

Harris mural a lost opportunity to take a stand



'Autumn' painting: acrylic, gouache and pen, by Jenny Altmann. Image reproduced courtesy of Jenny Altmann.

Analysis – Carol Altmann

How extraordinarily healing and beautiful something like this work by local artist **Jenny Altmann** would have looked at the Lighthouse Theatre instead of a Rolf Harris mural covered in black Perspex, apparently forever.

Imagine if an artist like Jenny (*disclosure: my former sister-in-law*), whose art often deals with themes of healing from sexual abuse, had been asked to replace what has become an embarrassment for our city?

Warrnambool City Council, on our behalf, would have made headlines around Australia for its courage in grasping a rare opportunity to send a symbolic message to all survivors of

sexual assault that we, as a community, will stand with you over and above any cult of personality.

Such a message would be particularly powerful given Warrnambool has more than double the state average rate of child abuse: 16.5/1000 compared to 7/1000.

But last Monday night we blew it and we [deserve headlines like this one.](#)

For all of the bluster about censorship, separating the art from the artist, and fears of replacing the mural being the “the thin-edge-of-the-wedge”, the decision really boiled down to one of celebrity.

The only reason the mural is remaining is *because* it was painted by Rolf Harris – who is actually better known for his entertainment than his art – but nobody has had the courage to say it.

This was not about preserving all art at all costs.

In fact, less than two hours after deciding to keep the mural, the council was praising its spectacular upgrade of the Lake Pertobe maze, where old murals (painted by children?) were replaced by the works of street artists.

Unfortunately these children were not as famous as Rolf Harris.

And, [as I have already written](#), local indigenous artist **Fiona Clarke** saw her mural at the Ozone carpark removed to make way for apartments, and nobody blinked an eye.

Unfortunately Fiona is not as famous as Rolf Harris.



The Sheffield Council had the white paint out and over a Rolf Harris mural on the side of the Sheffield Archives building in the UK shortly after his conviction. Image: BBC News.

In the art world and beyond, murals come and murals go [and the Sheffield Council in the UK had no qualms](#) – after Harris’s conviction on 12 counts of sexual assault – about painting over one of his murals on the side of the Sheffield Archives building.

An even earlier Harris mural, at the Sheffield swimming pool, had already been lost when the pool was demolished.

Removing a mural does not erase Harris’s crimes or stop sexual assault, but it is a symbolic gesture that sexual predators deserve nothing more than our disgust for the ruin they can inflict on their innocent victims.

Many of the people who wanted to see the Harris mural replaced are survivors, but to “out” yourself as a survivor in a regional city is enormously difficult because, often, the shame is still there and, in many cases, the perpetrator (even the dead ones) still garners respect.

I thought that the majority of our councillors absolutely understood this and, indeed, **Cr Jacinta Ermacora** (who earlier worked as a social worker at the South West Centre Against Sexual Assault) lifted my spirits when she told the council meeting that:

“One of the hardest things for survivors is to see their abusers continue their life in the community, unaffected, still respected in their community and sometimes even community leaders, while they, and their children, suffer and survive in confidential silence.”

I felt like leaping out of my chair and applauding.

But just as it appeared as if Cr Ermacora was about to crush the reputation of people like Harris hard under her heel, she went on to argue for all the reasons that the mural should remain, including that its future was irrelevant to the bigger picture of preventing sexual assault.

And then this:

“I don’t believe we should indulge in an angry, lynching squad armed with paint rollers, because that says more about ourselves than it does to our sensitivity and acknowledgement toward local survivors,” she said.

I have always admired Cr Ermacora as a strong woman who has achieved great heights in local government, but I still cannot understand where this attack was coming from, particularly when many members of of this metaphorical “lynching squad” were survivors.

Crs Sycopoulis, Gaston and Neoh have been equally as disappointing, falling somewhere between respecting survivors, not wanting to “destroy” art and finding a compromise that appears to have cheered no-one.

Only Crs **Peter Hulin** and **Brian Kelson** argued for removal and

so the mural will remain, under black Perspex, for time immemorial, although I doubt anybody really believes that.

If this was really a victory for art, why is nobody celebrating?