

LIFE AFTER BRYMORE

Chris Austin

I left Brymore in the summer of 1967 and the one thing I was certain of was that I would never be a farmer. Not that I hadn't enjoyed my time at Brymore but my art teacher, Malcolm Fergusson RWA, had presented to me a totally different set of possibilities.



That year the "Beatles put out "Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" and Bob Dylan gave us "Blonde on Blonde"; the Sixties were in full swing, the world was changing and I was going to be an artist. Unfortunately my parents felt that more education was required so in the autumn I was enrolled for 6th Form at Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, Crediton, in Devon.

After an all boys boarding school I found my new environment very different and spent more time learning to cope with girls than I did my formal studies. Eventually however I managed to achieve enough GCE qualifications to apply

for tertiary education and found myself in 1969 with acceptance to both Exeter Art College and St. Luke's College of Education (now the Education Faculty of Exeter Uni.). My parents suggested that the latter offered more employment opportunities so in September 1969 I began to study to become a teacher of Art and Drama.

Maybe six months after arriving at St Luke's I had become friends with two other students and together we approached the head of Art to complain about the level of art tuition. It was explained to us that we were being trained as teachers not as artists and if we wanted to be artists we were in the wrong place. That day we all enrolled in evening classes at the local Art College.

By 1974 I had graduated as a teacher and spent the next eighteen months working for Wiggins and Teape at their paper mill just outside Exeter while my then girlfriend finished her History degree. I had spent the previous five years as a typical student of the time. I drank too much, I smoked too much (and not just tobacco), demonstrated about everything and made subversive art and performance my mission in life. I had had a wonderful time but now I had to work.

I found a job teaching Art at The Leggatts School in Watford, Hertfordshire where I spent the next nine years learning the practicalities of teaching students whose background was quite different to my own. I also held a couple one man exhibitions of very pretentious paintings at the Ickenham Arts Centre.

The fact that I sold nothing at either exhibition only served to convince me that I was a misunderstood genius.

In 1979 I applied for and won the job of Head of Art at Kings Langley School. The school was just down the road really but its catchment area was quite different. These were not street smart kids from working class homes but the sons and daughters of wealthy, second hand car salesmen who lived in the "green belt" and cared about education. Life was sweet and I enjoyed a very happy five years of being invited onto marking panels for the new CSE examination system. I also, saw many plays, exhibitions and concerts in London, spent half term holidays in Paris and summer holidays in Greece.



Playing Henry the Eighth in "A Man for All Seasons" 1979

While my life as a respectable art teacher was being established I happened to meet the Australian who was to become my partner and mother of my three daughters. Lyn came from Sydney and was loud, opinionated and to my eye, quite devastatingly beautiful. We bought a house in Watford and proceeded to breed. By 1985, with two daughters, Jessica and Abigail, we decided to move to Australia. Well Lyn's mother was ill and we fancied an adventure. We sold up and with Lyn seven months pregnant with Martha we flew out of Heathrow airport to the other side of the planet.

It was not my first visit to the Great South Land, in fact we had holidayed there in 1982 but living there was a different matter. On arrival and for six months after, we lived with Lyn's mother in the Western suburbs of Sydney. I eventually found work as Head of Arts and Practical Subjects at St. John's Regional Girl's High School, Auburn. St. John's was (it's closed now) a girls Catholic school. In one hit I had done what I'd sworn never to do; never a private school, never a religious school and never, never a girls school. On the plus side, we bought a lovely house in the Blue Mountains, some forty minutes outside Sydney but even this was not enough to compensate for the horrors of main stream Catholic Australia. After four years of commuting to and from a job I hated we finally decided to move up country to the mid N. Coast of NSW.

We had seen an advertisement in the Sydney Morning Herald for a property of some four acres on which stood "a charming timber poled cottage – the artists dream". Wow! Just what we wanted and very cheap. We wasted no time in

driving the 420 kilometers north to Kempsey and then a further 20 kilometers of dirt road to the “dream”. The “cottage” was a traditional slab structure with a pit toilet, the sort of building that early settlers had constructed. We bought it for \$45,000.

To my romantic mind it was indeed a dream. We pumped water from the creek and baked carrot cake in a wood fired stove. We had neighbors who grew everything and played the best music I’d ever heard. We had found the hippy paradise. The truth is of course that living in the bush comes with its very own set of challenges. In the city one is confronted with other people but in the bush it’s nature herself and nature in Australia is pretty wild. We have Kangaroos the size of small cows, we have wonderful Koalas and beautiful Rainbow Lorikeets but we also have the most poisonous snakes and spiders in the world. On our property I have seen King Brown snakes, Red Bellied Black snakes and a 10 foot long Python as well as Huntsman spiders and the deadly Funnel web; if that’s not enough we have floods and bush fires of biblical proportions. It takes some getting used to but I wouldn’t trade it for anywhere else in the world.



The “dream” house – Collombatti near Kempsey NSW Australia 1989

After moving to Kempsey I worked as Head of Fine Arts at Kempsey College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) for 14 years and then moved back into school education working with the Dhunghutti (the local Aboriginal tribe) kids. This is not as idyllic as it might sound as drug and alcohol abuse is rife and the circumstances of many of these children are pretty dire. However I enjoy the work and now only do three days a week.

I am a member of the local Arts Council and have held several one man exhibitions over the years from which I've made reasonable sales – I'm obviously not a misunderstood genius.



Interior of the "dream" house 1989

My partner has remained a teacher in a local primary school; two of my three daughters are teachers and the other - a starring actor in Sydney



Jessica, Lyn, Abigail and Martha dressed for a Frida Kahlo party in 2009

In 2005 we rebuilt our bush house into a more "Grand Designs" type place



The “dream” house 2005 looking toward our octagonal bedroom

....and in 2008 we went travelling – Turkey – Austria – Poland – UK - New York – Texas – San Francisco.

In April this year I spent a glorious week at the internationally famous Byron Bay Blues Festival where Bob Dylan played songs from 1967 to me.



If you ask me – life doesn’t get much better than that.

*If you’re interested you can view some of my pictures at -
www.wonderlandframing.com.au*