

Forget cover ups: roll right over Rolf



Convicted pedophile Rolf Harris happens to paint: does this mean his art is worth more than sending a strong message to sexual abuse survivors? Image: The Guardian.

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T [/dropcap]wo very unsettling things have emerged from the debate over whether a mural by convicted pedophile **Rolf Harris** should be kept in Warrnambool's Lighthouse Theatre, and neither offer any comfort to victims of sexual abuse.

The first was a comment by Warrnambool City Council chief executive officer **Bruce Anson** in which he compared Harris's systemic abuse of minors to an artistic "foible" – a weakness, a blemish on his character, a minor flaw.

Here is the quote in full, as taken from the *Warrnambool Standard* report of July 2:

"I'm not justifying in any way what has happened (but) I don't

think we should destroy art as a result of inappropriate behaviour.

“Many of our great artists had foibles.”

A dirty old man in a rain coat who sexually abuses children is seen as the predatory pervert that he is, whereas an entertainer who fooled the world with his charm and natty dress sense – and who also sexually abuses children – is considered to have a “foible”?

I waited for the torrent of outrage against Mr Anson’s comments, but there was barely a trickle, despite Mr Anson holding one of the most influential positions in our city.



Warrnambool City Council CEO Bruce Anson earlier this week described Harris’s behaviour as a “foible”, but the outrage was saved for the Rolf Harris mural. Image: ABC Radio

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T [/dropcap]he outrage was instead saved in response to calls by some – including *Bluestone Magazine* via our [Facebook page](#) – that the Rolf Harris mural be painted over. Bluestone supports this move in order to send a clear message that the work of a convicted pedophile should not be honoured via public display in a public building.

If the Rolf Harris work was on a canvas, instead of a wall, it would be removed immediately (as is happening [elsewhere in Australia](#)), but *because* it is on a wall, we need to be even braver and bolder in our response and this is where we have become weak-kneed.

Despite Harris painting this mural in the very same year as he was actively abusing minors, the artwork is seen by some as separate to the artist, as if one Rolf Harris is the jocular painter, and “another” Rolf Harris is the pedophile.

This is a false comfort, as the hand that held the brush that created this mural is the same hand that could not keep itself off children – the art and the artist are inseparable.

There is also an argument that because Harris happens to be a visual artist, his “work” immediately deserves higher status and preservation than, say, the work of a pedophile priest, teacher or judge who – once exposed for their crimes – are [stripped of all public honour](#).

Imagine if the Lighthouse Theatre decided to stage a musical tribute to pedophile and Harris associate, **Jimmy Savile**? Would we be as forgiving of the need to preserve *his* talents as an entertainer?



Would we tolerate a musical tribute at the Lighthouse Theatre to the late entertainer, and pedophile, Jimmy Savile?
Image: The Guardian.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] B[/dropcap] keeping the Harris mural in place, we are sending a message to every victim of sexual abuse that a piece of art is worth more than them: that we, as a community, value the work of a convicted, systemic abuser more than we value them.

We can argue around it, through it and over it, but that is the bottom line.

If we keep the mural, we must also be prepared to argue that a recent work by a convicted pedophile is more precious to our collective community consciousness than standing up for the one in three girls and one in six boys who are [sexually abused in Australia](#).

But wait, some say, the history of art is littered with examples of child abusers having their work celebrated in public, such as Caravaggio's erotic paintings of young boys painted in the 17th Century.

I would like to think we have come a long way as a society in

four centuries and understand – fully and painfully – the lifelong ramifications of child sexual abuse that, in the case of Harris, is clear cut.

I am also still struggling to find an artist who is a convicted pedophile and is still feted by the public – Caravaggio included.



In Australia, one in three girls and one in six boys are [sexually abused before they turn 18](#). Image: Courier Mail.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] S[/dropcap] why not just cover the mural up, as has been suggested?

Because that, to me, is a cop out. It says we are frightened to make the tough call and that one day, when we all “get over it”, the cover will come down again. Otherwise, what is the point?

Collectors can keep all of their Rolf Harris’s in their private collections and galleries – although it appears that the Queen has [disposed of her portrait](#) – but there is only one thing to do with our Harris mural: run a paint roller right

over it.

Gather a group of women who have suffered sexual abuse (you won't have to look far) and invite them to reinterpret the mural as a work of defiance: a work that says, loudly, we will not tolerate or condone this man's disgraceful behaviour, no matter how well he paints.

With this work, we have the opportunity to make a very clear statement about a living, breathing sexual predator who happens to be an artist, and we at Bluestone are dumbfounded as to why it is proving so hard.

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