FROM RIVER BANKS TO SHEARING SHEDS

THIRTY YEARS WITH FLYING ARTS

1971 – 2001

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

The work presented in this dissertation is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at The University of Queensland or any other university.
The thesis explores the history of an organization generally known as Flying Arts. Queensland is host to this unique visual art school which, since 1971, has flown contemporary artists to regional Queensland. The school was responsible for disseminating modern creative art – experimental art when the artist relies on his subjective sensibility – to people throughout Queensland after its founder, Mervyn Moriarty, learned to fly a small plane to take his workshops to the bush. In particular, the study examines the impact of creative art on the lives of women (and some men) living in regional Queensland, to understand why so many travelled long distances to attend workshops.

With very little having been written on the leisure activities of country women, the history of Flying Arts gives an insight into why women were attracted to its workshops. Women predominated at workshops and the thesis argues that they found relief from constantly living with the heat and the dust and the loneliness of life in rural areas. The workshops and the social interaction with like-minded women compensated for the cultural deprivation of life on the land. The women who attended Flying Arts embraced Moriarty’s workshops in search of the personal regeneration the school provided.

In writing the history of Flying Arts, the theme that binds the thesis is the power of creative art to stimulate discussion and project ideas when people come together as a group. The potency of creative art is its demand for concentrated thought; students could not copy what they saw before them, and mental stimulation from discussions with contemporary artist/teachers on how to express themselves through their art was an invaluable exercise for other activities. By supplying an interesting and encouraging venue for networking and discussion, the school opened up a broader lifestyle for hundreds of people living in regional Queensland, and case studies documenting changes in their lives have come from people who attended its workshops.

The study reveals that not only did Moriarty’s workshops change lives, they brought changes to country towns. To display the work produced by the group, local artists trained by the school were responsible for a growth in private galleries; their activities influenced local councils to acquire artworks and set up regional galleries in many country towns. From only two regional galleries outside Brisbane in 1971 there are now over fifty. The extensive network of regional galleries brought travelling art exhibitions from city galleries
to the bush – alleviating, to some extent, the cultural deficiencies of life in regional Queensland.

In writing the history, the thesis follows the growth of creative art from the stagnant years in Brisbane when the teaching of skills was the policy at Queensland’s premier art training college. When practising contemporary artists trained outside the state began teaching in Brisbane they brought new vitality to Queensland art and the early chapters trace the lives of those who introduced an art which focussed on the creative imagination. The following chapters record the economical difficulties of extending creative art workshops to regional Queensland, and the dedication of those who were responsible for its success.
Acknowledgments

Many people assisted me. My research draws heavily on oral history through interviews with current and past students of Flying Arts. Of particular assistance have been former students: Kathryn Brimblecombe Fox (Dalby), Coralie Busby (Bundaberg), Gladys Cooney (Julia Creek), Peggy Uebergang (Inverell), Ellie Neilsen (Biloela), Rita Kershaw (Rockhampton), Auda Maclean (Baralaba), Jo Forster (Richmond), Anne Lord (now at James Cook University, Townsville), Mabs Blackband (Dalby), Jack Wilson (Dalby), Char Speedy (Quilpie), Judith Banks (Goondiwindi), Jocelyn Cameron (Goondiwindi), Patricia Garner (Goondiwindi), and Kath Leonard (Goondiwindi). A number of students were interviewed at Rolleston and Baralaba workshops. Leslie Jenkins, a professional oral historian, generously gave me access to oral histories she had gathered from students centred around Mt. Isa. Many students from remote areas of Queensland responded to my questionnaires, and I am grateful that they shared their experiences with me.

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