



Taking a New Creative Pathway

Story and images Michelle Meehan

When Jenni Nichols looks at an artwork, she doesn't just see lines drawn on paper or splashes of paint on a canvas - she sees the story behind the artist.



For the East Maitland art gallery owner, it is the journey they have taken, not just the artistic conclusion they have reached, which sits at the heart of her appreciation of an artist's work.

Since opening the Hunter Artisan Gallery and Café, Jenni has spent plenty of time considering the artistic merits of the works that adorn her walls or fill out her tables and shelves.

She has also had countless opportunities to learn more about the artists themselves.

"I don't think enough recognition is given to the journey that artists themselves go on," Jenni said.

"If you look at traditional art through the years, we're a battered bunch, we really are a battered bunch, but imagine life without art, without music without literature, without poetry; it all comes from a screaming soul and some of the best art is not the prettiest art.

"To me it's that story, it's that reason why people feel they have that need to create and I suppose that's why this gallery is so good, there's such an eclectic bunch of people (showcased here).

"I haven't particularly gone 'Well, you know, we're going to be a traditional gallery or we're going to be a contemporary gallery or this or that'. No, this is the people's gallery, this is for people to come in and enjoy the stuff that's flowery and light and bright, and also enjoy the stuff that's got the journey behind it.

"When people come in with their little bundle of things under their arm and say 'Can you put my work in your

gallery?' I say to them I don't even want to look at your work until I talk to you because to me the person is the thing that's most important."

Jenni's views on art will also be reflected in the inaugural Hunter Artisan Gallery Scholarship this year, which will offer three artists the chance to take part in a combined exhibition at the gallery, while also walking away with \$1500 each.

"It's not even mainly about the art, it's about the artists," she said.

"Anyone who knows me knows that my passion is people, and I believe that a person's journey through life is what reflects in their art at the end of the day.

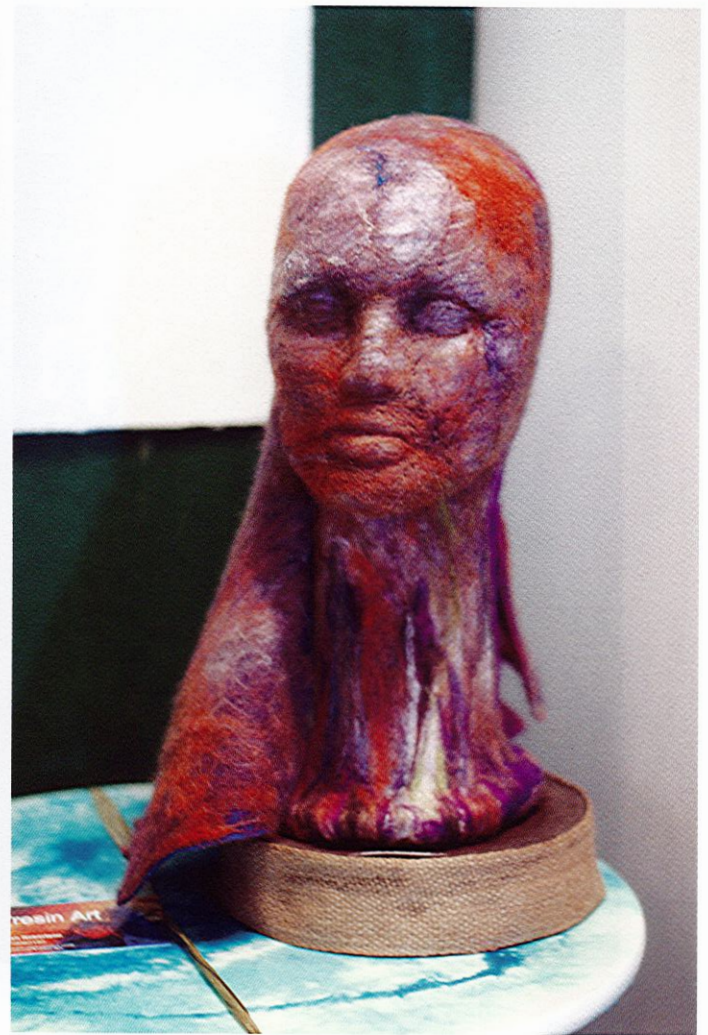
"Basically the scholarship is for people who, in spite of all different things that life has thrown at them, have still continued on their journey and what the importance of that art journey has been to them."

Jenni's own journey through life and art has been a series of troughs and triumphs.

While she has always loved to paint and draw, Jenni did not pursue her passion for art in a serious way until a "year from hell" in 2015 forced her to take stock of her own life.

The qualified town planner and owner of the iconic Old George and Dragon Restaurant in East Maitland found herself struggling to cope following an intense period of personal tragedy.

She decided to close the restaurant and enrol in a Diploma of Visual Art at the Newcastle Art School, seeking solace in her long-held passion for art. >



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At the time, the art she created simply reflected the dark space she was in, and while it was, in a sense, of form of therapy in itself, it did not stop her spiralling even further downwards.

