

Beaver Galleries 1975-2024: The end of an era for marketing art in Canberra

the-riotact.com

17 October 2024 | Sasha Grishin



Beaver Galleries was first established in Deakin in the 1970s. Photo: Beaver Galleries.

Ron and Betty Beaver established the Beaver Galleries in 1975 and for the past 33 years it has been run by their son Martin and his partner Susie.

It has become Canberra's oldest and most prestigious gallery, showing the cream of Canberra artists and some of the best from interstate.

The Beavers have a reputation for integrity and a fabled mailing list. They know their artists well, they are passionate about their work, and they infect potential clients with their passion. They also know the Canberra art scene and, after almost half a century, they know in detail who is buying what.

So why are they closing shop?

Running a commercial art gallery in Canberra is a tough gig and the Beavers have no succession plan for the gallery. They are old enough to retire comfortably, yet young enough to pursue a future career. The opportunity presented itself to retire on their own terms.

Unlike a number of commercial art galleries in Melbourne and Sydney that have gone belly up leaving their artists out of pocket, the Beavers are leaving with their reputations intact.

Why is it so difficult to run a commercial art gallery in Canberra, a city nudging half-a-million of generally well-educated and relatively affluent culture vultures?

As an art critic working in Canberra for 47 years, on my watch I have seen the demise of many a major commercial art gallery. Remember the Solander Gallery, the Chapman Gallery, Macquarie Galleries, Abraxas Gallery, Gallery Huntly, Nancy Sever Gallery plus a dozen others? They have all left the stage.

There will be no major commercial art gallery surviving after the closure of the Beaver Galleries. Remaining galleries, that have been here for more than five minutes, include the Grainger Gallery and Humble House in Fyshwick and Aarwun Gallery in Gold Creek – all three of them have a very uneven ‘stable’ of artists whom they represent. Then there is a number of recently established spaces that are yet to establish their credentials.



Martin and Susie Beaver are retiring on their own terms. Photo: Beaver Galleries.

It is silly to say that Canberrans go interstate to buy their art. A few may, but they are probably outweighed by the interstaters who come to Canberra to do their art shopping.

The main problem in Canberra is the lack of a level playing field in the commercial art sector. The ACT Government has pumped money into about a dozen arts organisations – Canberra Glassworks, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, ANCA,

M-16 Artspace, the arts centres in Belconnen and Tuggeranong – to name just a few, that operate as surrogate commercial art galleries, some charging artists room hire fees and a substantial commission on sales.

They differ from proper commercial art galleries as they usually have no overheads to pay, such as premises, staff, insurance, utilities, etc.

In theory, they are meant to show (I think), artists who would otherwise find it difficult to have representation in a commercial art gallery. In practice, it is frequently the same artists who show in both. They cannot be blamed for this behaviour as they are generally underfunded and selling art is an important financial lifeline in their budget but, in doing this, they undermine the survival of commercial art galleries.

Commercial art galleries, as we know them, came into being in the mid-19th century. It is a legitimate question to ask if they have reached the end of their useful life?

The great art fairs and art auctions in Europe, Asia, Australia and the Americas apparently sell more art than all of the commercial art galleries combined. Online art shopping is huge and a new model for an art gallery appearing in Australia and abroad is for a relatively small bricks and mortar footprint, a huge online presence, and active participation in art fairs.



Beaver Galleries is closing its doors for good. Photo: Beaver Galleries.

Personally, for many decades I have enjoyed visiting the spacious exhibition rooms at the Beaver Galleries and falling in love with the offerings on the walls and on plinths and discovering treasures tucked away in the stock rooms of the gallery.

For this, and for so many other things, Canberra is grateful to Susie and Martin Beaver for enriching our lives. With the closure of the Beaver Galleries, we are losing one of the jewels in Canberra's art crown.

[Beaver Galleries](#) is at 81 Denison St, Deakin, open Tuesday to Saturday 10 am to 5 pm. It will close permanently on 1 December 2024.