

# Woolloongabba Art Gallery

## Now & Then Warren Palmer

**Exhibition Dates**  
7th April ~ 2nd May 2015



*Then 2014*  
Ceramic & mixed media  
40 x 40 x 62 cm



*Now 2014*  
Ceramic & mixed media  
40 x 40 x 46 cm

## THE WORK OF WARREN PALMER

I've watched Warren Palmer's work since the 1970s. He is an artist who exemplifies that feeling we get that something is happening in our own backyard comparable in concept, style and quality to the latest 'brainwave' being fed to us from 'overseas' in the art magazines, TV art shows and Biennales to which local art brokers are tuned—while Warren remains somewhat overlooked.

On hearing that Warren and I met in 1973 in an art school, people often presume he was my lecturer. Actually it was the other way round. I was a precocious 23 year old painting and drawing teacher at Queensland College of Art, George Street and Warren, 32, was in a class of a dozen experienced high school and college art teachers up grading their official qualifications. Over the next 6 months I managed to allay their scepticism of me on the studio floor and also in the nearby George Street pubs after—and even sometimes before—class. However, they did not share my preference for a structural approach to life drawing more like Cubism than fanciful Surrealism or Brett Whiteley, whose impact was very strong at the time. I've come to realise since that an artist like Warren, whose desire for and sense of structure was so satisfied in his 3-D work, was prone to playfulness on canvas and in the sketch pad. The drawings and paintings of Andre Masson (1896–1987) one of my favourite Surrealist, come to mind.

In Warren Palmer's 'Now & Then' exhibition 2-D and 3-D things are deliberately coupled to be viewed and (hopefully) sold in combo. The 2-D components are fiddley, squiggley, scribbly, spermy, squirmy and downright (or is it upright) wriggley! (just like Andre Masson's erotica). Warren admits they are about uprighting himself.



*What's It All About, Alfie (Self Portrait)*  
2010-2014, Ceramic & mixed media  
(Base thrown by Martin Kelly)  
28 x 20 x 68 cm

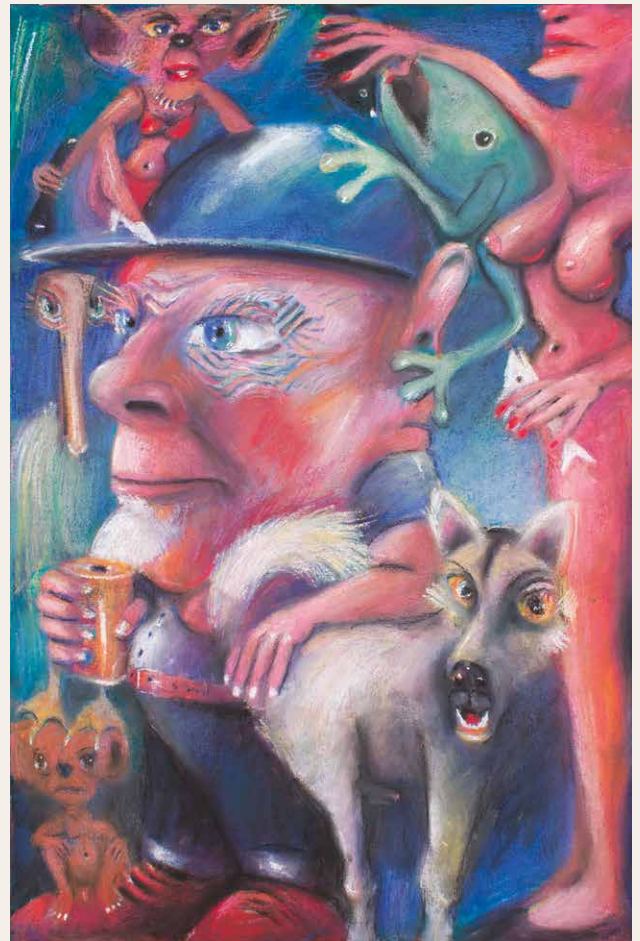
I look at Warren's work, done without a conscious thought of Masson's. I look at Masson's, particularly his erotic line drawings and visceral paintings and see that Warren's work has always been in flesh and fluids never akin to my structural theorems, even though he knows all about them. All those years ago in life class I taught a structural notion of figuration. Now, Warren is figuring the notion of his life having structure. Such is art's pluralism that a central issue for one person need not be of any concern to another.

Warren Palmer (born 1941, Herberton, North Queensland) would never strike anyone as 'an academic'. He is a big, gritty guy always with a fishing story to tell and a whiff of sea and earth about him. Pottery-clay-powdered, kiln-smoked and wine-dipped. This does not alter the fact that he spent much of his adult working life in academies; first as a youthful high school art teacher, then, by the time he was 30 as a teachers college and art school lecturer. Whilst always the freewheeling artist, he's been close to libraries, obliged to intellectualise college curricula and kept abreast of current, if trendy, art movements and debates by four decades of art students coming at him. So his subjective stance has always been taken under vast influence and knowledge of historic and contemporary art. One could not be a high school art teacher as he was in the 1960s without knowing and teaching ancient Egyptian art. One could not be a college lecturer in the 1990s as he was without comprehending post-modern theory and everything in between since Tutankhamun. His work shows the benefit.

