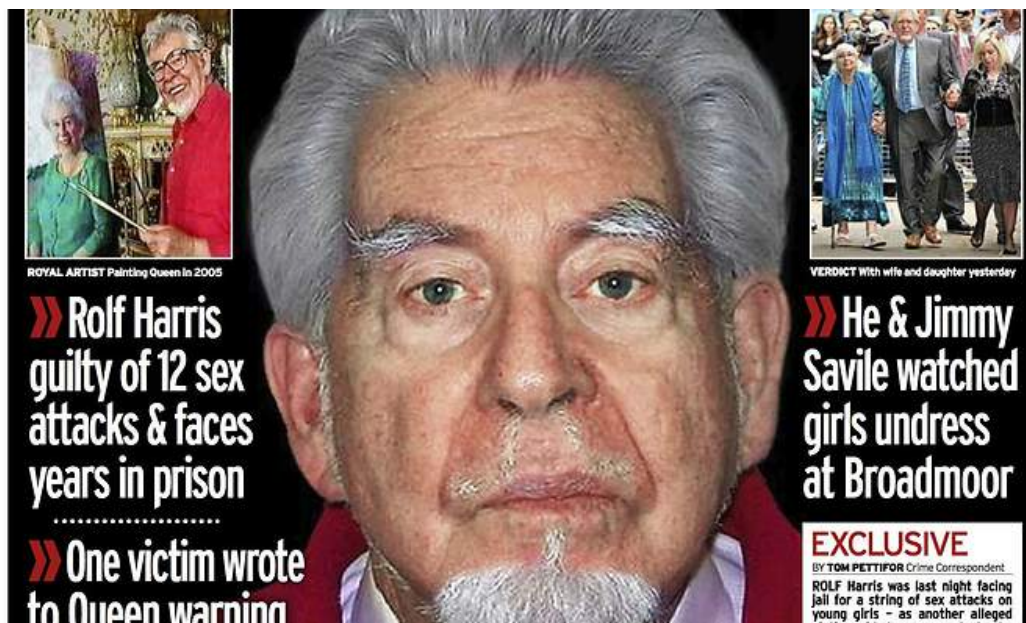


Harris mural: who is listening to the survivors?

Description



It is nine months since Rolf Harris was convicted on child sex charges, but the official debate over the future of his council-owned mural in Warrnambool is yet to begin. Image: sbs.com.au

Analysis – Carol Altmann

I must admit that I thought it would have happened by now: that the Warrnambool City Council would have asked survivors of sexual assault what they thought should be done with the Rolf Harris mural at

the Lighthouse Theatre.

Especially given that the council met last night (23/2) for its briefing – which is closed to the public – and was asked to adopt a recommendation at its meeting next Monday (2/3) that the mural be kept, but covered by black perspex, as it is now.

It is nine months since the council knew it had a problem on its hands, when Harris was convicted and sentenced in the UK on a string of sexual offences against young girls.

It is three months since his avenues of appeal lapsed.

But as of today, Tuesday February 24, *only one person* from within the entire council and its elected officials had bothered to contact the South Western Centre Against Sexual Assault or Emma House Domestic Violence Services to ask their opinion. (That was Cr Peter Hulin).

In the meantime, in light of his conviction, Harris's works have been removed from public galleries around the world, his impromptu mural in a Melbourne paint shop has been painted over, he has lost his place in the Australian Recording Industry Association hall of fame, he has been stripped of a fellowship in the British Academy of Film and Television Arts and, as of earlier this week, was no longer an Officer and Member of the Order of Australia.

In Warrnambool, however, the council has apparently made up its mind to keep the mural without consulting anyone.



The Harris mural in the Lighthouse Theatre loading dock has been temporarily covered with black perspex. Image: Warrnambool City Council.

We contacted SW CASA manager **Mary Clapham** today for her thoughts on the mural.

This is Ms Clapham's written response in full:

"Previous comments by the South Western Centre Against Sexual Assault as part of the public discussion of whether or not the local mural painted by Rolf Harris should be removed, have highlighted the very real possibility of this mural causing significant additional distress for people who have previously been impacted upon by the sexual abuse of children by paedophiles.

Many people, if not necessarily a victim themselves, may have been a parent, brother, sister, friend or relative of a child who was sexually abused and bear witness to the devastating impact it has upon individuals and families.

With sexual assault being as prevalent as it is within most communities ([1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men are abused before the age of 18 years](#)), the community discussion currently being generated will include the voices of people who have been impacted upon by sexual assault and these are the people who have a right to be asked and listened to regarding the next steps for the Rolf Harris mural.

Regardless of the assigned artistic virtue of an art installation, an integral part of the public display of art is the honour associated with having that work displayed.

The Warrnambool City Council has rightly negated the honour previously afforded to Rolf Harris by covering up the Warrnambool mural. The South Western Centre Against Sexual Assault supports no community honour being afforded to any perpetrator of sexual violence against children, including Rolf Harris."



The mural painted by Harris in 1986 – the time some of his offences took place. Image: Jeremy Lee, ABC South-West Victoria.

We also contacted Emma House manager **Pat McLaren** to ask her opinion.

“We would like to see it painted over. It needs to be painted over so that it is obliterated forever, just like [Frank Penhalluriack did in Melbourne](#) without any problems whatsoever,” Ms McLaren said by telephone.

“This not censorship: this is about taking a stand against pedophilia.

“It is a piece of art on council property. It is not a piece of art that is bought and sold. Council needs to take a stand against sexual assault and grooming and all of the other things that Rolf Harris has been convicted of: these are not allegations, these are crimes proven in a court of law.

“The Australian Government has taken a stand, we need to do the same,” she said.

Ms McLaren said the council had quite rightly waited for any appeal before taking any permanent action, but now that the appeal had failed and Harris’s conviction stands, the council needed to renew the conversation about the future of the mural.

“It is not just a decision for the council to make, but one that the community must make. The council needs to be talking to people across the community.”

None of this matters, however, because the councillors, it appears, have made up their minds already.

The vote next Monday – and the arguments put forward – will no doubt be fascinating, but if anyone other than Cr Hulin claims to have consulted with those who support survivors of sexual assault in making their decision, they are wrong.

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carol