

5 Malakoff Street, North Caulfield, Vic, 3161
Telephone: (61 3) 9509 9855 Facsimile: (61 3) 9509 4549
Email: ausart@diggins.com.au Website: www.diggins.com.au
ABN.19006 457 101

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**Tribute to Lauraine Diggins by Dr Gerard Vaughan AM,
former Director National Gallery of Australia and National Gallery of Victoria**



Like each of today's speakers, I regard it as a great privilege to have been asked by Michael and Nerida to participate in Lauraine's memorial event, by sharing memories and reminiscences which are both personal and professional. Lauraine lived her life to the full, with great energy and creativity. When I think of Lauraine, I think above all of her enquiring mind, her hospitality and her sense of fun - and as a former art museum director who, in collaboration with curatorial colleagues, regularly acquired major works from the Lauraine Diggins Gallery, I look back on the discussions and negotiations as always being immensely interesting, and often challenging, given the depth of the research undertaken, and the reasoning about why a particular work would be ideal for a major public collection. Her knowledge of Australia's public art collections was immense, and the same clearly applied to the private collections sector. She enjoyed great success in directing historic, modern and contemporary artworks to many different destinations within the Australian art world.

The Lauraine Diggins Gallery always gave strong attention to the quality of its research, and the well-illustrated scholarly catalogues she produced stand out, following in the Melbourne tradition of the catalogues published by the Joseph Brown Gallery, and the even earlier Joshua McClelland Print Room and Gallery. I will always remember those robust debates about art world issues, her instinctive responses to matters and problems (both art historical and relating to the rough and tumble of the art market) to which she brought so much wisdom and experience. Lauraine seemed to like taking 'considered' risks by backing her hunches about authorship and quality, or by confidently weighing in to arguments about authenticity v. forgery, all too common in today's art world.

When Lauraine established her gallery in 1974 I was busy studying Arts/Law at Melbourne University, and it's not surprising that her new establishment was not on my radar. Rose and I then lived overseas for nearly twenty years, and so our paths didn't really cross with Lauraine and Michael until we returned to Melbourne in 1999, when I started at the NGV. We have already heard much about Lauraine's voluntary work in many spheres – and the impressive list of her associations printed in the memorial booklet speaks for itself – and I soon realised that Lauraine's and Michael's presence on the board of the NGV Foundation made a difference. Lauraine was knowledgeable, well-connected, and wanted to help. It is worth recording that after she retired from the Foundation board, she sometimes acted as an agent bidding for the NGV at art auctions, a role previously performed by Dr Joseph Brown until his retirement.

I really want to concentrate on Lauraine's sense of public service, of giving back to the arts community. Yes, she was a commercial dealer, and a very good one, but it is important to say how often she went out of her way to ensure that some of the greatest masterpieces which came into her hands were drawn to the attention of public galleries at the first opportunity if she felt – and Lauraine always knew this instinctively – that a particular work would perfectly suit a particular public gallery, whether it be the NGV or the NGA, or another state gallery, or a whole group of regional galleries, especially in Victoria. Her wish to assist the public sector extended to offering generous payment terms, allowing instalments to be paid by cash-strapped public entities. And her wish to assist extended to introducing some of her own friends and clients, who became donors to our public institutions in assisting with securing important artworks. Looking around this large gathering, I see a good number of people who helped in this way. The images of the major works handled by the Lauraine Diggins Gallery which have been projected throughout this gathering include many masterpieces of Australian art (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) with which we are familiar because they on permanent or regular display in our public institutions.

Lauraine gifted many works to the NGV and the NGA during my time as director, and I think in particular of her wish to strengthen our Indigenous holdings. Adrian Newstead has spoken articulately and extensively about Lauraine's many involvements with Indigenous art and artists, and art-producing communities. Her gifts of works from Utopia have been particularly generous and important from my perspective.

Lauraine's and Michael's inquisitiveness extended to areas rarely touched by Australian art dealers, such as offering European Old and Modern Masters, often drawing on her network of global dealers. In my years at the NGA in Canberra, I regularly thought of Lauraine when I walked past that important early 20th century Russian Constructivist masterpiece by Alexandra Exter, which she provided.

It is pleasing and reassuring to know that Michael and Nerida intend to continue Lauraine's work, and that her gallery will continue to provide that special mix of historic, modern and contemporary art from which so many clients have benefitted. In terms of the last category, I think I am right in saying that Lauraine was the first dealer to exhibit the work of Peter Churcher, straight out of art school, extending to Michael McWilliams, Andrew Sayers, Robert Clinch and many others. I know I speak for us all in wishing Michael and Nerida well.

Yes, we will all miss Lauraine. We will miss her impish sense of fun, her hospitality, and her 'reach' into so many fascinating areas. For me, I will always recall with pleasure those interesting discussions about the Australian and international art worlds, often late in the day on a weekend due to pressures of work, debating issues and ideas about the authorship of 'problematic' artworks, sometimes relating to the art market, and often not – but always with a glass of excellent wine. None of us will forget Lauraine's many achievements in enlivening the Australian art world.