

Family chat spawned Alexander Boynes' ANCA artshow

This exhibition grew out of a Christmas get-together, writes SALLY PRYOR.

Christmas Day is usually a time for families to kick back and enjoy some downtime together. Or, depending on the family, to pick away at old grievances, let them simmer or air them out.

But if you're a member of the Boynes family, Christmas is more likely to find you coming up with intriguing artistic collaborations and making plans to put them into action, even when you live on opposite sides of the country. That's how things roll when you're a family of artists.



Multimedia and video artist Alexander Boynes with one of his works on display in his exhibition *Lumen*, currently on show at the ANCA Gallery.

Photo: Jeffrey Chan

Alexander Boynes, 32, the son of painters Robert Boynes and Mandy Martin, grew up in a house full of art, with both parents alternating between lecturing and working in the studio. It was a wonderful environment to grow up in, he says. And yet he can't remember a moment in which his parents wanted him or his younger sister, Laura, to become artists. In fact, they railed against the prospect, begging them to look into finance or law. Anything but the life of a poor artist.

Boynes is recounting this to me while standing amid his current solo exhibition at the Australian National Capital Artists' centre. Of course, he was never destined to be anything but an artist. Laura is a dancer, living in Perth with her partner, the cellist Tristen Parr. And their Christmas Day discussion a year-and-a-half ago involved the three of them bemoaning the lack of momentum in their artistic trajectories.

"We were all saying we really wanted to make something happen, and Laura was talking about trying to get this momentum going, and we just started saying, 'Why don't we do it ourselves?' " Boynes says.

"It's hard trying to find opportunities, but you can always make your own, and that's what's really exciting and what's been so incredibly rewarding about putting this together, and then my work that's flown on from that, the static work and the smaller video works and things like that that have sort of connected from one to the other."

The project that came out of the Christmas talk is Dark Matter - Variation 1, an installation involving a cage filled with Styrofoam balls, and projected images of Laura performing a dance sequence, with a dramatic soundtrack by Parr. It's mesmerising and overwhelming, and fits perfectly with Boynes' paintings, done on metallic surfaces that fill the rest of the space. If only all family get-togethers were this productive.

"Originally, when I was a teenager, I thought I really wanted to be an architect, and I ended up spending time in an architect's firm doing work experience," he says. "It really wasn't for me."

End of story - sorry, mum and dad! Perhaps their biggest mistake was sending young Alexander for Years 11 and 12 to Narrabundah College, an institution where even the most latent of artistic genes can be coaxed out, let alone the overt and unavoidable ones carried by the Boynes. He went straight on to study gold and silversmithing at the ANU School of Art, a degree that has influenced everything he has done since, although he has moved away from crafts.

As soon as he finished his honours year at art school, Boynes moved to Melbourne, that so-called Promised Land for any aspiring artist on the east coast. There, he

worked for a fine art framing company, Fini Frames, putting up shows for the likes of the National Gallery in Canberra, as well as the National Gallery of Victoria and the Australian War Memorial.

Boynes is reluctant to discount any bricks in the road that led him to his practice today. But after a few years, he realised the art scene in Melbourne was so damn arty and glamorous it was preventing him from doing any actual work. So he moved back to Canberra, which he realised was far more of an artist's mecca for him than Melbourne ever could be.

"It's a terrific place to make work, and that's one of the real reasons I came back because in big cities there are so many distractions," he says. "There's always another opening to go to, another party, another gig, and no time to do any work. That's exactly what happened. Who makes your work for you? In many ways I came back to Canberra to focus on my career and making, which for me is extremely important."

He returned to a close community that spends time nurturing talent and presents opportunities to anyone who really wants them.

"In Melbourne, you have to apply and go through interviews to work as an unpaid volunteer at an art space, whereas in Canberra, if you walk into any art space and say 'hey, can I be a volunteer', they'll probably give you a job on the spot, and say, 'You can do this right now'," he says.

"There are so many people who have gone to this idea of arts utopia that it's incredibly flooded with way too many people who are all looking for the same thing. But there are opportunities here that are wonderful. I sound super gushy about the city, but it's actually terrific. The best example is how many established or late-career artists we have who are really at the top of their game and well-known not only throughout the country but internationally. The city's a bit smaller, so you can just get on and make your work and pop your head up when you want to."

The transition to Canberra was made easier by the fact Boynes was able to set up a studio at his childhood home in Macquarie, the house where his father still lives. Robert Boynes and Mandy Martin split up when Alexander was a teenager, and Boynes senior now lives with ceramicist Sarit Cohen.

"On the weekends, it's a bit like a little hippy community, like a mini-version of ANCA because there are three studios and we all stick our heads into each other's rooms - 'What are you doing? What are you making? Oh, that looks good!' That kind of thing,"

he says. "It's just a hive of activity, which is great, and it's wonderful to be able to work around people whose work you're really interested and excited by."

He says his family is the biggest influence on his work, despite having gone against his parents' early wishes. "I guess in many ways I didn't really know what I was interested in and what I was on about until I was finishing honours," he says.

"I was making aluminium lights, making different shapes and forms I was wanting to get light out of, so I started to cut lines in them and drill holes in them, and before I knew it I started drawing images by drilling holes. By perforating to let the light out, I could also use it as a kind of tonal dropout, to create a tonal dropout image, so I began creating these works."

When he first returned to Canberra, Boynes worked for a time at Bijou, the jewellers originally located at Centrepoint in Civic. But his focus was by then well and truly on two-dimensional works.

After two years, he moved on to the Canberra Contemporary Art Space, where has been the program manager for more than three years.

"I think it's really important that artists have, if possible, jobs that keep them connected with the arts world," he says.

"Being able to fund your arts career just off your art is practically unheard of in this day and age. There are probably about five artists in this country that can do that seriously. So I think it's really important artists can have a job that connects them to their practice."

As for his practice, Boynes is still preoccupied with light, and how the brain perceives it. "It's present, we experience it, but it's completely intangible," he says. "You can't touch it, it's completely ephemeral."

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Boynes would love to be able to create a work in the form of a hologram. "I find that really beautiful - that flickering light is really fascinating, the way we experience these things, like films for example, which give us this complete solid and a very full sense, but it's nothing more than flickering light, which is gone in a second.

"But there are these hints or gestures that create something in our minds that are far stronger, and far more solid and enduring than that flickering light."