

Flying artist comes home to roost

Merv Moriarty, the man who pioneered distance education for artists, returns to Queensland, writes **Suzanna Clarke**

DURING the 1970s and 1980s, Merv Moriarty was one of Queensland's best-known modern artists, with works in major Australian galleries. A renowned art teacher, he began the Flying Arts School, which had a significant impact on emerging artists across the state. Then he moved south, and his name became increasingly obscure to a new generation. In two weeks, Moriarty is planning a return to teach a workshop on colour — a logical extension of his life's work.

The 70-year-old Moriarty has lived with his life partner, former fashion designer and artist Prue Acton, since they met in the late 1980s. They live at Wallagoot Lake on the south coast of New South Wales, where he works on his sculpture, drawing and painting, while Acton also paints.

"Around 1988, I made a decision to give up fashion business and I went looking for the best teacher in the country," Acton says, on the phone from their home. "Everyone I spoke to told me that Merv was the best."

Moriarty's life and career are

integrally connected to the development of the Queensland art scene.

His fate was determined before he was born in 1937, in NSW's Northern Rivers region, when the family house burnt down. Struggling financially, his parents decided to move to Brisbane to start again. Moriarty remembers living in a flat in Brisbane's Ascot. "Then we moved to this government housing estate at Moorooka, then on the outskirts of Brisbane," he says.

Apart from living next to an extensive area of bushland, the other thing the young Moriarty was attracted to was the pretty girl next door. However, it was her mother who left a more lasting impression. She was an artist, who showed him how to make plaster casts, and encouraged his burgeoning interest in art.

Moriarty had always enjoyed making sculpture out of plasticine, but as he got older, he wanted to create more enduring work.

"I used to put drawings into *The Courier-Mail* children's art prize. I often had them published, and won a number of times," he says.

Another formative experience was a visit to the Queensland Art Gallery at the age of 12. "They had recently acquired an Epstein sculpture called *The Visitation*. I remember putting my hand on the hand of the figure, and feeling as though I'd got an electric shock. To me then, it was an experience of enormous power."

Moriarty's parents had decided he should become a carpenter, but his kindly drama teacher suggested a job at Finney's department store, later to become David Jones.

There he joined the art department, creating displays in the store windows. It was the mid-1950s and he was also attending art classes at the Brisbane Technical College several nights a week.

"I learnt about the colour relationships, the effects colours have on one another — about harmony and discord," he says.

A painting of John Molvig's, hanging in the window of *The Courier-Mail* building — then in Queen St — made him start to experiment with modernism. "It was a very strong painting of two human figures, very abstract," he recalls.

He took some classes with Molvig beneath St Mary's church hall at Kangaroo Point.

Fellow artists who studied there included Gil Jamieson, Joy Roggenkamp, Andrew Sibley and Gordon Shepherdson.

Moriarty's first exhibition, when he was 25, was held with Shepherdson in the upstairs gallery of a city jewellers. It comprised landscapes and vignettes.

Then Andrew Sibley sent pictures of Moriarty's work to an Adelaide gallery and a solo exhibition followed. During the next few years he exhibited at leading galleries around Australia, including those of Kim Bonython and Barry Stern.

"You could call my paintings at that time contemporary figurative expressionist," he says. "They showed the influence of people like Albert Tucker and John Olsen."

He began to delve into the avant-garde Colour Field movement in the late 1960s, while also teaching private art classes.

"During the late 1960s, the art scene in Brisbane wasn't very strong at all, but it had a certain radical nature about it," he says.

In 1971, after the breakdown of his first marriage, Moriarty was searching around for what to do next. "I wanted to maintain my own style of teaching: to give people intellectual tools, and encourage and assist them to express their own creative vision."

A brainstorm over a bottle of wine gave him an innovative idea — he could run a flying art school. It wasn't as wacky as it sounded. Teaching art at the University of Queensland summer schools, where many of the pupils were from the country, had made him realise what a tremendous thirst there was for such knowledge.

