

Main street art: How galleries survive the recession



ABOVE: Peta Appleyard (centre) with gallery manager Nathan King and Sally Jeavons. BELOW: Gondwana's Roslyn Premont (second from left) with artist Mitjili, who played the grandmother in Samson and Delilah, as well as Marissa Gibson (Delilah) and Warwick Thornton, director of the acclaimed film.



By KIERAN FINNANE

For one Alice art business, after almost 20 years in the game, now is a time to consolidate in face of the uncertain economic climate; for another, born in the teeth of the downturn, now is a time to hold their

nerve.

Gallery Gondwana was established in Alice in 1990, in the wake of a previous economic slump caused by the pilots' strike of the year before.

Peta Appleyard Gallery opened in November last year, just a month after massive credit losses around the world put the words "Global Financial Crisis" on everyone's lips.

At the time Arts Minister Alison Anderson acknowledged the courage of owner Peta Appleyard given the economic times.

Founder and owner of Gallery Gondwana, Roslyn Premont, says the circumstances of her early years were "not as hard as they are for Peta".

"It was a very different landscape – much less competition, and I had fewer expenses, with just myself and a partner running the gallery."

Since then Gallery Gondwana has established a solid reputation for quality work and ethical dealings with Aboriginal artists and has also undergone various changes and expansions. At one stage there was a Gondwana II in Alice, focused on decorative arts and furnishings.

In more recent years there has been a Gallery Gondwana in Sydney, in an operation similar to its sister gallery in Alice, focussed primarily on Aboriginal art (though not exclusively work from the Centre).

Common to all has been the driving energy of Ms Premont, who arrived in Alice in 1987 and ran the government-owned Centre for Aboriginal Art for three years before branching out on her own.

Now she is closing the Sydney operation and will return to Alice to focus on "the main game".

The lease for the Sydney premises is up for renewal.

With the economic climate as it is, she feels it is "not sensible" to renew.

This time of year is always slower, says Ms Premont, so it is hard to know how much is due to the economic downturn.

"We are feeling it in Alice as well. When the tourist season starts, we'll see more clearly.

"My main priority is to keep everyone employed and to stay buoyant."

However, in the show just opened in Sydney, honouring the work of Mitjili Napanangka Gibson, who plays the artist grandmother in Warwick Thornton's acclaimed film *Samson & Delilah*, the signal seemed clear.

More than 250 people came to the opening, which featured cast and crew from the film and also marked the occasion of the final Gondwana show in the Sydney gallery.

Says Ms Premont: "Two years ago all the work of an artist of Mitjili's calibre would have sold on opening night.

"This time, while all the small works sold and a few of the larger ones went to big collectors, the medium-sized works have not yet moved."

In Alice Springs the gallery continues to sell works priced under \$5000 and occasionally "amazing pieces" to special collectors, but these larger sales are "few and far between".

"We are definitely feeling the crunch but we just don't know to what degree yet."

Ms Premont says she can't remember a comparable period in her two decades in the industry.

She believes a market for excellent quality work will always survive, as will, to some extent, a market for work by which to remember one's experiences in the Centre – "this market makes up part of our turnover in Alice".

But she will be looking for opportunities to diversify, "to tap into another income stream".

The local market will be important for this.

Gallery Gondwana already caters to locals with their jewelry lines, and occasional fashion parades.

"That's not our main income stream but it's important and it gets people into the gallery who otherwise might not come.

"We get a lot of first time art buyers that way."

Peta Appleyard's approach has been to diversify from the outset.

While the fortunes of the gallery are underpinned by its exclusive representation of Watiyawanu Artists, whose leading painters are much sought after, it is committed to displaying a broad spectrum of contemporary Australian art, not only Indigenous art.

