



Emma Bett

Emma Bett is the third generation of Bett gallerists, and with so many collective years of art knowledge behind her, brings a promising future to the gallery. Emma is a specialist in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: an interest which was spurred by the Aboriginal art she encountered in the gallery in her formative years. "I felt I didn't know enough about Aboriginal Australia," says Emma, so she took a bachelor's degree in the subject, specialising in art and language. Emma has spent much time in Arnhem Land and is a speaker of Gupapuyngu, a Yolgnu language. "I see the gallery becoming more involved with Arnhem Land art," says Emma, "and in bringing a younger side to the gallery, I would also like to work with new, young artists." Emma believes the Australian art world is at an exciting crossroads. "A decade of unprecedented economic prosperity has spurred intense activity amongst artists, gallerists and specialist curators across the country," she says. "A new generation of painters, sculptors, designers and images makers of all kinds is gaining a foothold in the art market. I'm thrilled to be party to that new talent and to bring some of those individuals to the Bett Gallery stable. To introduce this talent to a new generation of collectors is also an exciting and challenging prospect."

Bett Gallery Hobart is a family affair. Jack Bett, Dick's son, grew up around the gallery and studied fine arts (majoring in photography) at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania. Jack is responsible for all photographic services at the gallery, as well as exhibition installation, and the transport, installation and supervision of satellite exhibitions outside Tasmania.



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B E T T g a l l e r y H O B A R T



Dick Bett knows what makes himself tick. He has distilled the lessons of 30 years of running some of the most successful commercial galleries in Australia and New Zealand into one simple truth: “I’m absolutely driven by art,” he says. It’s this strength of conviction that has made Bett Gallery Hobart one of the outstanding galleries of Australia.

Slotted between shops and restaurants in the fashionable suburb of North Hobart, Bett Gallery Hobart has a wide plate glass shopfront, the works clearly visible to passers by. Dick and daughter Emma Bett are usually in attendance, as the eclectic clientele drops in. This clean-lined, modest space and the unpretentious atmosphere with which it is run perhaps belies the seriousness of the operation. The gallery represents several of Australia’s leading artists and is a national authority on Aboriginal art. It is one of the few Australian galleries with a strong Trans-Tasman connection, and certainly the only art gallery in Australia overseen by a third generation gallerist.

Dick Bett founded Bett Gallery Hobart in 1986. He came from a background in fine arts himself, with early ambitions to be a sculptor. Previously he had co-run the Elva Bett Gallery in Wellington New Zealand with his mother who had founded the gallery in the 1960s. Then there had been an important five year stint as director of the Govett-Brewster Gallery in the North Island’s New Plymouth, which fostered a deep appreciation of contemporary New Zealand art and art of the Pacific Rim countries. Bett knew of the strong arts focus in Australia’s island state, Tasmania, and two years as director of Chameleon Artists’ Co-op (now known as Contemporary Arts Services Tasmania) in Hobart convinced him of huge untapped artistic potential here.

“I became convinced of the prospects for a commercial gallery in Tasmania,” says Bett. “I recognised the quality of the artists here, and I knew I could set up something as good as anything on the Australian mainland.” Establishing a gallery in Tasmania in the 1980s was pioneering work in an underdeveloped market. It was an initiative that soon took off, however, when the first Bett Gallery was opened in one of the convict-built sandstone warehouses of Hobart’s Salamanca Place. Surrounded by artists’ studios and a creative hum, the gallery began to make a name for itself and soon became one of the most respected, as well as commercially successful, in Australia.

This was a time of cultural awakening in Tasmania. A far-away outpost in the Southern Ocean, Tasmania had long felt remote and isolated: in some ways culturally bereft. But a kind of island resourcefulness and creative inventiveness began to feed a new art and crafts movement in Tasmania from the 1980s. At the same time the island, with its superb natural environment, was at the very start of a tourism boom. As this trend gathered momentum, the dynamics of the waterfront Salamanca precinct changed to become less interested in serious art, and Bett Gallery Hobart was set for a move.

The new site chosen was a part of Hobart on the fringes of the CBD. Like Melbourne’s Brunswick St or London’s Notting Hill, North Hobart was the beating heart of arts on the island. “There are 90 artists living and working around here today,” says Bett. It was the perfect setting for a flourishing gallery with a national reputation.