"I envisaged a flying art school on the same lines as the Royal Flying Doctor that would bring properly organised classes, qualified teachers and continuing encouragement to artists in remote areas."

He had some flying lessons at Brisbane's Archerfield airfield. He remarried and his wife Helen took on the administration of his work. "We created a big campus, covering nine million square kilometres."

They flew to Cairns, and inland as far as Longreach, about four times a year, providing a structured art course.

During the 12 years he was involved, Moriarty says that different towns developed varying styles — some embraced abstract art, while others remained more figurative.

Although the students were en-



CONTEMPORARY ... from left, *Woman Asleep*; a drawing by Moriarty and Moriarty with partner Prue Acton. Pictures: Eryca Green

thusiastic, finances were a nightmare. Moriarty appealed to the Whitlam government for funding, and Gough Whitlam, then the new prime minister, despatched his good friend Clifton Pugh to investigate. After a six-week tour, Pugh sang the praises of The Flying Arts School, and the government stepped in with solid financial support, but it came at a cost. The organisation had to become a non-profit body, and was eventually taken over by the Kelvin Grove College of Advanced Education.

Moriarty went back to painting and running a private art school in Brisbane's Enoggera Tce. In the meantime, he had broken away from the Colour Field movement, and returned to more figurative work.

Another marriage breakup and the need for a change saw him relocate to New South Wales, where he now lives with Acton.

His exhibition in 2001 aroused some criticism from feminists, with its concentration on the naked female form, but Moriarty said to *The Canberra Times*: "All humanity must embrace the feminine side. Women possess great courage, it's a great attribute."

For the past four years he has been writing a book on colour theory, which is being considered by a British publisher.

Now he feels ready to teach in Queensland once more.

Merv Moriarty's Four-Day Colour Workshop will be held from August 6-9 at Toowoong. Tel: 3398 9592. Email: merryn.m@bigpond.net.au

exhibitions events

ROYAL QUEENSLAND ART SOCIETY INC. Pastel Workshop - Tutor - Chris Blake Saturday 4th August 9.30 a.m. - 4 p.m. Cost: \$60 members \$75 non members Contact Karen, Tuesday - Friday 10am-4pm, 3631 3455 for details.

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ERRORS 1

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David Bromley Acrylic on canvas

ORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN ART: Norman Lindsay, David Bromley, David Boyd, d'Arcy Doyle, Ray Crooke, Pro Hart, Robert Dickerson, Hugh Sawrey, Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, Colin Parker, Paul Visser, Eric Langker, Alan Baker, John Coburn, Doris Kaminski, Robert Wilson, Bob Merchant, Max Mannix, Fred Elliot, Alan T. Barnardo, Nick Petal, Colleen Parker, Herman Pekei, and more... **ABORIGINAL PAINTINGS (SINGLE VENDOR COLLECTION)** Dorothy Napangardi Robinson, Minnie Pwerle, Gloria Petyarre, Ningura Napurula, Teresa Ross, Grace Morton Pwerle, Lindsay Bird, Barbara Reid, George Ward Tjungurrayi, Elizabeth Marks, Nalle Marks Namkara, Katherine Napatjari, Ronnie Bird, Gabrielle Possum and more. **WORKS ON PAPER:** Whiteley, Olsen, A. Boyd, Cassab, Sheard, Pugh, Dickerson, Blackman, Smart, Coburn, Larwill, Crooke, Lookhart, Bromley, D. Boyd, Pro Hart, Preston etc... **INTERNATIONAL ART:** screen-prints, original lithographs and etching by Chagall, Picasso, Dalí, Miró, Renoir, Matisse, Manet, Rembrandt, Giacometti, Dresser and more. **LARGE RANGE OF CARPETS INC. FINE SILKS:** Tribal, village and city rugs from Persia, India and Afghanistan. The collection is excellent and ranges from unreserved Tribals to the very fine silk carpets. **BRONZE SCULPTURES:** Including Ums, Animalia, Art Deco and classic figures after sculptors such as Chiperus, Rodin, Sykes, Remington, Mayer, Bologna and Deggs.

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