It wasn't until she took a break and spent some time with friends in New Zealand that things really started to turn around, in both her art and her life.

"Having gone through the year of 2015, which was the year from hell, and losing people and all of that, I suppose my art at that stage was quite, I call it dark and vortexy because that's how I felt, I felt dark and vortexy," she said.

"I had a really cathartic experience probably about 12 months ago when I'd done five months of TAFE and was still feeling probably a bit nervous there and a bit unsure of what I was doing.

"Everything sort of crashed around me and I had a nervous

breakdown and I went over to visit my friends in New Zealand for a while.

"I came back and I really did just have this epiphany. I sat outside and I talked to the sky and forgave everyone and forgave everything and forgave life and felt like this lightness came over me.

"And my work changed, my work changed so considerably. If you look at the body of work I put up (for my diploma), it's all about growth, rebirth and life and transformation. It's actually called Suiga, which is the Samoan word for change.

"I just have had the best time creating these works that to me represent my journey out of that dark abyss.

"One of the pieces is called 'Broken Faces' and the story behind that is we're all pulled from the same mould but some of us are pulled gently and we come out all nice and some of us are ripped a bit harder and, you know, we're not. >



"However, it's still that positivity in terms of there's always beauty even in the broken and there's always perfection even in the imperfection, which is a lot of what my philosophy on life is about now.

"You've got to accept the fact that you go through shit times and at the time you think you're never, ever, ever, ever going to live through it but you do, you come out the other side and you are a changed person.

"Some people change significantly and some people not so, but it was amazing to see for me, to physically see the impact that it had on the work, to see it in much more of a positive light. It was like as art as therapy and I think my whole life I've kind of been doing art as therapy, I think a lot of us do."

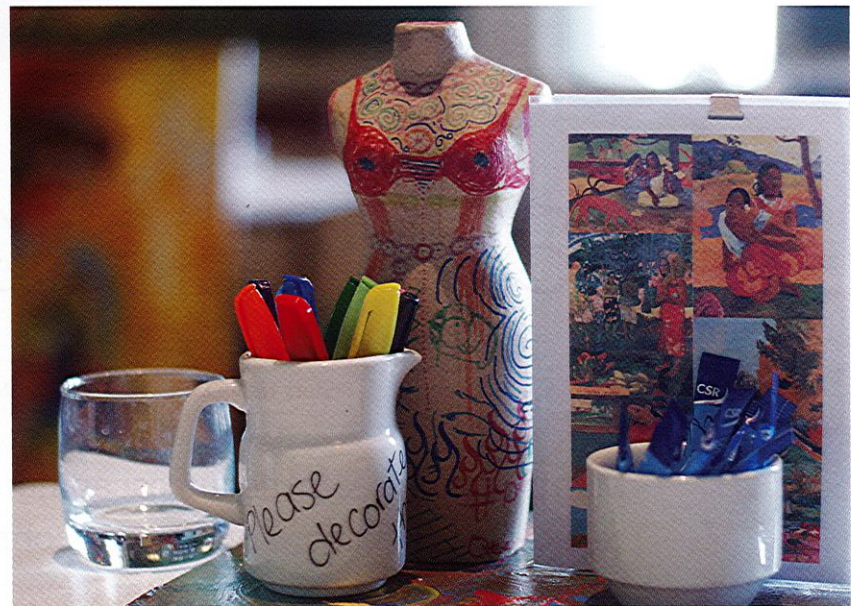
While in New Zealand, Jenni also had the idea of transforming the Old George and Dragon Restaurant, which she had previously been trying to sell, into a café and art gallery in order to give emerging artists such as herself and her classmates a place to exhibit their work.

"The one thing I heard so much (when I started art school) was how hard it was to get your art out there," she said.

"I had the building on the market since April 2016 but I think in a way I didn't want it to sell and then this idea began forming about opening a café and art gallery because I love art and I love food.

"The need for places like this is obviously very much a requirement I think for people to be able to get their art out there.

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"Truthfully the café part of it is a really good little way of ticking over enough to cover the costs so that this space could be available to our artists.

"People seem to be really perplexed when I actually tell them that for me it's not about the money at all.

"They look at me like I'm stupid. I have been in a business for a long time and I've been in business for myself for a long time, but to me the absolute pleasure in this is when one of the pieces sell and I get to ring that artist up and go 'I've sold your work'.

"That to me is worth more than any dollar amount."

Jenni said she had been overwhelmed with the response

from the region's art community, with a mix of emerging and established artists keen to showcase their work in the gallery space. There are more than 100 artworks currently on display, including some of Jenni's own paintings and mixed media creations. 

You can follow Jenni's artistic journey on her 'Art By Mumma Jen' Facebook page or check out the ever-changing array of works from Hunter artists being showcased at the Hunter Artisan Gallery and Café, which opens on Melbourne Street, East Maitland from Thursday to Sunday each week.