

Speech on Celebration Night of *Queer Lives* Exhibition

Welcome everyone. I'm so pleased to be here and be celebrating with you all. Ozlem and Cathy have provided you with the context for the exhibition, so I will just add some last comments.

The initial 'Opening Night' for this exhibition, held two weeks ago, was intended specifically to recognise and honour the portrait subjects. At that event, I gave a brief account of my artistic direction and the community imperative behind the exhibition. Tonight I would like to outline another possible focus. Our 'Celebration Night', this evening, offers the opportunity to pay tribute to a certain kind of art—that is, art that has a purpose, and secondly to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community through art.

So, to acknowledging a certain form of art. As you probably know, most of western art history (and portraiture in particular) was shaped by social hierarchy. Portraits were of kings, popes and the like. Art told us who ruled and what mattered and were often intended to 'instruct' us plebs in our proper place. Over time, however, art and portraits became increasingly less bound by service to official religion, the state and those who ruled. By the 19th century, artists of many different directions—including those associated with the aesthetic movement, romanticism and symbolism—began to rebel against the assumed value of art as about kings and popes, as lying in its moral, didactic, political, utilitarian functions. Instead, these newer approaches put forward the notion of 'art for art's sake'. This notion amounted to an insistence that a work of art is an autonomous entity, that its significance arises from its realisation of aesthetic forms. Rather than the social order or the portrait subjects themselves being the central, instead the individual artist, and their emotional and sensory interiority, became centre-stage. This understanding of art continued in the 20th century and beyond, through cubism, abstract expressionism, and conceptual art, amongst many approaches.

The conception of art as being distinct from social demands and social issues began in the 19thC with a rebellious edge against given authority. Rather, what came into view was an ever stronger focus on the heroic individual artist, usually male. There were of course critiques of this direction, including from some who suggested that this shift towards 'art for art's sake' amounted to privileging other elite groups who were deemed sufficiently aesthetically responsive and

informed. But despite such criticisms, the notion of art as being about freedom from social conventions and issues (art being above or outside the social order) has continuing influence. This has meant that to talk about art's message or function, is still seen as rather constraining, perhaps appealing only to a narrow audiences, and not really high art.

This exhibition necessarily engages with these ongoing debates. I do have an aesthetic orientation here. All the same, for me partitioning off art as somehow purely aesthetic, divorced from its socio-political context, does seem to be also limiting. Seems to me that there is an important place for social location, social commentary in art. In this setting, Vincent Namatjira (some time winner of the Archibald and Ramsay Art prizes) has said with regard to his artistic commentary on colonialism that 'I'm not here to muck about...I use my paintbrush as a weapon' AFR (20-22 October, 2023). This informs his portraits of Aboriginal people, including himself. Similarly, I aim here to acknowledge and produce art that is not only aesthetic but art with a message, with social meaning.

So now I'll turn to my second concern, that is, artistic representation of community. The Queer community has in recent times been acknowledged in some important respects. The advent of same sex marriage is one sign and practical instance of this significant shift in our present era. Those who do not fit the heteronorm no longer have to inevitably fear social rejection, imprisonment, homophobic distaste and potential violence and an array of legal impediments from inability to adopt to exclusion from hospital visiting lists. Much has changed, as we are all very aware.

However, while the history of western art has the occasional references (often disguised) to people who live beyond heterosexual assumptions, western art has only fairly recently and still rather uncommonly paid tribute to the Queer community, to Queer connection and solidarity. I would go so far as to say that this exhibition is probably unique in focussing exclusively on LGBTQ+ people and on those people from a particular location—in this case people who were born and/or lived or live in South Australia. In representing the community, my attempts to broaden the collection beyond those of European ancestry didn't quite come to fruition. Perhaps next time! All the same, the portraits are of young, old, couples, singles, gay, lesbian, trans subjects. The exhibition is in this sense a historical record of the community in art. It is a record that has a deep

resonance for me, and not only in the sense of having shaped my professional career—as a gender and sexuality academic.

As I said two weeks ago, while my own personal queer ‘credentials’ are creakingly antique, I want to acknowledge that my life has been deeply enriched by the LGBTQ+ people I know and love, from my darling daughter and her wife to my dear friends and colleagues and my intellectual and cultural idols.

The portrait subjects have graciously offered themselves up to our scrutiny. That is STILL a brave move. It shouldn’t be but it still is. In relation to this exhibition and in a number of other ways, I wish to thank them and applaud them.

Cheers to them and to us!