

## The Elliott Eyes art collection: an extraordinary private treasure goes public in Erskineville

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On Gordon Elliott's desk is a limited edition Andy Warhol Mont Blanc pen, engraved with Campbell tomato soup tins. Around the top runs a Warhol quote: "Art is what you can get away with."

For Elliott, and his partner Michael Eyes, who live in a modest two-storey terrace in Erskineville, art is what you live with.

Every room of the house, from the kitchen to the bathroom, and every wall, is full of original artworks. Even the security door is a work of art called *Gordon's Gate*, by Sydney artist Michael Snape, with interconnecting bodies stretched out in silhouette.

The collection of mainly Australian and New Zealand works – 291 to be precise – has been assembled over 20 years. Now Elliott and Eyes have decided to open it to the public, showing small groups through the house by appointment.

Seen from the street, the only hint of what's inside is an elegantly elongated Terry Stringer sculpture, surrounded by a neat green hedge. It's easy to walk past without really noticing it, but anyone who stops to look will see it appears as a different work from three different angles - a large hand on one side, a face on the other, and at the back a male nude, which can only be seen from the house.

Elliott bought the terrace 20 years ago with his previous partner. Together, they made the decision that the bare white walls of their new home would only be hung with original artwork. "The house was a blank canvas," Elliott says. But 18 months later, his partner was diagnosed with cancer and died soon after. It was a traumatic time, and as part of his response to the death, he remortgaged the house. "When I was depressed, I went and bought something nice for the walls. So that was the main impetus of the collection."

He met Eyes in 2003, and they found their artistic tastes aligned.

"We both like paintings and we tend to like similar works," says Elliott. "Michael likes ceramics more than I do. I find them very fragile."

"You worry about them," says Eyes.

"I'm more a bronze and marble person," says Elliott. Though the collection is a reflection of both of them, he does most of the decision making. "I normally just buy stuff."

"He'll come home with something and surreptitiously hang it on the wall and see how long it takes for me to notice," says Eyes.

A recent purchase, a painted bronze banana by young Melbourne artist Adam Stone, was left in the fruit bowl in the kitchen. It didn't take long to spot that one.

The collection, meticulously documented by Gordon on a computer data base and filing cabinet in his study, roughly hangs around the figure in a landscape.

In the front dining room, the first room visitors see, every wall and surface is occupied by art, from paintings to marble sculptures, ceramics and decorative plates to embroidery. "We do have dinner parties but things have to be moved," says Elliott.

The effect is overwhelming at first, until Elliott homes in on individual works and starts telling their story, such as the large vertical triptych by New Zealand artist Euan MacLeod, commissioned specifically for a certain spot on the wall. Each panel is a separate scene, but together they create a figure that runs through all three. They asked the artist to include a dog in one panel – there's one in each. The work is called *Gordon Michael Triptych*. "So if anything ever happened and it was sold, whoever buys it has to keep that title," says Gordon.

About 10 per cent of the collection are commissioned works, usually by artists they have got to know well.

"On the whole we like to leave it up to the artist, so our intervention is pretty minimal," says Eyes. They have never been disappointed. "Generally, they are always better than expected."

The collection unfolds through the house. In the living room, glasswork by US glass artist Dale Chihuly sits opposite a 2.5-metre, 250-kilo bronze by New Zealand sculpture Terry Stringer which stands next to *Thor*, a gargantuan painting by McLeod. "We were so surprised by how wonderfully they went together," says Gordon.

The halls are decked with James Gleeson, Donald Friend, Rick Amor and Rupert Bunny, while Cherry Hood, Jeffrey Smart, Julian Marr and Sidney Nolan decorate the guest bedroom. In the master bedroom, a John Coburn painting glows on a cobalt blue wall, with ceramics by Gwyn Hanssen Pigott on the mantelpiece below, and a Michael Zavros painting above the bed. Outside in the small courtyard garden, Gregor Kregar's *Reflective Cloud Number Five* reflects the clouds.

Two small watercolours on paper by German artist Norbert Bisky hang in the downstairs hallway. Bought in 2014, they are among the collection's few non-Antipodean works.

"His oil paintings are amazing," says Eyes. "We'd love to have one."

