* While visiting Armidale McDonald began to discover quite a sizable group of artists living and working in nearby Walcha.

“You actually have a place where you have a really strong group of artists who had all studied in the city, who unusually went back to the land ...and perhaps unlearned some of the things they learned in their (city) art education. And began to work in a way that combined the relative art sophistication they would have picked up from living, working and studying in the city with a sense of place, the genius loci of Walcha itself.”

But it isn’t just a group of arty city refugees fleeing the art world for fresh air and a bit of honest labour. The local community has embraced them and the artists have collectively produced a large body of public works that now grace the streets of Walcha. Twenty-one of them in fact, including works at each of the roads entering the town right through to the town’s centre where James Roger’s huge abstract metal sculpture stands.

There are five Walcha artists in the show. Paintings by Wynne Prize winner Angus Nivison, and Ross Laurie examine their part of the world through abstracted landscapes, while Julia Griffin’s starkly realistic views of regional Australia from that vantage point most familiar to city dwellers – on the highway and viewed from the comfort of one’s car. Also represented are local abstract sculptor James Rogers and sculptor Stephen King, a prolific carver whose totemic carvings litter his Walcha property. All of them dinki-di Walcha locals. Says McDonald, *“All of them do a bit of work on the land. They all have a connection with the area that goes back a long way.”*

And it’s this connection that is the unifying theme of the show that McDonald finds so satisfying, *“It’s nice to do a show where there is that organic basis”* he says.

McDonald also has plans for the Walcha works after the show and would like the show to tour to other regional centres. The show also will be giving something back to the Walcha area. McDonald commissioned a photographic catalogue of the public sculptures that will be in the show and then donated to the Walcha city council as a permanent part of their new visitor’s centre. ■

Walcha, City of Art opens on 12 June and runs until 27 July at newcontemporaries, Level 3 South, Queen Victoria Building.

June – July

1 - 4 July

🎵 Regional tour by Sydney Conservatorium String Ensemble. Tour takes in venues in **COOMA, BOMBALA, MERIMBULA** and **BYRON BAY**.
Contact South East Arts Region
Tel 02 6499 2286

2 - 19 July

🎭 *The Promised Woman*, presented by the Newcastle Repertory Club.
NEWCASTLE Repertory Theatre.
Bookings Tel 02 6582 1012

2 - 22 July

👁️ Alvaro Art Prize Exhibition, showcasing selected works from the competition.
Berrima District Art Society Gallery,
BOWRAL. Open 10am to 4pm daily.
Tel 02 4861 4093

4 July

🗨️ Annual Sister City Day Japanese Film Night, held at the Community Village, Earl Street, **COFFS HARBOUR**.
Contact Arts Mid North Coast
Tel 02 6659 3360.