

SINNESS·VICTORIA



For art's sake: From left, Kerrie Warren, Judi Money and Gaye Nieuwenhof at their gallery.

PHOTO: JOHN WOLSTEN

Unity and community is strength

By GEORGINA KENYON

Creative thinking is a natural talent, and three artists in Gippsland are using it to present their business.

The Miat gallery, in Newborough, Gippsland, was launched in August 1987 with nothing but a shopfront and three eager artists.

Since it started, one of Miat's original founders, Ms Gaye Nieuwenhof, has set up an Internet site with a virtual exhibition, which has led to the business operators sitting as judges on a German art prize jury.

The website at <http://www.ayupac.com.au/~renngaye/index.htm> has also attracted international interest from other artists and travellers, with its modern Gippsland landscape paintings.

She met her future partners, Kerrie Warren and Judi Money, when she tried to buy their house.

A potter, Mr David Osborne,

joined the group later, and all four realised they could solve together their common problems as painters — lack of space, isolation and the need to sell their work.

Ms Money says that Miat saved all three regional artists. "We had tried all the usual avenues of artists trying to make a living, from selling our own paintings at local markets and weekend galleries, or creating and selling our own pottery, to selling our people's work in a shop in Nine."

But Ms Money said selling other people's art made them more able to commission agents than artists.

Gippsland has 1500 registered artists among 350 groups in 30 different places.

The art on display in Gippsland attracts about 17 per cent of tourists visiting the region for one night to a gallery or craft centre.

On a proportional basis, Gippsland's art outlets attract a similar number of tourists from Victoria, interstate and overseas.

The artists at Miat joined forces to pay the \$75 weekly rent in Newborough, and the venture has been so successful it is now recruiting other artists, from painters and textile workers to wood turners.

Each artist works as a separate business, allowing them to market their work separately to specific markets, while creating a shared pool of buyers for future sales.

Ms Warren has commissioned works hanging in the foyer at the Hazebwood Power station, in Williamstown galleries and Government offices in Traralgon. Her works sell from \$5000.

The other artists sell to local companies for \$300 and more.

According to Ms Warren, buyers look more for a successful consistent style rather than content, as form is the artist's "signature".

Ms Nieuwenhof says the regional gallery had to price items so local residents could afford them.

"It is the local community which will support you when you are starting out, and hopefully again if business is bad."

After winning local support, the gallery searched further afield for the tourist market, which demanded the artists produce different styles for a broader range of tastes.

And while a planning decision as simple as the freeway bypass around Newborough has closed the market to many tourists who no longer stop in the township, Ms Nieuwenhof says the regional setting is "an ideal place to work and it's proven a cheap business start".

The business has become part of revitalising Newborough and joining it to its sister town, Moe, through a network of artists keeping in contact with each other. A niche publisher and a music shop have recently opened as part of this networking. Miat now houses five artists, including a potter and another painter.