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Not the main game: Art collections in hospital spaces: the Westmead experience

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In Australia during the 1970s the formal setting for the display of art was no longer confined to official art institutions. Instead significant art collections were housed in a variety of public institutions, including hospitals. While hospitals are not often associated with the display of collections of art, the history of art in hospitals has been extensively documented in many western countries. In Australia, Westmead Hospital opened in 1978 and held a unique competition the Westmead Print Prize as a means of procuring original paint works for the hospital. The competition was held during a time when premier health journals including the British Medical Journal were advocating the benefits of displaying original art work in a hospital environment.

In 2005 the authors were contacted by the management of Westmead Hospital and asked to conduct a curatorial and conservation audit of their artwork which by now included some from the original collection and others since acquired through donations, bequests and occasionally, purchases. As the authors soon discovered this was the first time the artworks had been the focus of any attention since the opening of the hospital some 27 years previously.

Using the Westmead Print Prize this paper examines the policies and practices put in place by hospital management to redress the situation and discusses the politics of display in hospitals. It also argues for the need for on-going, specialist involvement to best position art in hospitals, or any therapeutic space.

Keywords

Hospital art; museology.

1 Introduction

While hospitals are not usually associated in the public mind with the display of art, the history of art in hospitals has been extensively documented in many western countries for many centuries (Henderson, 2001). Indeed, there are many hospitals (such as Westmead Hospital in Sydney) that contain artworks that are considered, as a collection, a major body of work. In the case of Westmead, this collection represents particularly Australian printmakers of the 1960s and 70s - a rare body of work only now beginning to be of major interest to Australian art historians and museological scholars.

In Australia, there have been a number of major public and private hospitals that have procured significant art collections since their establishment and many of these collections are managed by the home institution's internal art committees, volunteer staff members, or by external contractors (Capon, 1997). Over the decades these art collections have developed into both valuable aesthetic and financial assets for their home institutions and wider community. Such a collection is that of Westmead Hospital.

Art collections held outside mainstream art institutions offer a highly problematic scenario for the home institutions. This article, through an empirical and historical survey of the *Westmead Print Prize* addresses the problems associated with citing art in a medical space where art is definitely 'not the main game'. It seeks to highlight the difficulties – and indeed survival – of art in such spaces, particularly when the normal art museological protocols are not used to support the display and collection of such art works over the period of some 26 years. The authors then examine the recent policies and practices put in place by the hospital management to redress the situation, and argue for specialist involvement to best position art in Australian hospitals enabling them to capitalise on the benefits of their collections for staff and patient morale, for more interesting and less sterile spaces and even financial benefit.

2. The Westmead Children's Hospital

In the 1970s the Whitlam government approved funding for a new teaching hospital on the former Parramatta Showground site in the Western Sydney suburb of Westmead (Issacs, 1978). Comprising of an eventual nine hundred and twenty-five beds, the hospital was partially completed in 1978 at a cost of over \$175 million (McIlraith, 1978). During the early stages of construction, the Department of Public Works employed interior designer Desmond Freeman to oversee the procurement and design of the new hospital's interior (Freeman, 2007). Although the hospital's construction eventually came in under the original budget estimations, no formal provisions were made in the interior design budget for the procurement of an art collection. The new hospital represented the government's commitment to provide the latest medical care for the residents of Western Sydney. Therefore, it was regarded by the planners as crucial that the interior

design of the new hospital reflected not only the modern exterior but also the advanced medical services that would be available once the hospital was fully operational. Although there was no formal art budget, and only limited funds for internal fittings, Freeman was convinced of the need to include art and determined to procure an assortment of artworks to exhibit within the hospital's vast interior (including, public through-fares, public waiting areas, administration offices, specialist rooms and wards) through a variety of strategies.

Westmead Hospital received its first patient on the 1 November 1978, although it took several more years until the hospital was able to offer a full range of medical procedures and services. When the hospital opened its doors, the procurement of an art collection was obviously still not a major priority, and only a number of key pieces had been purchased for the hospital's main entrance and administration areas. Freeman, as the interior designer, first purchased a selection of sixteen original print works by leading American, European and British printmakers from The Pallas Gallery Ltd, London. This collection included artworks by Deborah Skinner, Barbara Newcomb and Op-Artist Victor Vasarely. The Vasarelys were hung in the hospital's main entrance and education area and the remaining artworks within the hospital's administration areas. Even though the purchase of works by significant artists such as these was undeniably important and clearly indicated the importance of the display of such works, there was still a surfeit of large, rather bleak hospital walls and corridors. Whilst the Vasarelys undoubtedly provided areas of colour with their modern geometric design as eye-catching artworks for the main entrance, the central foyer of the hospital was dominated by a large, bare, grey concrete wall.

