

Artist: David Larwill

"Art from the Heart"

David Larwill (B. 1956 - D. 2011)

A founding member of the legendary Roar Studios of Brunswick Street Fitzroy Melbourne, today David Larwill is recognised as a highly significant figure in Australian abstract art of the 1980s and beyond.

Roar's manifesto was "art from the heart". The original Roar Studio was located in an old shoe factory and run as a co-op. It enabled a group of emerging artists to become established outside of the commercial gallery world of the 1980s. Roar Studio artists acknowledge early Sid Nolan works, and those of John Perceval and Danila Vassillieff as Figurative Expressionist influences.

Roar was an artist-run gallery and it took an avant-garde approach in the tradition of the Angry Penguins literary group. "It was a reaction against the art establishment of the time and provoked a major reassessment of the Melbourne art scene," Larwill said of the philosophy behind Roar.

As a co-founder of Roar Studios with Mark Schaller and Peter Ferguson in 1982, Larwill quickly attracted notice. He built a reputation for his fresh, expressionist art executed with bold colour and a naïve exuberance. His first showing was two works hung in the Roar opening exhibition; his second was a one-man Roar show. "I just wanted to paint and I wanted people to smile when they looked at my paintings." Larwill said of those years. *

An early painting, "The Restaurant Bill" hung in Fitzroy's Black Cat café – another local icon founded by Henry Maas, where the artists drank coffee. The work was so called because Larwill stuck his bill in the centre of the painting.

The Roar artists helped each other; their work was sold privately but it was also purchased by the National Gallery in Canberra and the National Gallery of Victoria. Indeed, the NGV purchased Larwill's "Ash Wednesday" in 1983.

Larwill was also a skilled draftsman, etcher, lithographer, sculptor, and printmaker. He was educated at Mornington Secondary College on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria graduating in 1973 then attended Frankston Technical College the following year. He studied photography, painting and sculpture, and completed a ceramics course at Prahran College of Advanced Education in Melbourne. After a period of travel in 1979, Larwill reconnected with Roar colleague Peter Ferguson and enrolled in further courses.

At Preston Institute, he studied under artists such as Peter Booth, Mirka Mora and Rod Bishop. In particular, he was strongly influenced by Booth and said of that artist's work: "you could do ugly scenes, but the overall effect is one of beauty."

Jean Dubuffet's personal idea of "the values of savagery; I mean: instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness.", also impacted Larwill's approach and in a sense, he can be seen as one who almost entered the realm of "Outsider Art".

Career highlights include Larwill's 1998 trip to the Northern Territory with Mark Schaller and Peter Walsh who together created works for an exhibition to raise funds to stop the Jabiluka uranium mine being built in the Kakadu National Park.

In 2003, Larwill held his first overseas showing in his 23-year career in London's Notting Hill. "I sort of perceive London to be a fairly cold and drab place. I wanna give 'em some colour," he said in typical larrikin style.**

Sadly, Larwill contracted lung cancer in his early 50s. In spite of complications of the illness, in June 2011 he made a last trip to Central Australia with his family. He died on 19 June at the age of 54.

David Larwill exhibited widely throughout Australia and overseas, and his work has been translated by the internationally renowned Victorian Tapestry Workshop into several giant tapestries, the largest hanging in the Esplanade - Theatres on the bay in Singapore. As well as many private collections, he is represented in the National Gallery of Australia; Melbourne Artbank; New Parliament House Canberra; Heide Museum of Modern Art; Sir William Dobell Foundation Sydney Collection and the British Museum London as well as State and Regional Galleries including the National Gallery of Victoria; Art Gallery of NSW; Queensland Art Gallery; Geelong Regional Gallery; Ballarat Art Gallery; Toowoomba Art Gallery.

- * Quoted in Grishin "David Larwill" in *David Larwill and the Western Desert Artists* Lisa Fox 2008
- ** Quoted in "Straight from the Heart" The Age Melbourne January 12 2003 By Gabriella Coslovich