While bright young sparks of contemporary art often seem to ‘drink at’ a pond of ideas about 10 years deep, Warren Palmer is a much more boring old fart who looks back; even if only 100 years sometimes to Andre Masson and those anarchistic Surrealists, mind-blown and spiritually stripped by war, revolution, the meaning of life and death and the whole damn thing. I can’t say that in another 100 years Warren Palmer will be seen as one of the strongest artists at work in Brisbane today at the turn of the 21st century. Mind you, he could be, could be. But what I can say is that some, seen as important now, will not be.

Historically we see a tendency for sculptors to make prints as a 2-D offshoot from their major work. The traditional materials of metal and stone in both activities is an obvious connection. Think Henry Moore, think George Baldessin. Warren Palmer, always the 3-D visionary, has never devoted himself to labouring at printing blocks of metal or stone. Rather his natural game is freehand image, gesture, decoration, even in clay—a brushman and draughtsman of flourish in ceramics for which he is best known. He ‘paints’ and ‘draws’ with the clay as well as the glazes. His curling, fanciful, top-heavy pot/ sculptures are more likely to topple over than become boring and relegated to door-stopping. (In the 1980s it took my baby son only 1 week of walking to demolish my lofty Palmer totem of the time; although it was taller and heavier than him). Even Warren’s wheel-thrown works are subjected to rabbit chops and other renovative kneading, touch and massage. Sensuality! felt in the clay, the seriously fired end results resembling the rude, giggly things done with clay by the naughty school boy behind the wheel-throwing teacher’s back. Similarly, his pastels remind us of doodles on the phone pad and in school book margins rather than the Classical tradition of capital ‘P’ picture making down through European history—although we can think Bosch and Bruegel, Surrealism and, more recently, the funky Pop of Red Grooms, the narrative crowd scenes of Keith Looby and German Expressionism old and new.

Warren Palmer’s modus operandi of the recent decade has aligned with the most socially relevant art practice of the 20th century: collaging and conglomerating common man-made objects into art forms; as an end in themselves or to be re-cast or re-surfaced in other materials and colours. A seminal spark of this from ±100 years ago must have been Picasso’s bronze of a monkey with a toy car for a face—initially modelled in clay by Pablo of course. In his collage Warren is a fellow traveller of his international contemporaries rather than merely an influencee. i.e. I believe he was as capable of thinking it all up for himself as he was of following the leaders (Jean Tinguely & Niki de Saint Phalle, France - Robert Arnenson, California, U.S.A.). Meanwhile, in the local sense his work, along with Tom Risley’s, resembled and pre-empted although didn’t necessarily influence Scott Redford’s black-drenched object composites.



*Selfie with Besty* 2014, Pastel on board, 92 x 61 cm

Now, the social relevance of appropriating household objects and toys into ceramic art works has been reciprocated, with suburban dollar stores and garden centres tossing up more terracotta and higher fired ceramic angels, cupids, gnomes, vases, pedestals, flowers and gross curly bits than Warren can accommodate. He is acquiring them and they make his new work 'blossom'. Although dominant in the structure and decor, Warren has absorbed them so well into his work you don't really see them at first as 'ring-in ceramics' much less be distracted by thoughts of their true origins. Rather, as always in Palmer's 'Maximalism', image, details, meaning and innuendo keep affecting your head (just like a time release cold and flu capsule) for some time after ingestion. The graphite 'bronzing' camouflage is all pure vintage and evolving Palmer. His mouldings of clay, paint, glazes, pastels and graphite traverse the range from fresh to lived in; broadly brushed yet fiddled with, never laboured and glum yet not easy options either. Excruciating details in pitted, layered surfaces and forms adding up to objects simultaneously cumbersome and fragile; demanding to look at, heavy and awkward to lift and carry—the antithesis of an Andy Warhol screen print!

Such is Warren Palmer's art and life.

Through this essay I have deliberately dropped the names of artists past, present, near and far because the wider tentacles of influence, lineage and impact are often neglected or severed in the parochial practice of 'pigeon-holing' artists. Warren Palmer, undeniably and willingly, has done years of hard labour on the 'rock pile' of CRAFT in Queensland. Yet his works and concepts warrant much broader connection with heavier, 'finer' art. As an art student/teacher trainee at Brisbane Central Tech. in 1960, his youthful painting and drawing teacher, only 6 years his senior, was William Robinson. Through the 70s, 80s and 90s they spent  $\pm 20$  years as fellow staff members in Brisbane teachers' colleges. Now as I look at the proliferate figures of various shapes, sizes and species which populate the ceramic 'pots' by each of them I wonder who got the wobbles and the blobbles from whom. (I don't assume it flowed from the 'teacher' whose different looking work of the time is documented). Maybe it was an independently, yet mutually contracted condition of their shared time and place. Whatever, Warren Palmer now deserves a place in Queensland and greater Australian art as much as anybody.

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Photograph by Alex Shaw, courtesy Woolloongabba Art Gallery