

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]

I [dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"]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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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 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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