John Mutsaers

Clutching my half used return bus ticket I looked with curiosity at a painting by John Mutsaers of a goat in a boat at the Gippsland 14 exhibition recently held in Melbourne. In my research about John I had discovered that after a professional painting career over many years he studied a Masters in Creative Art Therapy which had a great influence on his art. As he taught young people who were struggling with life and often finding a release through drug taking he encouraged them to find their way through art, John’s own journey changed so that his most recent works are centred around his personal philosophies, social commentary and such themes as freedom, equal rights, loss and migration.

So – understandably I was a little confused about the goat. But then it all made sense once I understood that John had emigrated with his parents from a Holland still recovering from World War II with little food to eat and many hardships. The goat in the picture is representative of all migrants. And why? Because goats are amazing creatures that have the ability to survive in almost all conditions. Goats, who were also early European settlers in Australia, are extremely curious, intelligent, and indomitable. John told me. “Everyone I tell about the theme has a story about goats and their tenacity, so it’s reasonable to accept that their determination and resolve is familiar. Migrant stories have the same ring about them.”

Asked where he gets his artistic talent he puts as much down to genetics having had several uncles who were artists as well as his father’s inventive capacity. “Dad was regarded as ‘Mr fix it’ by the neighbours; there seemed to be no end to his talent. I'm sure that his handiness, inventive nature and his confidence that he could do most things he put his mind to, are part of what makes me an artist today.” I laughed as John told me about his father burying his passenger bus in a paddock as the Nazis invaded his city thereby avoiding confiscation of all motor vehicles. As the Nazis left after the war that same bus was exhumed from its grave and put back into service with his father back at the wheel of the only bus in town.

John’s talent was evident at an early age. At age 4, when most kids are drawing those wonderful stick figures with distorted arms and legs, John was drawing bodies complete with torsos and arm and legs all in proportion. He still adores life drawing by the way and is an ever present artist at the Bass Coast Art Society Life Drawing classes on a Tuesday morning. ”Painting, drawing and clowning around are all subjects I would have excelled at but unfortunately they were not part of the curriculum at my school.” And so at 14 years shortly after he arrived in Australia it was to enter into the workforce and not continue any studies.

After a few odd jobs he found a career in Land Surveying, a boss that encouraged him to re-engage in studies – and leading up to this the discovery of the local town’s local group of artists who encouraged him with his art. He won his first prize of 10 shillings at age 16.

He continued exploring art and did a couple of live-in summer schools at the National Gallery of Victoria with Clifton Pugh. Of all things, John is renowned for being able to capture light on his canvasses and it is the tonal painter John Balmain that he credits for mentoring him to achieve this ability.

John has few regrets in life – but one is that he lost much of his Dutch language due to his family’s desire to quickly assimilate into the Australian way of life. Whilst he has now re-learned the language of his birthplace, it is the language of art that he lists as his other significant language.

So how did this Dutch born fellow end up living just up the road in Inverloch? After immigrating he moved to the La Trobe Shire and after meeting his wife, Mary, bought an idyllic little farm with an old milking shed just screaming out to be converted to a studio. They spent a blissful 41 years there before tragically a fire ripped through and destroyed the studio and many of his artworks – as well as a note of thanks from Princess Margaret for one of his works that became part of her collection. And so began the search for another home.

He is often asked to judge art – and whilst this at one time was a substantial part of his art career – he is now more reticent. “There are clearly good and bad pictures but I worry about how much that judgment depends on a judge's personal taste? It wouldn't be the first time a badly reviewed work later turns up as a masterpiece. This is precisely what happened to Vincent van Gogh.”

Whilst he has not judged for some time he did judge the Winter Solstice Exhibition in 2018. John has instigated this project where he wants to encourage in particular young and emerging artists to exhibit at Wonthaggi’s Community Gallery, ArtSpace. Low entry fees are designed to encourage such artists. This exhibition is now held every year at ArtSpace.

By the way John turned 73 a few days ago. “I often hear friends talk about their retirement plans and I thank God that I don’t have to worry about that. I never want to stop making art.”