



## **Bohemian rhapsody**

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Away from the solitary confines of their studios, Melbourne's artists have always had a talent for mingling, writes Andrew Stephens.

IN AN ATMOSPHERIC painting of the 1824 Salon exhibition at the Louvre, by French artist Francois-Joseph Heim, there are paintings covering every possible bit of wall space. Part of the idea for the Salon - a long-running French biennial - was to create an air of democracy, with all sorts of work on display.

But it also brought together a breadth of artists who could enthusiastically praise, criticise and busily gossip about the works (and each other). After all, artists are often a gregarious and social lot, despite all those isolation myths to the contrary.

The Louvre Salon shows eventually bit the dust but the other type of salon that artists adored back then had more staying power. These were intimate gatherings at the home of a hostess or host. Discussions, ponderings, arguments, carousing and much drinking and eating were the focus of those now-famous salons, usually associated with French artistic and literary groups from the 18th and 19th centuries of grand wigs, revolutions and very big frocks.

How the tradition of the salon has endured.

Here at the clinical-sounding Ocular Lab in Brunswick West, there is, in fact, much warmth: a group of like-minded artists regularly gets together for a big 30-person dinner, setting up long tables across the concrete floor of the gallery space. They don't toss food about but they do throw around ideas - eight or 10 people discussing a topic at any one time over Lab-artist Alex Rizkalla's well-regarded cassoulet - as they develop a supportive communal ethic that's been carefully fostered.

Melbourne artists, in the wake of the Parisians, seem always to have loved the salon idea. While much (possibly too much) has been written about the Heide circle, their salon-style gatherings have remained an enviable model. Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, John Perceval, Albert Tucker, Joy Hester, Georges and Mirka Mora and, of course, Sunday and John Reed were among that gang of modernist artists, poets, writers and patrons who congregated at Heidelberg and other sites from the 1940s onwards, helping to re-invigorate Australian art.

But on weekends in the 1960s, many such artists and their families would travel to Aspendale to visit the Reeds' and the Moras' beach houses. Even then, this was just another bayside suburb, but it was far enough from town - and from Heide - to be a welcome escape in summer. There was the seashore, a lot of food and quite enough drink, paintings on the walls, kooky films - and various "happenings", the sorts of curious performances that can occur when artists get together.

So much was documented from these times, after the Reeds and the Moras bought and built on adjacent seafront blocks of land in 1961, that Rodney James, senior curator of the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, has put together a fabulous, extensive show on the era, which opens next week.

It was out there on that beach, for example, that Mirka Mora went prancing along the

sand in a huge trailing gown, one of her sons holding up her train to show her bare bottom. In another "happening", Mirka and Mary Perceval put their littlest ones in dresser drawers at high tide and pushed them out into the waves.

There was also the time, writes James in his catalogue for Aspendale Beach: an artists' haven, when Mirka and Mary Nolan, with children Tiriell and Alice, walked naked "round and round in the courtyard" during a daring artistic display. A series of 1964 pictures taken by Robert Whitaker - shot a week before he went to London to become the Beatles' official photographer - also show how much fun this creative hub had.

And yet there was a simple side to these cavortings, with artists just hanging out together for a good time: James shows me a plain brown-paper-covered book in the special collections section of the State Library of Victoria, filled with beautiful black-and-white photographs of visitors, compiled by Mirka. It is signed "our holidays at Aspendale . . . just a glimpse, with love Mirka, February 1965".

IT IS SO EASY TO romanticise those days but for many young artists, finding such circles is not always easy. After leaving art college or secondary school, the road forward to living as an artist can be excessively isolating and dispiriting. Indeed, that cliché of the starving artist alone in a garret (or at least a rented bedroom in a student house) can be all too true.

That's why a community revolution in Abbotsford just over two years ago was so refreshing for the artists who now inhabit the wings of the revitalised Convent. The Convent was converted into a solid arts precinct in 2004 after a seven-year community campaign to save the beautiful buildings and gardens from redevelopment. Now, in many ways, it's the salon or communal ethic come true.