This imposing slab of concrete dwarfed the main foyer, reception, information desk and admissions counter. The area required a bold installation to reduce the clinical coldness of the concrete as well as complement the modern architectural style of the hospital. Architect David Sloane, compared the design developments made in hospital interiors to those of a modern shopping mall when he argued that 'the challenge was to retain the aura of competence provided by the scientific and technical excellence of the hospital while supplementing it with a new, more open, more welcoming atmosphere' (Sloane, 1994). The design of foyer was intended to produce a powerful statement about the hospital's embracing of cutting edge design technology in medical advancements as well as illustrating new design directions in public health institutions. To provide a conduit between the two, leading Australian fibre artist Judda Feddersen was commissioned to create two fibre sculptures for the hospital; one for the concrete wall in the foyer and the second a non-denominational altar piece for the hospital's chapel (see Fig. 1).



Figure 1 Judda Feddersen, woven wall hanging, main entrance and chapel altar piece, Westmead Hospital September 2006.

For the foyer, Feddersen designed and made an imposing, layered, woven wall hanging comprising three overlapping flaps, produced from hand dyed natural fibres, in vibrant tones of red and orange. The combination of colours and shapes perfectly complimented the deep red and orange carpet and furnishing chosen by Freeman, producing a warm and vibrant focus for the interior for the entry points into the hospital. This large scale, vibrant colour statement was in total contrast to earlier hospital interiors which were all too commonly marked by colourless, 'sterile' spaces; the only colour being provided often by the choice of lino flooring accompanied by bare walls. Indeed in 1969, an article published in *World Medicine Journal* on a new approach to the use of both lino and colour argued the importance of bringing colour back into hospital environments through the use of imaginative use of tiled lino flooring, painted doors and patterned curtains (Agate, 1969). Inevitably, however creatively and colourfully it was used, the walls, in most cases, remained bare.

Even though the artworks by Vasarely and Feddersen were prominently exhibited within the main entrances to the hospital, and were recognised as the works of major artists in the art world, for the hospital and its patients, these works were little better than wallpaper. The most basic of display protocols were ignored. The public, even if interested, would have been unable to know anything of the artwork, its creator or technique. The authors consider that the techniques used by most of the artists — that of printmaking, was a major contributor to the eventual 'invisibility' of the collection. Quite simply, these works were regarded as being examples of commercial prints, rather than examples of perhaps the most popular art production technique of the period. The Vasarely works were produced by silk screening on paper, for example, and do not obviously look to have the individual 'hand' of a particular artist (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2 Victor Vasarely, screen print, Westmead Hospital.

More importantly, the lack of any information on the artwork clearly indicates a lack of concern by the hospital administration to place the hospital's art work as anything other than wallpaper. This early oversight by hospital administration to consider employing, at the very least, basic museological labelling to its artworks was a clear indicator of what was to come and to have dire consequences on the later artwork procurements, especially the more fragile artworks entered into the *Westmead Print Prize*.

3. The Westmead print Prize

Even though the administrative protocols applied to managing the existing artworks was minimal, as the hospital continued to open new sections, the planners continued to anticipate the inclusion of artworks. However, it became quickly evident there would be insufficient funds to procure more original artworks for the vast majority of the hospital's interior. The amount spent to procure the initial artworks represented only .02% of the total building costs for the hospital and .25% of the furnishing budget. This proportional figure was not unusual and perhaps emphasises the lack of formal government policy in Australia during the 1970s in setting percentages of public building costs for the procurement of artworks. In comparison, the University of Amsterdam Hospital, built in the same period, between 1974-84, had a specific art budget of .24% of the total building costs, with provisions made for additional annual purchases (Baron, 1984). Westmead's lack of funding and the ever increasing bare concrete walls, forced Freeman and the hospital Board to undertake two, innovative and cost effective projects to ensure the remaining hospital had some form of art on the walls.

One solution was found in a 1981 article published in *Belle Homes*, where interior design journalist Babette Hayes advocated the use of fabric panels – such as those being produced in Finland by Marimekko - as a cost effective interior design option for both domestic and public spaces (Hayes, 1981). The hospital purchased a large number of abstract printed panels by Australia's John Kaldor as well some by Marimekko. These large, bright, abstract panels were mounted on wooden frames and hung throughout the hospital; adding colour and decoration at a minimal cost (see Fig. 3).