"But they're €55,000; a little bit out of our league," says Elliott.

It's easy to assume the wealth of art that fills their home could only be amassed by people with a lot of money. The Elliott Eyes Collection is included in a small book called *Private*, by Skadi Heckmueller, about private art collections open to the public in Australia and New Zealand. The book's two other Sydney entries are Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation and White Rabbit Gallery; their owners, Gene and Brian Sherman and Judith Neilson, are distinctly well off. Elliott and Eyes are not.

"We're doing it on two less-than-average incomes," says Eyes, who works at a bookshop in Woollahra. "We're not millionaires."

Elliott is a line-dancing teacher. He grew up in Foster on the NSW mid-coast, in a non-arty family. "My parents would have no idea of the value of the art," he says.

He trained as a PE teacher and worked as a schools careers adviser for 11 years before he took up line dancing, then began to teach it, which he's been doing now for 27 years. He also has a masters of art in public space.

Two of his pupils, who have been dancing with him for 20 years and are now friends, are in the kitchen having a cup of tea.

"We call him the guru," says Sarah. "Every person he teaches will tell you he's the best, no one comes close to him."

But even the best line dancing teacher's salary is not overwhelming. Almost all the art in the house has effectively been bought on layby. Choosing one work at a time, if it's too expensive to buy outright – usually anything over \$5000 – Elliott organises to pay it off in instalments. Some galleries and artists allow him to take the work home while it's being paid off, some only release the work when payment is complete.

"We buy from galleries, we commission work, we buy from auction and from other collectors," he says. They also do swaps. In the kitchen is a silver totem pole sculpture by Melbourne artist Reko Rennie. On a visit to his studio, Elliott showed him some of their collection and Rennie suggested an exchange – one of his works for a small bronze by Australian-American artist Clement Meadmore.

Walking through the rooms, themes start to emerge. The human figure is a recurring subject, often male nudes, and dogs. The couple would like a real dog but are not home enough, says Gordon. "Therefore we just have lots of other dogs."

In another corner of the kitchen, two joyful dancing dogs in bronze by Anne Ross are a nod to Elliott's line of work, and reflect the collection's sense of humour. "We have serious art and we have fun art," he says.

Even the serious art can be fun. A striking male nude by Peter Churcher (son of Betty) in the upstairs hallway is perfectly positioned to reflect in the bathroom mirror, so unsuspecting guests get a shock when they look up from the hand basin to see a starkers stranger behind them.

Many artists are represented in depth, with multiple works. "I like supporting emerging artists and seeing how their art develops over time," Elliott says.

The collection increases by about 10 items a year – "As soon as you look at it, you know whether it's the right work

or not, it's an instinctive thing," Gordon says – but they do sell work from time to time.

"Every time I panic about the size of our mortgage, we normally offer something up for sale," says Elliott. "Then what ends up happening is we pay a bit off the house and I use the rest of the money to buy something else."

"The first question when we buy something is, 'Oh my god, where's it going to go?' " says Eyes. "As you can see, we're running out of wall space."

"We are quite creative with the way we hang," says Gordon. The best thing they ever did, he says, was install a tracking system, so artwork is hung from wires, not on hooks banged into the walls.

He has few collectors' regrets, apart from selling a Norman Lindsay ink and wash drawing that was overly framed. "By you!" Michael points out.

"I do regret selling that because "It was lovely," he says. "At the time it seemed the right thing to do."

And he has always wanted a William Dobell; he still thinks of a tiny work called *Maitland* he missed out on years ago. "At that stage I didn't have the funds, so I didn't end up buying it. It's one work I would have loved to have had."

Some works are the result of dogged persistence, like the Michael Zavros that hangs in the main bedroom. Gordon had been trying to buy one of his paintings for a while but everything was sold out. "So I sent Michael an email saying, 'Who do you have to kill to get one of your works?' He sent back a polite email saying, 'I'm represented by these three galleries.' I replied, 'I know that, I have been following you for ages, I just can't get a work.' Then about a month later I got an email saying he would offer me this work from his own private collection, so he shipped it down to a Sydney gallery, I went and looked at it and said, 'Yes, I really like it but I need to pay it off.' He was happy with that, so I paid it off and eventually got the work."