On the day I visit to meet some of the artists, they are in the Convent's gallery admiring their first group exhibition - appropriately called The Salon Show - which opened the previous night. As we chat about their ideal situation - individual studios but with a strong work ethic of meeting up, talking and critiquing each other's work - their enthusiasm and commitment is impressive.

"One of the things for me, being in a community like this, is being validated as an artist," says jeweller Katheryn Leopoldseider, who finds she is now trading skills with artists in other fields she has met there. "When you work by yourself, it's really hard to be an artist. It is seen as decadent or self-indulgent. So it is really nice to be in a place where what you do is seen as relevant. Being in an environment where you can reach a high level of creative resolution."

The convent hosts artists from all different fields and disciplines - visual artists, craftspeople, musicians and glass-blowers - with an ethic of cross-fertilisation starting to take off. Most Friday evenings, the artists meet at an unusual but uber-cool cafe-cum-bar in the west wing of the building called Handsome Steve's House of Refreshment.

Fibre artist Wendy Golden - she has made two life-size nuns out of thick twine for The Salon Show - says Handsome Steve's is the unofficial canteen for the artists, who find they are loving being together and discussing their work on a regular basis. "A lot of us are here because we were isolated," she says. "This has given us the opportunity to do our own work - but also to mix."

Visual artist Jon Butt agrees, pointing out that one of the most refreshing things about the varied artists at the Convent is that they not only cross disciplines but also intellectual agendas. Other group studios, he says, usually "curate" their inhabitants to form a more like-minded and cohesive clique.

"I was in the Nicholas Building (in Swanston Street) for more than six years. People talk

about the community there - and there is a community there - but you end up meeting each other in the lift or going up the stairs. It's like a rabbit warren and people go into their little cubbyholes and hide away. The community sense here is much greater. It's kind of urban-countryside with a gentle feel to the place. There is much more dialogue between the artists, just in a social sense."

It is a need that author Alex Taylor writes about at length in his new book, *Perils of the Studio, Inside the artistic affairs of **bohemian** Melbourne* (2007), which charts the way the artist's studio forms a nexus of work, mystery and social contact - and how an increasingly complex and sophisticated studio culture has historically been seen as a reflection of "success".

Success, of course, can be perceived in different ways. At the Ocular Lab, the social dinners are a creative boon for artists involved such as Alex Rizkalla, Tom Nicholson or Elvis Richardson. Richardson moved down from Sydney a year ago, and being introduced to the fold at Ocular Lab (where she had previously had a show) has made her relocation easier.

For Tom Nicholson, a long-time Lab artist and teacher at Monash University's fine arts department with a strong interest in communal groups, it is pleasing that the students he deals with are interested in the dozens of artist-run spaces that have been overtaking commercial galleries in Melbourne.

Joining such spaces, he says, is partly pragmatic, partly social. "But it's an ideological decision as well, because most of the experimental work in Melbourne in the past 10-15 years has occurred in spaces which have some collective dimension."

This means their work is not "about the expression of an individual genius" or of studio time as "a hothouse of neurotic self-examination" - but part of a larger relationship of collaboration and the exchange of ideas.

At the dinners, he notices an interesting pattern to conversation, with six, seven or 10 people taking part. "You end up talking with them in a way you would never do at an opening. And that's how a lot of Lab projects get cooked up. It taps into exchanges that lead to work." And the work, of course, is where it all eventuates: but whether it is those summery days at Aspendale in the '60s, Heide in the '40s, or communal groups such as these, it is not only the work that lives on - the spirit does, too. The evocative photos from Aspendale prove it.

Aspendale Beach: an artists' haven is at Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery from December 12 to March 10.

*Perils of the Studio: Inside the artistic affairs of **bohemian** Melbourne*, by Alex Taylor (Australian Scholarly Publishing/State Library of Victoria, \$59.95).