Figure. 3 John Kaldor and Marimekko fabric wall hangings, displayed at various locations throughout Westmead Hospital.

Secondly, the hospital Board and Freeman decided to hold a national art competition to acquire original artworks for the remaining public areas (including wards, which had traditionally been seen as inappropriate environments in which to hang artworks, due to the risk of infection). Procuring original artworks through an art competition was a unique concept which offered the hospital an opportunity to acquire an art collection which was to prove exceptional for both the hospital and the greater Western Sydney area.

It is important to note here that this print competition was instigated in an era where premier health journals, including the prestigious *British Medical Journal*, were advocating the benefits of original artwork in a hospital environment (Baron & Greene 1984). Consequently, in 1978, a unique art competition, the *Westmead Print Prize* was devised in 1979 as a vehicle for procuring original art for the new hospital (Freeman, 1978).

It was determined that over one thousand artworks would need to be procured through the art competition to complete the interior decoration of the hospital. Because the earlier purchases had been of various print mediums it was decided to restrict the competition to the same genre. The entries had to be produced by either, silkscreen; etching, woodcuts, lithograph or lino cuts and printed on paper. No restrictions were placed on subject matter, although the entry form noted all the artworks would eventually hang within a public hospital environment. There was also no stipulation that the works had to be produced on archival paper, an omission that was to have lasting consequences.

The entry form did note the following entry conditions; firstly the competition would be divided into two categories, professional and student. Secondly, all entries would be framed at the hospital's expense and exhibited within the hospital's education area for several weeks. Thirdly, all entrants would be able to sell extra editions through the hospital; commission free and finally all entries would remain the property of the hospital (Westmead Hospital, 1978). This final condition was to become a contentious issue for a number of influential gallery owners and national art institutions. The competition was eventually launched by the hospital on the 10 November 1978, and judged on the 23 April 1979. This time the art was noticed by the Press, once the competition was announced in the national media it gained both critical acclaim for the hospital in its support of artists, but also critical comments from a number of Australia's leading print organisations, who considered the donation of the artwork as exploitation of artists by a public institution. In a letter to the hospital, *The Sydney Print Circle* condemned the competition as follows 'at the moment we have no alternative other than to condemn your exhibition as a threat to every artist's status and chance of monetary returns for their labours'. Whilst Terry Ingram from the *Financial Review* targeted the Government, arguing that the competition primarily highlighted the lack of government funding for art installation in public buildings 'In many countries in the world public building are required to set aside a proportion of construction costs for art and this is seldom less than 1 per cent' (Ingram, 1978). The majority of negative press surrounding the competition was only received during the initial stages and by early 1979 positive letters of support were received from some of Australia's leading artists including Lloyd Rees, Frank Hodgkinson and David Rose. Artist John Olsen and Stadia Graphic Gallery owner, Stanislas De Hauteclouque added their professional support and accepted an offer to judge the competition. Eventually over 400 hundred entries were received from all over the country and by some of Australia's leading artists including Arthur Wicks and Frank Hodgkinson.

The competition was eventually heralded as a resounding success by Nancy Borlase and Colin Alison of *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Borlase, 1979; Alison, 1979). During the final stages of the competition, the daily running of the hospital had been formally handed over to the NSW Health Department and Freeman's contract was close to concluding. Subsequently the final hanging of the competition artworks appears to have been handled (rather unfortunately) by the hospital's maintenance staff. Whilst a brief exhibition catalogue (authorship unknown) was printed, this document only gave the artists initial and surname, medium and title of the artwork. No formal museological catalogue listed full artist's details, hanging location was produced (Westmead Hospital, 1979). This lack of information has made it almost impossible to identify many of the original entrants (especially those submitted in the student category) and therefore making research into the provenance of many of the works virtually impossible.

It perhaps seems inconceivable that such a substantial art collection could simply be forgotten for 27 years. The initial problem was in the lack of planning for the final hanging spaces of the artworks; an early indication of this was the responsibility for

perhaps the most important component of exhibition practise that of the hang of the works was left to the hospital's maintenance department. While all of the artworks were attached to the wall (not always securely), no consideration appears to have been given to the location and placement of some artworks. For example, etchings depicting a curled snake and a fish entwined in barded wire were hung above beds in the maternity unit and a large pouncing spider at the entrance to the hospital library (see Fig. 4).



