

See it, like it, take it home (but, please, bring it back)

Bronwyn Watson

Margaret Olley was a passionate lover of regional galleries because, as she told me, they are an essential part of what help rejuvenate the community. She felt that if art is flourishing, then the community

has been enthusiastically taken up by the Maitland Regional Art Gallery in the lower Hunter region. In the next five years, the gallery is planning a next step of making its extensive collection more available to the public – not just through gallery walls, or online, but also available in the same way that you might borrow a book from a library, the gallery aims to lend parts of its collection during designated periods of time.

The gallery's cultural director, Joe Eisenberg, embraced the idea of the "people's gallery". In his tenure, he has nurtured a very open style at the gallery, where "the gallery belongs to the people of Maitland" and "the way to make the collection available is just a next step".

Eisenberg agrees wholeheartedly with Olley on the importance of regional galleries. "The gallery is a litmus test of the community," he says, "and that the community is readily able to engage in cultural pursuits. It is the lifeblood of the region and a vibrant regional gallery really enriches the community."

The gallery's director of the gallery, Brigitte Uren, is the vision of creating links between the gallery, artists, and the collection. "The gallery is one of the largest in regional Australia and our competitive advantage will be the accessibility of it," says Uren. "We propose

to have an open collection store, which is entirely accessible, like shelves in a library, and where people can come into the gallery and look for work.

"It is not about the work just being on the walls, it might be in a solander box or in the map drawer, for example, but people will be looking autonomously for themselves.

"There is talk about collections online, but ours will also be onsite and on-loan. We have a number of works that could be loaned to the community, and people will be able to borrow the art work the way you would a library book."

Uren describes this plan as "really turning collection management and accessibility on its head.

"There are significant logistical issues to be resolved, but it is about looking at accessibility differently, and if libraries can do it, so too must our art galleries be able to consider these possibilities.

"I would expect that we will set a new benchmark for regional galleries if we were able to achieve this. There is a big risk but also great opportunities. We have over 4000 works in the collection worth about \$7 million and at the moment you can't come in and see it unless it is in an exhibition or you are in a private tour, and I find that deeply sad."

Eisenberg says that his philosophy of the people's gallery has been willingly backed by the Maitland City Council, which has spent about \$8 million building a new gallery. In 2002, it bought a 1910 Federation Gothic building, which was a former TAFE, for \$1.25 million. A year later, it spent about \$500,000 turning it into a gallery. Then it renovated and extended the gallery, which opened in 2009.

"This showed that the council really wanted to

give the people of Maitland something worthwhile," he says. "My job, our job, has been to create that and give it back to the people. My whole aim has been about getting people into the gallery and making it acceptable and accessible. We are next door to Centrelink and just watching people come in in shorts and thongs and mums with babies, that is what the gallery is about, and that is what I am proud of."

After working at the gallery for just over 10 years, Eisenberg is retiring later this year. During his time at Maitland, he has garnered much support from both artists and donors. As a swan song, he has put together an exhibition that could only happen in Maitland and could only ever happen once.

He contacted every artist, every donor and every philanthropist he has worked with. He asked them to create or donate an artwork based on a song, *The Piano Has Been Drinking (not me)*, by one of his favourite musicians Tom Waits.

Nearly 200 artists responded, ranging from Dick Watkins, Euan Macleod, Wendy Sharpe, Salvatore Zofrea, Elisabeth Cummings, Robert Dickerson and Vicki Varvaressos. All created a work on paper that will go into the gallery's collection, a gift to the city of Maitland.

And along with some of the offerings were personal notes to Eisenberg, such as this one from artist Judith White: "the Joe Eisenberg phenomena is like a rock being dropped into a still pond, sending out ripples that will reverberate for many generations."

The Piano Has Been Drinking (not me) exhibition will run at the Maitland Regional Art Gallery, 230 High Street, until July 12.