

Grappling with the work of a predator



The impromptu mural by Rolf Harris in the loading dock at Lighthouse Theatre – it has since been covered by perspex.
Image: ABC Radio South-west Victoria – Jeremy Lee.

OPINION – Carol Altmann

[box] A warning: this piece contains details of Rolf Harris's crimes which some readers may find distressing.[/box]

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] I [/dropcap]t is more than two months since the Warrnambool City Council promised [a discussion about the future](#) of the Rolf Harris mural in light of his convictions for molesting children but, until now, we have not heard a word.

As readers will recall, an impromptu mural by Harris in the loading dock of the Lighthouse Theatre was covered by painted perspex after he was convicted on 12 counts of sexually

abusing four girls aged between eight and 19, with the community split over whether the work should be retained or painted over.

Mayor Michael Neoh, at that time, said there was no room for a “knee jerk reaction” and the future of the work needed a considered response – perhaps it would be reinterpreted by adding a white ribbon over the perspex or some other symbol of denouncing violence against women. (Except Harris’s crimes were not about women, they were about sexually abusing children.)

Then the discussion fell quiet as if, by keeping the mural out of sight and out of mind, we might all just forget about it.

But survivors of child sexual abuse never forget, and neither do we.



Mayor Michael Neoh. Image: ABC.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]W [/dropcap]hen

Bluestone emailed each councillor for an update on their personal view about the mural, Mayor Neoh initially sounded annoyed that he was being pressed to “act in haste”.

“Council will discuss the matter as a group. I would respectfully say that it is appropriate to address issues in a considered manner and not to not act in haste to meet external deadlines,” he wrote.

When asked what deadlines he was talking about, Mayor Neoh replied:

“As you would be aware the painting has been fully covered and we were awaiting for any indication of an appeal processes which seems unlikely now. The acting (Chief Executive) and I recently discussed raising it in a future briefing and I assume it will be an item, like many others, on a briefing agenda in the near future.”

So does Mayor Neoh still want the mural retained or not? We don't know.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] 0 [/dropcap]ur view on the mural is unequivocal – it should already be gone and you can read our reasoning in [our earlier opinion piece](#) – but the councillors are divided.

The [full responses from councillors can be found here](#), but, in summary: **Cr Kylie Gaston** and **Cr Peter Sycopoulis** said they wanted the work retained – but covered – and with some form of educational message added, such as the white ribbon symbol or an explanatory plaque.

Cr Peter Hulin said that unless Harris successfully appealed his conviction (which appears unlikely), the mural should be painted over. While **Cr Jacinta Ermacora** said there was no right answer, she believed the fate of the mural should be decided by the community and “relevant stakeholders”. “I believe that the voices of victims ought be given significant

weight in this matter," she said.*

We did not receive a response from **Cr Brian Kelson** or **Cr Rob Askew**.



Rolf Harris was earlier this year convicted on 12 counts of sexual offences against children. Image: The Guardian

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] W [/\dropcap]hat I wonder is this:

Would the council still be tip-toeing around this issue if the mural had been painted by a Warrnambool man who had since been found guilty of the same crimes as Rolf Harris?

[learn_more caption="You can read details here: contains explicit content"]Harris's crimes include touching an eight year old girl's vagina, digitally penetrating a 15 year old girl on multiple occasions, and licking the vagina of a 15 year old girl while she was asleep and her parents, whom Harris had been visiting, were downstairs.[/\learn_more]

These are among the crimes which the judge outlined in his sentencing of Harris and they need to be named up. ([You can read the full remarks here](#)).

The celebrity status that Harris used to cover up his crimes

(including in 1986, when he painted the Warrnambool mural), is the very same status that is protecting him now.

We don't need white ribbons and plaques and educational reinterpretations to remind us that this man is a predator and, to this day, has shown no remorse: he typifies so many sexual abusers, including those who still walk free in our community.

"But it is *art*", is the most common response from those who find it impossible to accept that this mural must go.

It is a *painting*, to be sure, but in my mind not all art is created equal.



Melbourne paint shop owner Frank Penhalluriack took one of the "most important stands" of his life in rolling over a Rolf Harris mural after the artist's conviction. Image: Herald-Sun

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]P[/dropcap]ublic murals, by their sheer nature, are transitory: they fade, they are painted over, they are removed.

We know this because about 12 years after Harris spontaneously created his mural from an errant paint splodge, another commissioned mural less than 400m away was bulldozed to make way for a string of soul-less apartments in the Ozone carpark without so much as a whimper.

This was a work by local indigenous artist **Fiona Clarke**.

Harris's work will remain in dozens, if not hundreds, of private art collections around the world – he was nothing if not prolific – and had this mural been treated the same way as Fiona Clarke's when the Lighthouse Theatre was upgraded, it would already be gone. (Apparently the plans were modified to accommodate the mural, such is the power of celebrity.)

If only we, as a city, had the courage and fortitude of **Frank Penhalluriack**, the Melbourne [paint shop owner](#) who, the moment Harris was found guilty, rolled a bright-red roller over an impromptu Harris mural painted in his shop in 1990.

"It is one of the most important stands I have ever taken," he told the Herald Sun.

I wonder how many of us – and our city councillors – could say the same thing?

* Since being contacted by *Bluestone*, Cr Ermacora raised the issue at last week's council briefing, which is the first in a series of steps toward opening a wider community discussion.

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