

# Wild Dogs from Down Under

## Past and Present

In 2007 Baw Baw Shire Council hosted a delegation of local artists and Council members to visit their sister city, Jiujiang in China. In its simplest form this is how the Wild Dogs from Down Under project culminated, but that description totally belies the mountain of work, financial commitment and goodwill behind the scenes that was needed to see the entire project come to fruition.

It is better described as a true collaboration over nearly three years, of art, business and government that enabled a touring exhibition to regional galleries and Queens Hall, Parliament House Melbourne, leading to the Chinese cultural exchange with legacy exhibitions and awards on the group's return to Australia.

With the benefit of hindsight now over a decade on, it is remarkable to reflect on the journey of the six artists and what they achieved as Wild Dogs from Down Under - as well as now probably realising the audacity of thinking it could be done! Naivety actually worked to the group's advantage at times. A perfect example was asking Austrade to become involved - normally their portfolio is major import / export and trade but somehow this small group of regional artists sparked interest and 'the rest is history'. Austrade representatives came to the exhibition launch in Jiujiang and gave a speech in Mandarin to the Chinese official party.

I was at the time employed as Baw Baw Shire's Cultural Development Officer and part of my role was to liaise and assist artists to achieve their goals. Kerrie Warren, well known abstract expressionist artist had just completed the respected Gippsland Community Leadership Program, which challenges participants to think big and outside the square....it was through this environment that the seed pod that was to become the Wild Dogs project was germinated.

Kerrie connected with a diverse coterie of local artists, all residents of Baw Baw Shire and all who became her colleagues in the close knit world of regional artisans. They were also a very diverse group in their individual art practices but had a few things in common; a positive attitude, a truckload of talent and an enduring belief that Gipplander's can meet any challenge!

The artists of the project are Kerrie Warren, Laurie Collins, Dr Jenny Murray -Jones, Gary Miles, Dr Auntie Eileen Harrison and Leonie Ryan.

Having a great and ambitious idea is one thing but then making it work logistically is quite another, not to mention the considerable amount of money that was going to have to be raised to support the project financially. I clearly remember the first gatherings of the artists of Wild Dogs from Down Under over coffee to talk, to plan, to brainstorm and to dream what might be possible....

The ensuing body of work itself, was titled and themed 'Gippsland'. It embraced environmental and social issues and captured the diverse landscape of the region. Interpreted through each artist's unique style and viewpoint the exhibition showed their immense love of Gippsland; their place.

Kerrie approached Baw Baw Shire Council presenting the concept of a 'cultural exchange' with the shire's long established sister city, Jiujiang in central China. Jiujiang is a city on the banks of the Yangtze River and home to over four million people, it is around six hundred kilometres from Shanghai. Fortunately at the time the sister city relationship was quite active with council delegations both to and from Jiujiang happening every couple of years. These however had always been of an economic or educational nature so the concept of a cultural exchange was something very new.

The project itself was launched in August 2006 with an initial exhibition of the six artist's work at the West Gippsland Arts Centre in Warragul. This was attended by over 300 people including many local businesses, so things were off to a promising start. Interest and media attention rose with the works then travelling to four other exhibition locations raising both profile and accomplishing business support and sponsorship. Wild Dogs from Down Under would never have occurred without the unwavering support from local businesses and entities such as - International Power / Mitsui Loy Yang B, Oamps Insurance, Wild Dog Winery and Baw Baw Shire. A myriad of other very important sponsors and supporters must be also recognised and a full list is contained in the exhibition itself.

Funding support was also gained from the Federal Government through its arts funding and advisory body, the Australia Council for the Arts. Support from State MP Gary Blackwood was also immediately offered and proved vital. Indeed one of the most memorable of the touring exhibitions for Wild Dogs prior to leaving Australian shores was the exhibition held in Queens Hall, State Parliament, Melbourne. Here Shadow Minister for the Arts, Ted Ballieu officiated along with Melbourne City Mayor John So.

Gippslander's by nature are practical people and the practical answer to transporting artworks was for them to be sometimes secured in the back of Gary Miles' horse float - both cheap and effective. This did make for an interesting sight however on the steps of the Victorian State Parliament!

The Wild Dogs arrived in China to commence their cultural exchange in July 2007. The exhibition period in Jiujiang was a whirlwind of official receptions and overwhelming media interest, in fact the Wild Dog artists were on the front page of five newspapers and interviewed for television twice!

Great adventures come with risks of course and one that was not expected was that Laurie's metal artwork was seized and held by customs in Shanghai. Heartbreakingly this meant Laurie's work did not arrive in time to be part of the exhibition. With true Aussie spirit however the show went on and Laurie instead added photographic images of his works from the pre-prepared catalogues and placed these atop of the exhibition plinths!

Artist Gary Miles is a painter in the truest sense, he prefers 'plein air' and would take early morning sojourns painting what he saw - but what he did not see in time though, was the bicycle riding commuter in a hurry who rode straight over one of Gary's works. In his resilient style, Gary just took this as part of the experience and the work proudly still wears its Chinese additions as a mark of local involvement!

It is a joy to know today all six Wild Dog artists are still practicing professionally and have all achieved high acclaim and artistic goals. All artists are represented in public and private collections of note, several run successful galleries, many have further travelled exhibiting or teaching internationally, others have studied and reached Masters and PhDs in the Arts. We are particularly proud Dr Auntie Eileen has just had her work featured in the closing ceremony of the recent Birmingham Commonwealth Games.

This exhibition is titled 'Past and Present' and in it you will see the natural progression and maturity of artists over fifteen years.

In short the Wild Dogs from Down Under is a story of ambition, belief, generosity and talent. The artists hope its legacy is to encourage artists to dare to dream and to indeed to ask themselves 'why not!' instead of 'why?' when an opportunity arises.