



End of the line for fine art at Sherwood Park

Description



Last man standing: Graphic design and illustration lecturer Mark Rashleigh is the only staff member remaining in the former School of Art and Design at Sherwood Park, Warrnambool. (Artwork: Untitled (landscape), Martin Jones).

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] M [/dropcap]ark **Rashleigh** is the last man standing at what was once a flourishing School of Art and Design at Sherwood Park, Warrnambool, and, come mid next year, he too will be gone.

It is indicative of how much things have changed that Mark, a lecturer in graphic designer and illustration, now has an office in the Faculty of Business and Law at the Deakin University campus because the former visual arts studios are closed due to various structural concerns.

A similar, if metaphorical, corrosion has also claimed the art school that will officially end next year after starting life under the former Warrnambool Institute of Advanced Education in Timor St (now South-West TAFE) in the late '60s, before relocating to the Sherwood Park campus in the 1980s. There, as a university degree, it became part of the Deakin merger.

“When I first started here, in 1985, there were about 13 staff teaching a very broad visual arts degree that included painting, sculpture, art history, photography, print making, graphic design and ceramics,” Mark, who will retire in June, said.

At that time, the teachers – most of whom were established artists – would mount joint exhibitions, maintaining a tradition that began when the school first started.

A document held by the [National Libraries of Australia](#), for example, records some of the names in a joint staff/student exhibition held at the City of Hamilton Art Gallery in November 1970 and it reads as a

virtual who's who of the early South-West Victorian arts scene: Ken Daniel** (lecturer), Ron Quick (lecturer), Graeme Birt (lecturer), David Wormald, John Elphick, Jill Fitzgerald, Jennifer McConnell, Christine Taylor, Ken Saddler, John Rogers, Trevor Morrison, Peter Bond, Lilian Baxter, Alan Murdoch, Frank O'Brien, Chris Carroll, Gary Sparks, Judith Lovell, Gary Heath, Lorrain Callow, Michele Hill.



Beginnings; A teenage [Graeme Altmann](#) surrounded by some of his early paintings created in the former School of Art and Design studios at Sherwood Park. Photo: [John \(Jack\) Wilkins](#).

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] I [/dropcap]n its prime, the airy studio space at Sherwood Park was alive with the sound, movement and colour of artists in action and gave the campus its energetic heart, usually to the beat of a paint-splattered cassette player set up in a corner.

Students pursuing somewhat more subdued degrees in economics, marine biology or primary school teaching could wander over and see what the “hippies” of the campus were up to.

The halcyon days of the 70s, 80s and 90s, however, crashed into the economic rationalism of the 2000’s when university degrees around Australia were no longer about providing knowledge and skills, but also a financial return.

In this new climate, art schools were in a hopeless position.

And while Mark can’t speak about Deakin directly, he can reflect on the challenge facing all visual art degrees.

“A visual arts degree is a quasi-industrial process: they cost a lot to run. There is the high cost of the studio spaces, and the high cost of running courses for small groups of students, because that is how the learning happens, in small groups, not in a large lecture theatre,” he said.

Skilled staff who leave or retire are not replaced, and, suddenly, painting is no longer available, or sculpture, or perhaps print making, and the degree is reduced to a husk.



Room to move: Artist Barbara Fulton with some of her large canvases in the painting studio in the 1980s. Image: [John \(Jack\) Wilkins](#).

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] A [/dropcap]t the same time, Australians love art: [according to the ABS](#), more than a quarter of us visit a gallery or museum at least once a year.

“The returns on the investment in art schools and courses cannot be measured in dollars, but in what we get back – as a culture – from the artist,” Mark said.

Yet Mark remains optimistic. As he closes the door on his career, and that of the school, South-West TAFE is refocussing its visual arts courses at its new location in the Timor St complex.

The wheel has turned full circle.

“Art changes its address, but it’s not going away,” Mark said.

** Ken Daniel established the art school at WIAE in 1970. When the school amalgamated with Deakin University around 1985, he was appointed Dean of the fine arts across all Deakin campuses.



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