

BAYSIDE GALLERY



MAY 2020 Q&A

Series: Who are the artists in your neighbourhood?

Local Bayside artist Lisa Swards is an accomplished printmaker whose warehouse studio is in Advantage Road, Highett. Her artworks were recently featured in this year's exhibition, *Bayside Local: journeys and discoveries*.

Following her solo exhibition *White parachute* in 2013, the motif of the parachute became the focal point of her practice. The parachute is now a recurrent motif that is pivotal in her storytelling process. Through traditional printmaking techniques that incorporate etching, aquatint, drypoint and eco-friendly solarplate etching, Swards continues to draw from her family and history to create works that are rich in both personal and universal symbolism.

Interview with the artist

Bayside Gallery (BG) asked Lisa Swards (LS) some questions about her art practice and her engagement with the beauty of the Bayside environment and its community.

BG: Personal storytelling and symbolism play a big part in your artmaking. Can you explain your preparation when making a series of work?

LS: It all begins with extensive research, notes, small sketches and drawings, all within a journal that in itself becomes an artwork.

When creating a new body of work or preparing for an exhibition, time is focussed on research, sometimes a year or two in fact. I enjoy researching both family and historical events that provide rich inspiration. The recurrent motif of the parachute object is deeply embedded in my psyche, and its nostalgic resonance stems from a photograph of my Belorussian mother as a child during her time in a displaced persons camp during WWII. The image featured her wearing white ribbons in her hair made from an abandoned white silk parachute found in nearby woods.

BG: Your artworks are often characterised by the recurring motif of the parachute. Can you explain the symbolism of this object and how this has continued to evolve in your work?

LS: I began collecting WWII and vintage silk parachutes during that first solo exhibition and many now hang in my studio. They are beautiful objects from their pure functional form to their rich association with past stories. To many people, myself included, they are a symbol of hope, survival and strength. As a result, the majority of my imagery features this beautiful object in some form.

BG: Where do you find your inspiration?

LS: My inspiration comes from my European family, from researching via the internet, reading historical books, and engaging with the older community who have so many stories to share. There are many stories associated with the parachute that crop up once you begin to delve deep.

As one example, I purchased some small drop parachutes from a military trader on-line. This led to wonderful information and endless stories associated with the Messenger Pigeon in WWII and as a result my second solo exhibition featured works on the thirty-two war pigeons that received the Dickin medal for delivering vital messages that contributed to saving thousands of lives. Two pigeons were Australian, and are taxidermied and in storage at the Canberra War Memorial. As part of my research I was fortunate to visit Canberra and spend time drawing and sketching these two feathered heroes that reside in the museum's storage facility. This research also led to many contacts within the pigeon world, including a visit to The Pigeon Room at Bletchley Park in England, the centre for the Allied code-breaking during WWII, and Hut 8 was filled with stories and footage of war pigeons and how some were attached to drop parachutes and released into specific areas.

BG: Are there any artists that you admire or have been influential to your practice?

LS: Narrative – or art as storytelling – is key for me. Art equates to creating a memory, a time, and a place, and as a result is a form of storytelling. The South African Printmaker William Kentridge brings the magic of storytelling to all his works on paper. American Printmaker Jim Dines employs personal family motifs in his work. The Italian/American photographic artist Frank Dituri creates images where dreams transcend reality. Melbourne artists Jon Cattapan and Sarah Tomasetti present underlying narratives in their paintings. Melbourne printmaker Marco Luccio mentored my printmaking when I decided to focus on the printmaking medium. Trudy Rice introduced me to non-toxic printmaking. I admire all these artists and they all indirectly influence my arts practice.

BG: What is the process of creating a solarplate etching?

LS: I have worked with traditional printmaking techniques including etching, aquatint, drypoint and using copper and zinc plates. However, recently my practice is Solarplate etching, which is a non-toxic form of printmaking that uses the sun/UV and water to etch the plates. My process begins with a hand drawn image that is exposed onto a solarplate using the sun or a UV lightbox that etches the line drawing into the surface of the plate. To obtain an aquatint tone the plate is also exposed to a dot-screen. Once plates harden they are inked up using my preferred etchings inks of Charbonnel pigments, then archival cotton rag paper is placed on top and the plate is hand pulled through my printing press. I create both large unique state works and print small limited editions of each etching plate. I always print my own plates. The act of printing from the plate is never straightforward, it can be very physical, and strong bonds are created between the plate, the image and the artist especially when the final print is revealed. I also find it a meditative activity.

BG: What are you working on now?

LS: I am working on two bodies of work that will both feature the parachute motif in some capacity. Firstly, a body of work titled *Snow Globe* is to be shown in Regional Victoria at Queenscliff Gallery in September (if galleries remain closed it will be an online exhibition). The artworks reference objects of memory, some whimsical, and are all orb shape etchings.

Secondly, I am currently reading Australian short story literature and am entranced by the way a writer can swiftly draw one into their story, and then just as swiftly leave you in wonder to contemplate the story further within your own imagination. Literature and art invigorate one another and one's imagination. These new works will be based on my own interpretations responding to a selected group of Australian short stories and their symbols. *Short stories* is planned to be exhibited in March 2021 at fortyfivedownstairs in Flinders Lane, Melbourne. In addition to etchings the exhibition will also feature an installation titled 'The writers desk'.

BG: What is your working day like as an artist?

LS: After I assist my family early in the mornings, I head to my studio Monday to Friday for a full days work. It's a short drive from home and with Leonard Cohen or Dave Brubeck quietly playing on my cd player it's always a day I treasure and embrace to the fullest.

To maintain professional engagement I regularly visit the NGV or exhibitions around Melbourne and undertake professional development workshops both as a participant and educator.

BG: Can you describe your studio for us?

LS: My studio is a large rustic red brick warehouse building in a street that is filled with many creatives hidden within their own spaces, in Highett, Bayside. It's been my creative home for nearly five years. Parachutes hang from its high ceilings; it is filled with hundreds of objects that I collect, lots of books, framed etchings on the walls, and my beautiful printing press named Andy.

BG: Can you explain your journey as an artist particularly as you came to art making later in life. Was there a crucial moment when you decided to shift from hobbyist to professional artist?'

LS: I have been creative (hobbyist) my entire life which I combined with a corporate marketing career and then with motherhood. In 2005, unexpectedly a life threatening illness halted life for that year and changed my views on the next chapter of my career. I returned to university as a visual arts mature age student, and have spent the past decade building an arts career. I am now fortunate to work as a full time professional artist, and my career has included five solo exhibitions, over twenty curated group exhibitions including acquisitive art prizes, and have had works included in the Sydney Contemporary art fair for the past two years.

Within the Bayside community, I had the privilege to co-establish Bayside's Pink Lady Art Exhibition that ran for five years and won An Australia Day award. It was the 2009 Bayside Community Event of the year. The fundraising exhibition hosted the works of many Bayside artists and raised over \$250,000 for Breast Cancer Network Australia and The National Breast Cancer Foundation. I also had the pleasure of establishing an arts program at the ANZAC Hostel Aged Care in Brighton in 2012 where I ran art therapy sessions as the artist in residence for five years.

End

To read this interview on-line and view a virtual studio and a printing demonstration by Lisa Swards please visit:

<https://www.bayside.vic.gov.au/who-are-artists-your-neighbourhood-lisa-sewards>

**www.lisaswards.com.au
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