“Much as it is loved, there is a saturation of Indigenous art in Alice Springs,” says Ms Appleyard. The gallery’s showing of a selection of work by the late Halcyon Lucas marks a first: there has not previously been a solo show for a non-Indigenous local artist in a commercial gallery in Alice (Gallery Gondwana has also shown work by non-Indigenous locals, an innovation at the time, but not as a solo show).

Art lovers have responded.

Peta Appleyard Gallery manager Nathan King, born and raised in Alice, says so far the show is covering its costs and if a couple more of the larger works sell, “we’ll be in front”.

But he also says “this show was never about profit”.

“Everything was priced very modestly. We and Halcyon’s daughters wanted to make the work accessible to the people who knew her – to provide the opportunity for a redistribution of her work back into the community.

“The main reason we would class the show as successful is that has been good for our general PR.

“A new group of people are becoming aware of our existence, a mixture of young and old, and some visitors, including four Belgian backpackers.”

The Belgians pooled funds to buy the excellent painting featuring on the show’s invitation, intending to share it, with a handover once a year on the anniversary of their acquisition.

Another work went to a significant private collection in Victoria.

Mr King, who has a degree in business with a major in marketing, knows that most new businesses go broke within the first 12 months.

“Our first goal is not to go broke,” he says.

“We’re realistic. We won’t make a lot of money this year, but we’ve been blessed.

“Just when things have been looking dire, when a big bill has been coming up, sales have gone through.”

This has been particularly the case with work by Watiyawanu artists, but a showing of the “collectable” British-born, Melbourne-based artist David Bromley also had good returns.

Only three works were sold, but two were for in excess of \$10,000. All buyers were local.

Were they surprised to find this demand locally?

“We were relieved but not surprised,” says Mr King, “that was our plan.

“Two out of the three buyers were people who do not have a passion for Aboriginal art. We were offering an alternative, non-Indigenous paintings with investment potential.”

Ms Appleyard says the most common word used in response to the Bromley show was “refreshing”.

“The public has been telling us what we felt ourselves, that there was room to do something different.”

Peta Appleyard Gallery is next door to Gallery Gondwana.

Ms Appleyard welcomes the prospect of Ms Premont’s renewed focus on her Alice operation.

“That’s fantastic for us and for Papunya Tula.

“Alice Springs is what’s important to me, as my home town.

“If we’re all working hard, we challenge one another, that helps all of us do our best.”

Her gallery is notable for its lofty space and elegant refurbishment.

“We strived to create from the floor up a good quality space, a blank canvas, to allow the work we show to speak for itself,” says Ms Appleyard.

It must also have exposed her to some debt: its furnishings are custom-designed; its Erco lighting is state of the art (“what they use in the Louvre”, she says).

Did she have a healthy amount of capital to start with?

She laughs: she had some capital but is certainly carrying some debt.

Her response to the current economic climate is simple: “Stay strong, focus on what we do.”

“I had every expectation that it would be a tough journey regardless of the economy.”

She acknowledges the importance of her exclusive representation of Watiyawanu Artists and on-going relationships with interstate galleries that have developed around that.

In fact the Watiyawanu artists are responsible for her involvement in the art industry and led her “to whitefella art”.

Ms Appleyard grew up out bush, between Haasts Bluff and Mt Liebig.

“Their art was part of my life along with other things like hunting and ceremony but it didn’t hit me as a profound experience until I went back out as a married woman with a child, and saw work by Wentja Napaltjarri – I was gob-smacked, I literally fell to my knees.”

Ms Appleyard’s mother, Glenis Wilkins, was (and still is) working as coordinator at the art centre.

“I said to them I’m here, tell me how I can help you.”

And so six years ago, she began marketing their work.

“I dealt with people the artists weren’t interested in dealing with, raising their profile – they are now a very recognised art centre.

“Our deal with them is like that of any other gallery, 60 to the artist, 40 to us, and we cover expenses.”

As she became more confident in what she was doing, the idea of her own gallery was born. Planning was well underway before the global economy began to unravel. There’s no turning back now.
