

**OPEN THE BAY OF FIRES ART PRIZE AT ST HELENS  
BY  
THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC  
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA  
SATURDAY 9<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2012**

Thank you for inviting me and my wife to come up here to one of the most beautiful parts of Tasmania to open the inaugural Bay of Fires Acquisitive Art Prize. May I say this is a great idea to put St Helens and the Bay of Fires on the map especially during the winter months. I think that congratulations go to Jo Thorold, Chris Draffin and Carol Rollason for conceiving this great idea and for sowing the seed leading to its development and this launch. Of course, like all good ideas a successful development depends on the degree of support given it by the local community and in this respect that support was strong and extensive so congratulations also go to the Break O'Day Council, and the District Chamber of Commerce and Tourism for their support. A big thank you to the Council for putting up half of the substantial prize of \$20,000 and an equally big thank you to the two donors, who equally contributed the other half but who want to remain anonymous. It must have been widely regarded as a worthwhile acquisitive Art Prize for it attracted no less than 169 entries from both established and emerging artists from as far afield as Canada, Darwin, Perth and Sydney. So I do hope that sponsorship at this year's level will continue for a few more years at least for the Art Prize seems to me to be a very good initiative and worthy of continuing support.

The Bay of Fires Art prize has also attracted some very respected and well qualified judges, Professor Marie Sierra, Head of the School of Visual and Performing Arts at Utas, Robert Owen, former Associate Professor and Head of Sculpture at RMIT and Glenn Barkley who is the Senior Curator of the recently redeveloped Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Thank you for doing what seems to me to have been the impossible job of first reducing the 169 entrants down to 35 finalists that are hanging here and that I had the advantage of seeing this afternoon when we first got to St Helens and second, for selecting the winner.

When I am asked to open art exhibition I always give a disclaimer that I know little about the visual arts. My background as a lawyer is words, not pictures. Although my father was, and my brother is an architect I missed out on the family genes that carry the capacity to create visual art; although I like to think that I inherited an appreciation of it. But it's the jargon that I find difficult. I refer to the following in a trendy exhibition catalog:

'The artist, through the materiality of the paint, mediates the transition and spatial flux between oceanic, landscape and cosmic space. Heavily applied, the painterly viscosity brings a three-dimensionality to the work into which the viewer can visually dive.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/deepend/stories/2007/1814788.htm>. Accessed 25th March 2011

I kid you not; I did not make that up! Or perhaps this comment from an art critic:

“I’m troubled by how the internal dynamic of the biomorphic forms verges on codifying the accessibility of the work.”

Well I don’t know about you, but I have absolutely no idea what any of that might mean, but I can say that it makes me nervous and I feel inadequately equipped to open an art award exhibition such as this one.

Indeed, at one stage I gave consideration to the idea that instead of trying to talk about art perhaps I could treat you to my learned discourse on the independence of the Judiciary and the development of the rule of law but, quite unreasonably I thought, my wife counseled me against doing that.

However, as I looked around the works this afternoon I realised that one doesn’t need to use or understand that kind of jargon that unfortunately so often accompanies artistic endeavour in order to appreciate the work. It will either speak to your emotions or it won’t. David Walsh at MONA understands this I think, and that is why his exhibits do not bear labels which people read and which, he says, will bias their opinions and emotional experience of the work. He wants you just to look at the piece, painting sculpture or other artwork and listen to, and feel your emotional reaction.

As I did just that in relation to this exhibition I realised what a difficult job it must have been for the judges. Although the theme for the prize “Our Island Inheritance” has been defined, the interpretations of that theme have produced an eclectic mix of art that defies comparative judgment. By way of example for a reason I cannot explain I just love Alan Young’s “The Eski & the Octopus”. But it is totally different from, for example, Sally Mumford’s tapestry-like “The Sea Remembers its Maireeners”. And both are totally different from - again for example - Leigh Robert’s fused glass sculpture. But each of them speak to my emotions in a way that I am unable to articulate in words, even if I had a handle on art jargon. And so it is for me with respect to all of the work that the judges selected as the 35 finalists. Although linked by a common theme each of them has something different to say to each of us.

I urge you to acquire one of the works from this exhibition. Apart from the pleasure the work will give you hanging on the wall in your home it may well be that this exhibition will become so well-known and popular that the fact that your art was acquired at the *inaugural* Bay of Fires Art Prize will make it very valuable.

Now I know that you are all eagerly waiting to learn who has won the inaugural Bay of Fires Art Prize and as it is my duty to make that announcement I will do it now by saying that it gives me much pleasure to congratulate

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