



The Great Sea

Inspired by the "great sea", the Mediterranean and the villages and towns along its coast, **Dr Wilma Tabacco's latest exhibition will be on display at the Glasshouse Regional Gallery** from May 12 ...



Hi Wilma. Where did you spend the first years of your life, and when did you move to Australia?

I was born in Italy in the Central Apennine Mountains (a long way from the sea!) in the Province of L'Aquila (the capital city being destroyed by an earthquake in 2009).

I arrived in Melbourne, Australia, aged 4, after a long sea voyage - during which I contracted measles and was placed in isolation for the duration of the journey (so my mother told me - I don't remember anything of the voyage. Family legend has it that I cried the whole time). Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining my fascination with natural disasters and my fear of deep water!

I have, since my early training, used a variety of abstract languages to express a variety of ideas, mainly related to my Italian past and to living all of my adult life in Australia. When younger I felt torn between these two cultural identities; now, I love the idea that I can be both, either or neither.

When did it become clear that your career would follow an artistic pathway?

It was clear to me from a very early age that I wanted to be an artist, but life had other plans for me - at least initially. I loved looking at, reading about and making pictures from early childhood but for Italian migrants in the late '50s, financial security was the primary focus. And for girls in particular, a steady job, marriage and children were the expected life course. My parents subscribed to this, but I did not.

When straight out of high school, the pressure to conform was so strong, that I studied Economics and Commerce and completed a Diploma in Education. I taught these dry

subjects for three years and then resigned. After extensive overseas travel, I enrolled in a Fine Art course (my father was aghast!) I was very fortunate that my work was "picked up" by Niagara Galleries in the late '80s and the gallery continued to represent my work for decades, with unexpected success.

We'll be able to experience your exhibition, *The Great Sea*, at the Glasshouse Regional Gallery. What were some of the biggest influences you used to form the basis of your work?

Once cannot be an abstract artist without recognising the contributions of Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevich and the American Colour Field artists. That said, my most significant influences derive from reading history, particularly ancient European history and most specifically Roman history. Archaeological artifacts, ancient ruins, lost civilizations and the sites in which these are located I find quite poignant, very relevant to human history and, though it may seem incongruent, to contemporary society.

It's fascinating, for instance, that part of what once was the coastline of the Bay of Naples has been, since the eruption of Mt Vesuvius in 79AD, under water, now part of the Mediterranean Sea (the Great Sea, as the ancients called it). Much of Pompeii is underwater. Continual change, whether by the force of nature or humanity's interventions through war and migration, has always been the "way of the world": everything changes, but nothing changes. These are the ideas that underpin my art.

When selecting the works for this exhibition, made over the last six years, I have kept in mind Port Macquarie's beautiful coastal location and deliberated on the similarities between this site and those of the Mediterranean that I hold dear.

How much time did you spend in

Italy observing the Mediterranean, preparing for this exhibition - and did you need to create your art works with the help of photos or memories?

My work does not derive from direct observation, although I have spent much time in coastal towns along the Mediterranean. I don't work with photos (too limiting) but I do love to reference old maps, villa floor plans, documentaries that reconstruct destroyed sites and to use text, that is, deconstructed alphabetical letters that "spell" the names of cities.

For instance, *Herculaneum* was constructed with the letters that spelled the name. I made these letters using paper, cut them randomly and then reassembled the bits according to my own compositional preferences so that the text could not be read, only hinted at and that the structure resembles a map or floor plan. The colours were chosen to reference those preserved domestic items (for instance, a baby's cradle) unearthed at Herculaneum after being buried and carbonised under 24 metres of volcanic ash.

Apart from being an artist, you're also an academic and a founder and director of Langford 120 gallery in North Melbourne. Why did you feel the need to establish this gallery space?

It seemed to me, and to my co-director Irene Barberis, that more and more "mid-career" and established artists had less and less opportunities to exhibit their works. We observed that artists who have contributed significantly to our cultural production

WHE
SELE
THE
WORK
FOR
THIS
EXHIB
MADE
OVER
THE
LAST
SIX
YEARS
I
HAVE
KEPT
IN
MIND
PORT
MACQU
ARIE'S
BEAUT
IFUL
COAST
AL
LOCATION ...

were either being marginalised or their work needed to conform to the dictates of commercial galleries. We wanted to provide artists with the potential to exhibit more experimental works and to ensure that those who had been "successful" in

the past continued to have the exposure they deserved.

I gave up the security of a steady income (lecturing at RMIT University) to devote time to this new endeavor.

What will be keeping you occupied for the rest of 2018?

I have works in six group exhibitions coming up soon. Irene Barberis and I are working on a collaborative installation for Langford 120's Ellipsis Gallery (I will be making a 3 metre "curtain" in gold foil) and I am planning new paintings for a solo exhibition in 2019. I am also working with an architect to design part of the façade of new building in Melbourne. This is all apart from running the gallery. Lucky me that I have a husband who likes cooking and cleaning!

Thanks Wilma.

Interview: Jo Robinson.

Photos courtesy of Mark Ashkanasy.



See *The Great Sea* at the Glasshouse Regional Gallery from May 12th - June 10th. Exhibition opening 12th May at 6pm. Free entry - bookings essential for exhibition opening.