

## Portrait of an artist and writer, Kerry Rochford

Lorraine McLoughlin

### Your studio reveals a woman of multiple creative pursuits. What are the main ones?

Currently I am painting with watercolors, involved in a demanding embroidering project and regularly writing work of a reflective kind. They are my three major foci, but I am also knitting madly producing clothes for children in Ukraine and planning new projects for the 2023 Festival Fleurieu.

### You had a successful career in education. Was there a parallel life in art or did that come later?

From my earliest married days, I was always interested in interior decoration, and reading about art, but I was busy with three children as a stay-at-home mum. I knitted, baked, preserved, gardened, and worked part time, and only had time to start studies in my thirties, receiving my first school posting after I turned forty. While I studied and taught, Clive and I ran a B n B on six acres in Hope Forest so personal time was scarce. As a teacher I did take a student to a drawing class and tried it myself, having a light-bulb moment that, contrary to common wisdom, drawing and other art skills are a process rather than a mystery, and can be learned. Developing a productive artistic life for myself, however, had to wait until I was in my fifties and living in Normanville.

### Although your various artistic interests are intertwined, let's discuss them separately. Firstly, where did your art begin?

I began with mosaics, applying pottery and china shards to a dressmaker's mannequin, old shovels and chairs. My first exhibition, at Jetty Food Store during a Leafy Sea Dragon festival, sold out showing my innovative approaches struck a chord. Five years ago, I started painting in water colours in spite of few outlets for sales in this district. Would that Council invested in building up our arts identity to lure visitation. When arthritis limited mosaicking, I explored crafts: papier-mâché, mono-printing and collagraphy. In 2019 I tried embroidery and instantly fell in love with this ancient craft.

### So, you work in embroidery. Isn't that what our grannies did?

It's no longer doilies and cross-stitch. With roots and techniques from ancient cultures, it developed over ages to be a symbol of religion and wealth, then as more widespread decoration. Now contemporary stitching has a new life addressing both joyous and serious themes, often a political cry against displacement and inequity. I have contributed to several political embroidery projects to the SA Artists for Climate Action project. Much of my latest work is nature themed, partly using wool and cotton which I've hand dyed with local plants and leaves. I am also exploring adding three dimensional details.

### While art pursuits are recent, your love of reading and writing began in your early years. Do they persist?

I grew up as one of those kids reading under the bedclothes with a torch. I loved the imaginary

worlds that books took me to, and my infatuation with reading lasted through childhood and teen years and remains an adult obsession. I can't get enough of the magic of words, the perfect sentence to leave one speechless! Reading about nature and places led to reflective and thoughtful reading, insights into understanding life and people. From this grew an obsession with writing, trying myself for the right word, fresh clarity and interest, and the ability to delve deeply into subjects close to my heart.

### What are you reading and writing now?

My reading is eclectic and constant. I'm currently devouring Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*, her well-researched novel of Shakespeare's times. While bingeing on a novel, I'm also likely to be dipping into a chapter of nonfiction, essays or poems, at present enjoying Susan Cain's *Bittersweet*. Besides reading on the page, I listen to audio podcasts while stitching or painting. In 2020 I took a further degree, a Bachelor of Letters in Creative Writing. Tinged with covid, the course soon shifted online rather than on campus but the readings across literary ages provided a thrill of deep pleasure.

### Visitors to the Festival Fleurieu have enjoyed being in your studio. How central is that space to your artistic life?

It's my essential quiet place. Life is busy bringing up three grandchildren but in this area, I relax, physically and mentally. It's a daily routine to retreat there to sit and write, paint and stitch. My mind clears and in the calm, I do my thinking and planning, for family, for art and writing, and what I'll do for the 2023 festival. And I listen to books, Radio National and podcasts for new ideas and stimulation. This space is enriching as well as soothing.

When my quaint old studio was at risk of falling down, another one was built by my husband. It too is beautiful, and I've adapted to its modernness and efficiency. Simply, I love it.



### Although South Australia is home you are also a traveller, both with family and solo. How and where have travels filled your creative well?

I am grateful I did overseas travel when I could. My daughter was working in London, and I would visit in holidays from teaching, and we'd go off to Paris, Turkey, Italy or Portugal. Clive and I also did some wonderful travelling in Italy and France and made many trips to Asia. We still travel as a family caravanning in South Australia and interstate, but I am also rejuvenated by solo travels. Pre-covid I would slip off to Ubud in Bali. Lately, I've found succor spending time in the Grampians, Pt Fairy and taking short stays in the Barossa and nearby



to regain perspective. A treat is to go to art galleries and writer's week in the city. I believe all writers and artists need to take time out to refill the well of creativity, to be inspired and have renewed vision.

### Often you've talked with warmth about other places. Is it love of nature or art or a sense of place that drives you?

It is all those things. Nature provides deep replenishment, as does the stimulation of art gallery or exhibition visits but sense of place transcends them all. It is not just scenery but the deep pull and sense of the inner person being at home whether in a familiar and loved place or the feeling in a new place that I've been here before, as I recognise a deep connection. As my creativity has grown so too has my ability to see the minutiae of life within nature. This awareness of the difference between looking and really seeing has impacted my artistic pursuits a great deal. The joy of life is engagement with, and connection to nature.

### What and/or who have been three major influences on your creative life?

Influences have been broad. The writings of many artists/writers have played a part, including those of Julia Cameron, Alice Neel's biography *The Art of Not Sitting Pretty*, and *The Jane Austen Remedy* by nonagenarian Australian Ruth Wilson. I've been strongly influenced by artist Desiree Fitzgibbon who I had the privilege of learning from at Grampians Textures and who introduced me to the concept of genius loci. Gilbert Dashorst's inspiring botanical art has also been a major influence.

### What an inspiration to talk with you Kerry. Many thanks for sharing your deep thoughts.

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