

Life after Retirement

Helen Wyatt

There is another life: Traveller, Writer, Author, Artist, Performer ...

I retired at a moment when the NSW Department of Education was about to re-structure. At that time I had a position as a School Education Director and realised that at 60, there were many years ahead (I hoped) and I could take the opportunity to follow my path as an artist which I had left behind when moving into school leadership. I knew this would be a challenge and would require a lot of work. I also knew that I needed to maintain my health if I was going to be able to re-invent myself.

The act of being an artist is, however, very solitary. After a Principal's role, it is a difficult transition and it is essential to find ways to connect with others and to continue to meaningfully contribute to the world.

Initially I set myself up to work as an education consultant but also found skills-based courses where I could build my art skills. I quickly recognised that I was much more committed to my new learning than revisiting the career that I had left behind. My challenges were to find good places to learn (there is a lot of average teaching for adults out there), to find a community, to have intellectual connections, to make a cultural contribution that was of value and to help others.

It was clear that if anyone was going to take me seriously – and if I was going to take myself seriously too – then I had to leap into the deep end and study again. My undergraduate studies in Art History, Art practice, many years as a Visual Arts teacher plus the development of creative work post-retirement all meant that I could apply for a practice-led research Masters of Visual Arts. My area of study is 'Contemporary Jewellery and Small Objects' delivered through Queensland College of Art (Griffith University). With a sympathetic supervisor I was successful in being offered a place and was able to develop my research project as a part-time student.

The biggest hole in my experience was that I had no exhibition record, so that became my initial priority. As a result, three years on, I now have a Curriculum Vitae that provides me with credibility in academic and contemporary art circles.

The Masters degree has opened up a community with whom I can exchange ideas. It has given me the opportunity to clarify my thinking and refine my practice in line with that thinking. It has exposed me to the work of contemporary jewellery artists internationally and linked me into that wide-ranging group in a very real way. As a research program, it has meant that I am very much in control of the project rather than having to conform to the agendas of others.

Complementing this have been opportunities to attend conferences locally and nationally, travel has had a strong focus and I have been able to undertake networking while visiting other countries – in other words I have had a ball!

I have become a member of professional associations in Queensland and in NSW. Consequently I am now the editor of the Queensland group's newsletter. This keeps me in touch with what is going on everywhere and maintains my writing and critical skills. I have also been invited to be on a committee for a Sydney-based contemporary art space and have found myself helping with submissions and curation.

Ongoing is the priority to look after my body so that I can deliver on the making (and the writing) and not push myself in a way that could injure me. This has meant that I have had to pace myself and have also had to realise that the best work comes slowly and not under pressure. Time is needed to make creative connections that are not necessarily conscious. Consequently it is a very different kind of learning but a rich, connected life style.

If you are in Brisbane in October – November 2018, visit **Artisan**, 381 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley, Queensland for my examination exhibition. Maybe, just visit Artisan, anyway!

Contributor details

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Helen was Principal of Kingsgrove North High School from 2004-2010. Since 2013, she has revisited her skills as a Visual Artist and has undertaken further study in this area. She is now exhibiting contemporary jewellery and small objects as well as writing about her field.