

Artlink rises from the ashes of Artlink

Description



Artlink client Nicki Holland works on one of her pieces in the vibrant surrounds of the Artlink studio.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] A [/dropcap]bout 18 months ago, things were looking decidedly grim for Artlink – a unique arts program for people with disabilities – when it moved from the heart of Warrnambool to the hard-edged industrial estate.

In fact Bluestone [predicted at the time](#) that it would signal the end for Artlink and, in many ways, it did: the Artlink program that operated out of the historic Ellerslie College building in Koroit St is not the Artlink program that now operates out of a non-descript building in Albert St.

Out of this death, however, has come a new life and it is jumping.

Jack Melican, who is a business development manager with **Western District Employment Agency** (WDEA) that operates Artlink, has at different times managed both incarnations of Artlink: the original and the new, and he is keen to show us the new.



Jack Melican, WDEA business development manager, with Kelly Walters who has produced so many art works, she has a whole shelf to herself for display purposes.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] J [/dropcap]ack, like everyone else, lamented the loss of the Ellerslie College space which boasted a beautiful gallery that not only hosted exhibitions by Artlink clients, but the new and very popular **Warrnibald** annual portrait prize.

Artlink was central, it was freely accessible to the public and it brought a local version of [the “raw” art movement](#) – quality art produced by people with disabilities – into the mainstream.

But the space was also expensive and, in the end, unsustainable.

“The financial decision had to be made, in order to keep the program going, that it be moved out of that particular building,” Jack says.

“The Artlink program is not the same as it was, and we no longer have artists employed to teach art, but it is still a valuable part of what we do.”



Linda Duffield leapt up to show us her Green Frog that she had finished earlier that day.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] W [/dropcap]e took up Jack's invitation to visit the new version of Artlink that sits within the cluster of WDEA work industries off Albert St, a short walk downhill from the Midfield Meatworks, which is clearly not the most picturesque location.

But once inside the building, it is a very different – and uplifting – world.

The arts program is overseen by **Paddy Kelly**, an Irishman with an accent to match his name and the lithe physique of a jockey, who moves around a workroom that is packed with people at work on their creative projects.

Some, like **Martin Juchtzer** are painting on canvas – he is working on a view of the Tower Hill visitor centre – using techniques he learnt at Ellerslie College with artist and teacher **Jenny Altmann**.

Others, like **Linda Kelly**, are working with watercolours or colour pencils, while client **Kelly Walters** has produced so many works in acrylics that she has an entire space of her own to display them. A team of three staff, plus volunteers, keep the paint – and banter – flowing.



Martin Juchtzer with his portrayal of the Tower Hill visitor centre, painted using techniques learnt in the first incarnation of Artlink.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] W [/dropcap]hen Jack says there is “a really great vibe in here”, he is not talking it up: you can feel it.

“Our Artlink people really love coming here and very few miss a day,” he says.

Between 16-18 people use the Artlink program, including people with disabilities who are involved in other WDEA work programs on site.

Some of these clients, as Jack explains, may never have tried art before, or had an opportunity to develop their creativity, but can now do so because of the co-location.

“It is a comfortable space, an inclusive space and a place that offers enormous social interactions. In fact I reckon we are the happiest workplace in Warrnambool,” Jack says, laughing.



Co-ordinator Paddy Kelly in the Artlink art room at WDEA in west Warrnambool. Image: Artlink/WDEA.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] While the focus of Artlink is now undeniably different – it is more about social contact than developing artistic technique – Warrnambool has discovered it has room for both.

Following the closure of Artlink in Koroit St, Jenny Altmann started her own business (Studio 4@Factory Arts) offering painting classes to people of all abilities, based at the former Fletcher Jones factory.

Studio 4 is now part of the wider revival of the Fletcher Jones site, with a gallery space to open soon.

And the Warrnibald portrait prize has also survived, following a year's absence, with the Warrnambool Art Gallery [to host this year's event](#) from July 18 to August 16.

Artlink may have splintered, but what it stood for, and aspired to, remains intact around the city. How wonderful.

[box]Artlink is at 11 Albert St, Warrnambool, and can be found on [Facebook here](#). People are welcome to visit Artlink in action. For inquiries, contact (03) 5561 2579 [/box]

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