



Photo: Andrew Perryman

Connecting Community: Hugh Waller

By Megan Spencer (c) 2014

First published in Bendigo Magazine, May 2014.

Within minutes of meeting Hugh Waller, it quickly becomes apparent that he is a man who *cares*.

Not only in his day job (as a carer), nor about his own work as a photo-digital artist, rather about the artistic community in which he lives - and has done - for over half of his life.

At 9/10 exhibition openings in Bendigo you'll spy Hugh in the crowd. Or you'll see him earlier in the day, hanging someone else's work as a favour, or helping out. He'll be there at the end too, packing up. And don't be surprised to receive a call from him out of the blue with "an idea" about how to corral emerging artists into a new scheme. Yep; he's *that* guy.

Born in Bendigo, the 53-year old has helped shape and support the local arts community since studying Fine Art in 1980 at the then Bendigo CAE (now La Trobe University), pouring even more energy into it since returning to live here full-time in 2003.

After recognising a disparity in the local arts scene, in 2011 he started the ['Bend Arts' Facebook Group](#) and the 'Bend Arts Guide' page. While the former now boasts over 500 members – largely from the local region – the latter touts arts events and exhibitions around Greater Bendigo, which according to its busy feed, numbers many.

"It's there to support the grass roots side of Bendigo's arts scene," he explains of this entirely voluntary, online endeavour. "Going along to openings you'd find one lot of artists attending. Then a different group at another down the road. And neither seemed to know about the other!"

“This was a chance to link everybody and create a community”, the idea being that members would not only empower themselves but help each other.

Waller began his road to creating community while working at what was then Bendigo’s only dedicated art supplier. Leaving for Melbourne after graduating art school, Waller spent 20 years “off and on” working a variety of arts service jobs – including selling his drawings door-to-door in the filthy-rich suburb of Toorak.

“It didn’t go too well” he chortles.

Eventually winding up in a busy art supply store in South Melbourne, in the early-2000s his boss

suggested Waller return “home to Bendigo” to help establish another branch. It was a no-brainer.

Waller rapidly met local artists, learning much about the ‘new’ lie of the land, quite different to the one of his 80s student years. “Everyone knew everyone... and you literally could go into the CBD and rent a studio space any day of the week,” he recalls.

Times had changed. “People would come into the shop and not be aware of each other. There was no sense of community - people were just working in their bedrooms, it was very fractured. I realised just how many artists were in the area. And how beneficial it could be if they got together.”

Waller’s commitment to his own creativity began in the 1970s. Beginning in printmaking and painting, he eventually detoured into photo-digital art, finding similarities in the layering process, across the two mediums. He embraced digital photography and image editing software in the late 90s, “back when it was hard to get your hands on a Mac!” he grins. He hasn’t looked back.

Waller can spend anywhere from a day to a week completing an image and his pieces often evoke intense reactions from viewers. In Melbourne he is finding a new audience, while in Bendigo expanding his local base with regular shows in spaces like Dudley House and View Point.

Perhaps paradoxical for an artist immersed in ‘the digital’, Waller is primarily influenced by nature. His pictures detail its essential beauty and fragility, a recent example being the image he made the day Nelson Mandela died.

“I woke up, heard the news and felt compelled to make a piece on the day of his death. I went straight into the garden and took a photo of a dying, dried up rose on a plant.” Starting in the morning and finishing that night, he used a combination of image editing programs to transform the picture. The rose became a poetic, atmospheric study of the fragility of life and contrast - that between light and dark, black and white, life and death. It is a fitting artistic tribute to a man who spent much of his life



'Apparition' by Hugh Waller (2012)

serving others.

Something Waller knows a little about, too. Of Bend Arts, a hungry beast that takes up a good deal of unpaid, singular time and energy, he admits, “at some stage I will have to step away from it.”



Hugh Waller at El Gordo, 2011. Photo: Megan Spencer

“It’s there to connect people... If someone wants to pick up the ball and run with it, they are more than welcome,” he invites. “It’s up to the practitioners to make it work. They’ve got the tools, they’ve just got to pick them up and use them.”

He trails off into a knowing grin, one that reflects a sadly all-too-rare understanding these days, of the value of community, commitment and connection.

Visit Hugh Waller’s website at hughwallerart.com

Read another article about Hugh by Megan Spencer [here](#).

© Megan Spencer 2014