The first art Gordon ever bought was in 1998, two Turner-like scenes of Sydney harbour by Joseph Frost. They are not on the walls - they no longer fit the collection - but he will never sell them. The first artist he began collecting in depth was James Gleeson, because he liked his figurative work: "Not that many artists paint male nudes."

Some artists will never be within reach, but there are different ways of collecting: the men have set a goal to see every Vermeer painting in known existence. So far, they have seen two thirds of them, in the US, Europe, UK and in Sydney when they arrive on tour.

"Wherever we travel we find out if there's a Vermeer around and try and tick it off the list," says Elliott. "We picked Vermeer because it's achievable. You don't pick someone like Picasso because you'll never be able to see the whole lot."

Hardest to tick off will be the one owned by Queen Elizabeth, but he remains optimistic. "If it's the last one on our list, who knows, it could be an email, 'Dear Liz, looking for the last Vermeer, please can we come and have a visit?' "

In their own collection, he and Eyes agree on their favourite work – *The Gateway (The Man Who Walked Away)* by Rick Amor, which Elliott commissioned for Eyes' 50th birthday. The result of 2½ years of secret planning, it hangs proudly in the front hallway. "We see it many times each day and I still feel it's one of the best works in our collection," Elliott says.

They have had groups visit the house before, usually organised through the Art Gallery of NSW or commercial galleries, and the decision to open to the general public was not difficult.

"Once an artwork is sold, unless you're invited into the home, it's never seen again," Elliott says. "We're quite proud of our collection and thought we'd be quite happy to show it to people."

"It's much more personal than a public gallery and brings the works into close-up, with the different relationships between different works, because it's an art lover not a curator."

All the time, money and effort has been worth it for the immense pleasure the art gives him. "I love living with it and seeing the works daily," he says. "If I'm feeling flat, I'll just walk around and look at the whole lot. Sometimes I just sit with works and look at them."

"We're not extravagant, we don't eat out all the time, we're not big drinkers, we don't smoke, we don't gamble. We all have our vices and art is ours."

*The Elliott Eyes Collection is open by appointment on Tuesdays, 9.30-11.30am, \$20 entry, [theelliotteyescollection.com](http://theelliotteyescollection.com).*

Private by Skadi Heckmueller, Dott Publishing/Artand Foundation, \$24.95, is available at the MCA shop, Art Gallery of NSW shop and Elliott Eyes Collection.

### **ELLIOTT'S COLLECTING TIPS**

- \*Start small, do lots of research and develop an eye for good art
- \*Visit as many galleries and exhibitions as possible and ask any questions, even if you think they are dumb
- \*Research artists you like, to get to know more about their art
- \*Start with works on paper or ceramics as they are cheaper
- \*Take a risk on an emerging artist as they also tend to be cheaper
- \*Just because a work is by a well-known artist does not make it a great example of their art
- \*For affordable art loans, try Art Money (artmoney.com) or Tasmania's Collect Art Purchase Scheme (collect-art.com.au)
- \*Pay off works off over time
- \*Buy what you love

### **SYDNEY PRIVATE ART COLLECTIONS ON SHOW**

Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Paddington – Gene and Brian Sherman's contemporary art

White Rabbit Gallery, Chippendale – Judith Neilson's contemporary Chinese art

Wombarra Sculpture Garden, Wombarra – Gaby Porter's outdoor sculpture

Centennial Hotel, Paddington – Anthony Puharich's contemporary photography

Lucio's Italian Restaurant, Paddington – Lucio Galletto's Australian art

### **CORPORATE COLLECTIONS**

Transfield – Walsh Bay Sculpture Walk, Hickson Road, Walsh Bay

Macquarie Group – emerging Australian artists, Space Gallery, 9-19 Elizabeth Street, city (open Tuesday and Thursday, 10am-2pm)

Deutsche Bank – art incorporated into the Norman Foster building, Deutsche Bank Place, 126 Phillip Street, city

Allens – Australian artists commissioned to create site-specific work for the Allens Project Space, visible from glass lifts, Deutsche Bank Place, 126 Phillip Street, city

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/the-elliott-eyes-art-collection-an-extraordinary-private-treasure-goes-public-in-erskineville-20170216-gub10v.html>*