Dick Bett is often asked “why Tasmania?” by those who consider the island’s remoteness a disadvantage. For Bett, as far as art is concerned, Tasmania is very much a centre. “Tasmania has an outstanding training institution with an art school that has been operating well over 100 years. In the past, when Tasmanian artists had an opportunity to exhibit elsewhere, they would pack up and leave,” Bett says. “With the advent of information technology and cheap flights, that trend has been stopped and even reversed.” Artists now move to Tasmania to make art, because of the creative stimulation of the burgeoning arts community. “It’s safe and Green here,” says Bett. “It’s at the bottom of the world. It’s about as far away from anywhere as you can get.” It’s a place where artists can forget about paying big-city rents and concentrate on making art. “And the landscape is utterly amazing,” adds Bett. “That’s an attraction in itself.”

Over twenty years of working in Tasmania, Bett has nurtured many artistic talents on the island, and Bett Gallery Hobart has become an essential part of the arts scene locally. “When you start a gallery, you start with new artists. The job of a gallerist is to build their public profile while at the same time building the confidence of clients.” Bett prides himself in being able to pick artistic talent and drive early on, nurturing artists in a way that allows their careers to flourish. Leading Australian art makers like Philip Wolfhagen, David

Keeling, Raymond Arnold, Tim Burns, Richard Wastell and Barbie Kjar, have been represented by the gallery since the inception of their professional lives. “When we identify talent, we make a commitment of 20 years or more to the artist. We don’t do that lightly,” says Bett.

Commitment to clients is similar. Bett believes in matching an artwork to a client, and is unwaveringly straightforward with his opinions. “We like to nurture long term relationships with clients. Everything a client buys has to be better than the last piece.” The gallery now has clients throughout Australia, as well as in New Zealand, Europe, North America, Southeast Asia and China. A growing online presence is widening the client base also.

To nurture public knowledge and appreciation of the visual arts, Bett has also set up nine art collecting groups in Australia. Each group has a membership of 25-30, and each member contributes a set amount of equity to acquire artworks. The groups exist for ten years, and meet several times a year to hear art lectures and discuss their purchases. Each piece is lent to each member on a rotating basis, and when the group concludes, after a final valuation to determine total equity, there is a private auction to reorganise ownership of each piece. “It’s a wonderful way for people to get a good working knowledge of Australian Art, as well as to obtain some superb works of art. Some members become very serious collectors,” says Bett. The success of these collecting groups has also given the Bett Gallery an extensive support network which has been critical to the success of the gallery.

An addition to its strong focus on Tasmanian art, the gallery also presents a number of New Zealand artists, as well as works by contemporary artists from the Australian mainland, and selected international art. There is currently a growing focus on Aboriginal art, spearheaded by Emma Bett who is an Aboriginal art specialist. Dick Bett is a registered valuer under the Cultural Gift Scheme for Australian and New Zealand art since 1890 – including Aboriginal Art: one of few specialists in Australia with this status.

“We deal with about 20 artists,” says Bett. “Painters, photographers, printmakers, sculptors and ceramicists. I’m quite catholic in my tastes.” What runs through all the workings of the gallery is something that Bett says he looks for in the artists and artworks themselves. “It’s about quality of original creative imagination,” says Bett, “and expertise in applying that. That’s what we demand of our artists and what we demand of ourselves.”

Bett admits to being stubborn, and driven by excruciatingly high standards in the pursuit of excellence. At the centre of it all is a deep reverence for art and the human imagination. “The range of artistic ideas that people come up with never ceases to astound me,” he says. It is this that keeps Bett, and his clients, enthralled.

Gabi Mocatta

April 2007



Richard Wastell *Napalm forest. Myrtle, Leatherwood, Sassafras* 2006
Oil & marble dust on linen, 132 x 182 cm

Bett Gallery Hobart exhibition highlights 2006–2008

Raymond Arnold
Peter Atkins
Richard Bell, Vernon Ah Kee and Gordon Hookey
Les Blakebrough
Tim Burns
Jane Burton
Amanda Davies
Corrie Fullard & Jeanette James
Chayni Henry
David Keeling
Abie Loy Kemarre
Barbie Kjar
Jonathan Kimberley & Jim Everett
David Larwill
Sue Lovegrove
Stewart MacFarlane
Derek O’Connor
Angelina Pwerle
Minnie Pwerle
Ramingining (fish traps and poles)
Michael Schlitz
David Stephenson
Imants Tillers
Philip Trusttun
Richard Wastell
Tiffany Winterbottom
Philip Wolfhagen