

## Reflections on the 'regional': Joe Eisenberg in conversation

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Joe Eisenberg at his 'Director's Choice' exhibition, Maitland Regional Art Gallery (MRAG), 2014; image courtesy The Maitland Mercury; photo: Stuart Scott

**Joe Eisenberg OAM was director of the New England Regional Art Museum (NERAM) in Armidale for over 20 years before becoming head of the Maitland Regional Art Gallery (MRAG) in 2004.** Over time, his enthusiasm, energy and vision have helped transform these two regional cities into hubs of artistic activity. In addition, Eisenberg has served on a number of State and Federal Government boards and committees and has recently been appointed to the National Cultural Heritage Committee. Now, after almost 40 years of significant service to the arts, Eisenberg is retiring. To celebrate his leadership, MRAG has been undertaking a range of events and exhibitions. The following interview was conducted on 26 March 2015.

**Anna Waldmann:** What changes have you noticed in art museums since the late 1970s when you started as senior project officer at the Crafts Council of New South Wales?

**Joe Eisenberg:** Professionalism! In the old days you could walk into an arts job if you knew an artist or a fellow worker. Now you need two PhDs and 12 months work experience in the Matabeleland Museum of Contemporary Art.

**AW:** What challenges did you encounter as director of NERAM?

**JE:** It was a Crown Land Reserve because Chandler Coventry [the gallerist who offered his collection to NERAM] did not want the local council to operate the museum. Being one of the few non-council operated regional galleries in Australia, money was not available for the daily running costs. With the assistance of many people, I had to find funds for everything including the staff salaries. And yet we even built a second stage.

**AW:** What challenges have you encountered as Cultural Director of MRAG?

**JE:** Very few. Unlike Armidale, Maitland City Council saw the dream and wanted to have an art gallery and support many of my dreams. It all came to fruition perhaps a little slower than I wanted, but I was fortunate I could build for a second time – some directors don't even do it once.

**AW:** Museums were once talked of as places that reinforced cultural hegemonies, but they are now seen as democratising access to art. What is your attitude?

**JE:** I believe art museums belong to the communities in which they are found. I have always tried to democratise the institutions so that people feel comfortable and have a

sense of ownership of the art which is inside. I try to provide opportunities for the community to have a meaningful relationship with activities and exhibitions by making these open to their needs and their enjoyment, as well as for education.

**AW:** NERAM and MRAG have good collections, but small acquisitions budgets. How did you manage to develop the collections further over the years?

**JE:** Regional galleries need to use their brains not just funds. My brains are the people that I attract to donate through that wonderful system, the Cultural Gifts Program. I have always been good at collecting people and that has assisted in building up collections. Once this starts, people seem to be able to connect you to others who behave in a similar way. Apart from drawing patrons in both institutions, I created a group called 'Partners' which helped both galleries and assisted us to find appropriate works of art. Even for my last exhibition, 'Just Paper',<sup>1</sup> I decided to make it a show that would add over 170 works to the collection by asking the artists to donate their creation at the end of the exhibition. Without bragging, we even got a Matisse-signed lithograph and a Shaun Gladwell video from Penelope Seidler. Anything is possible if you have the 'kahunas' to ask.

**AW:** Around the world people access art on their iPads, laptops, internet and mobile phones. What do you think about experiencing art through new technologies?

**JE:** What a waste of time. Art is the real thing – see it, smell it, touch it. The rest is for our children – God help us! Though saying that, I do have time for audio tours as they help to educate and explain.

**AW:** The contemporary art blockbuster is a relatively new phenomenon, starting with Thomas Hoving's legendary 'King Tut' show at New York's Metropolitan Museum in the late 1970s. What do you think about blockbusters?

**JE:** Well, look what happened to Thomas Hoving. However, blockbusters are the same as 'new technologies'. It is the single artwork that we should be interested in, the single exhibition which educates and informs, not merely entertains – you go to the circus for that. So, rather than following the state and national galleries, regional galleries should do retrospectives, mid-career, emerging-artist exhibitions and forget the blockbuster – travel and see the originals on their home gallery wall.

**AW:** Money, space and politics are the three most obvious constraints for public art museums. Which one was more of a constraint for you?