Figure. 4 Malcolm Cameron *Spider Web Qld 20/20 1978*, lithograph and J Lotzof *Genesis II 1/8 Not Dated*, etching.

The inappropriate subject matter of many of the artworks obviously did not assist in developing an appreciation or relationship between the artworks, staff (who had to view the works on a daily basis) and patients (see Fig. 5). In later years, as wards were refurnished, many unpopular artworks simply disappeared, along with the broken furniture and building rubble. One of these works that was found by the authors in a room of rubbish awaiting disposal was a significant work by Lloyd Rees.



Figure. 5 Artwork displayed above a hospital bed at Westmead Hospital.

Historically, over the centuries art and health have intertwined in many institutions, at many levels and in a myriad of ways. One notable such example of the dynamic historiography between art and health institutions can be seen in particular in the last century, where a different relationship began to be evident. The catalyst apparently the developments in new kinds of scientific discoveries, particularly involving new insights in psychology, psychiatry and more lateral approaches to health and healing. These scientific advances resulted in vast improvements in the quality of care offered in the general public in hospitals, whilst at the same time equally dramatic changes were occurring in the understanding of the human psyche, and in particular the place and role of the creative impulses. The importance of the synergies between these two aspects of learning and expression began to be explored (Ulrich, 1984).

The role and place of art, as both solace and healer in hospitals is reflected clearly in the various ideological changes in architectural design and artistic representation (Berhrman, 1997). However, In spite of these new understandings, the majority of society expects a hospital to be a hospital, not a hospital/gallery.

4. The next phase

Despite its precarious history, a percentage of the *Westmead Print Prize* has survived and in 2005 the University of Western Sydney, undertook a research project under the supervision of Dr Pamela James, to reinvigorate the art collection and establish basic museological practices for future procurements. Over the next three years a comprehensive catalogue was produced of the hospital's art collection (which over the years due to donations had increased to over 600 artworks of various quality) ensuring all artworks were numbered, photographed and recorded on a museum computer catalogue system. A large number of artworks were cleaned and reframed and re hung with public waiting areas of the hospital. Brief information panels were also written and displayed near the artworks to develop an interest in the art and an understanding to its purpose. The artworks were gradually emerging from a form of hiatus and reducing the clinical atmosphere of many of hospitals public waiting areas. To ensure this work was maintained the hospital's administration also created an Arts Procurement Committee to oversee all future art projects undertaken within the hospital and in 2008 contracted the services of a professional art management firm to oversee the running of the hospital's art collection over the next twelve months.

During 2004 Westmead Hospital began to build a new hospital wing, one which would incorporate cancer services, a hydro pool, physiotherapy services and predominantly a new intensive care unit. In 2006 as the building near completion a collaborative project was undertaken between senior hospital staff, artists, and an art consultant, the hospitals Art Procurement Committee, and the authors to procure new artworks for this area. To ensure any new acquisition did not suffer the same fate as those earlier

acquisitions in the *Westmead Print Prize*, careful consideration was given to the choice of artist, subject matter of the artworks and eventual hanging locations. It was of primary concern that the artworks be sensitive to the cultural diversity of staff and patients within the unit. It was also decided that no graphic medical posters would be hung within the public areas of the unit, allowing the artworks to be viewed to their best advantage. All of the artworks were numbered and added to hospitals catalogue. It was decided to label each work with basic information details (artists, medium, and title) only as the majority of the artwork hung along the main corridors within the unit. Due to the high dependency nature of the unit, detailed information panels were not displayed near the artworks. Although newspaper articles and clips about particular artists were left in the staff recreational areas and detailed narratives of specific artworks were published in the unit's monthly newsletter. It was hoped that instigating basic museological practices and by keeping staff informed the artworks within the unit will remain a viable cultural and aesthetic asset to the unit (see Fig. 6 below).



Figure. 6 John Tpiuamantumirra Martin *Untitled*, Ochres on Paper and Alfonso Puatjimi *Untitled*, Ochres on Paper and Marilyn Walters *Passage*, 1991 Oil on canvas.

One of the foremost problems faced by the art collection at Westmead was that no one, apart from the hospital's administration and a handful of senior staff members were conscious of its existence. Art collections regardless of their location cannot survive in isolation. With the emergent development of art collections in Australian hospitals there is a growing necessity for the development of a national data base and network to develop standardised museological policies and practices relation to art in health care facilities.

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