

# Profile of an “old style” dealer

by Michael Berry

**High profile local dealer, Jenny Pihan of Frankston's Jenny Pihan Fine Art @ The Kananook Creek Boathouse Gallery, asserts that a small stable of top artists committed to one gallery in the area is the key to cementing both an artist's and gallery's reputation – it is the best fit.**

Not widely known for being confrontational or outspoken, and despite her demure presence, Jenny does call it as it is – which is the first telling sign that she has the “creds” of an old-style dealer.

Firstly, she says the Peninsula begins at Frankston and suggests that visitors “might try travelling the beach road instead of the freeway and smell the roses as there are plenty of them along the way”. And she means it – nicely!

So where does such unabashed assertion come from? Formally unschooled in art – another point in her favour – Jenny is a rare being in the Australian art scene – or any art scene for that matter – as she really cares about art, artists and the public who love art. She just can't help herself – it is her life.

And it comes directly from her heart as nobody has ever told her what or how to “see” or feel about what she sees – she is simply wired visually and her perception responds that way.

Clearly visual images have dominated and predicted her life's non-linear unfolding.

Jenny still remembers the day she ran from the family's milk bar to school only to trip over and fall face-first into the newly poured asphalt in her brand new raincoat. She was in first grade and this indignity remains in her memory, but as a picture – without the assumed accompanying emotional rage.

At one stage when her parents owned and ran an Elwood delicatessen she took her younger sister Debbie's stencil set from her and hid under the frozen food section in the deli to paint colours on each coaster – such was her desire to play with colour. She was delighted but it did not win approval from Debbie. It seems where art was concerned she just couldn't help herself.

“I was always reasonably good at art but when I left school I went to work for the Taxation Office which is where I met my husband Bohdan,” she says. Raising her two children, Brendan & Jane, took priority in the early years during which time her hobbies were painting, gardening & cooking.

With her astute eye, steady hand and creative skill Jenny began to win cake decorating prizes.

“I can make coloured icing flowers, for example daphne, roses, hyacinths, maidenhair fern and forget-me-nots so real that if you were to put them in a vase you could not tell them from the real thing,” Jenny claims.

“It's the thrill of the hunt – there is no half-baked way of doing it – it becomes intoxicating!”

She then trained as a florist and worked as such for several years in Mt Eliza and Mornington. Another clue as to what drives this art dealer – but it doesn't stop there.

After settling on the Peninsula with her young family and commencing oil, watercolour and pastel lessons with Freya Dade, Jenny began to win a few awards in the local art shows – but her deep abiding humility never let it go to her head. “I'm definitely a hobby painter – but in Freya's classes I could smell the paint and listen to wonderful music,” she says.

“Freya was a wonderful person. She was a great influence on me – I loved the peace around her and we often laughed about the coffee she served because brushes were often dipped in it instead of the turps which left an oily slick around the cup.”

While her daughter Jane was attending Mt Eliza's Toorak College she heard on the grapevine that the school was to hold a public art show & she said to herself “there must be a job for me!”

Jenny became involved as an active member of the art exhibition committee and the rest is history during her 12 years involved in organizing the shows, the bar of quality was raised substantially. Subsequently she became involved in a number of other similar ventures.

Jenny formed longstanding friendships with many of the artists involved in those exhibitions and now represents some of them, including Alvaro Castagnet who is now an internationally acclaimed watercolourist.

She admits to having learned to read paintings from them as they forged their respective painterly careers.

**Jenny instantly dispels the myth that “good art can only be found in the city” – it is obviously not true as some of her artists have won national and international prizes and renown.**

Jenny's philosophy of running a traditional/contemporary art gallery is quaint if not straightforward – people should feel comfortable coming into the gallery so “I treat the space like my private lounge room”.

“When someone walks into the gallery they should feel at home. They ought not to be intimidated by the dealer's eyes boring a hole into the back of their head,” she says matter-of-factly. “Our prices start at \$100 and then go up, so everybody can appreciate something.”

Jenny has a well-earned and deserved reputation as a fine art dealer and a professional whose opinion is trusted by artists, dealers & clients alike. It is part of her *raison d'être* to be honest with clients and “not pull the wool over their eyes or shove a work down their neck” – rather she sees her role as assisting a client who often feels insecure about deciding on a painting for their collection. “I try to help them to trust their judgement,” she says.

Part of the gallery's service is to take works to a client's home so that he/she may see if the painting is the correct choice for their own space. “It is not about matching the curtains – a person's passion pervades their privacy; it is in the fragrance, the decor, the articles on the bench, the flowers – I can tell at the door if a work will fit,” Jenny reveals.



“People who open up to you are a joy to deal with – it becomes a mutual search – I love the ‘one-on-one’ of being with a client – I watch where they're coming from, I hook into their perception.” Jenny's logic when selecting artists to represent is to have “the best artists one can have in an exclusive small manageable stable” – from traditional to contemporary to abstract. She has a refined instinct for it.

Integrity is her mainstay. She will not poach artists from other galleries and prefers artists who are prepared to do the hard yards and work closely with her over a period of time exhibiting regularly to establish a client base.

The other essential ingredient in Jenny's gallery success is her sister Debbie Limon who looks after the business side which Jenny readily admits is not really her forte.

“I couldn't do it without Debbie – I'm lucky she is so adept at the business side of the gallery,” she admits.

Jenny is a lady of action – she's never happy doing nothing.

She is at her peak as a dealer when she has the freedom to do what is unique among dealers in today's art scene – run her own race with the solid support of the artists she so tirelessly champions.

**What are your favourite places to eat on the Peninsula?**

I like the Boathouse Restaurant at the back of the gallery, Via Mare across the road and I highly recommend Morning Star Winery.

**Who are your favourite artists?**

I like anything that is good – Streeton, Tom Roberts, Whiteley, Margaret Olley – I think Munch is fabulous – I just enjoy art full stop. I have a penchant for figurative work and nudes – pictures with people in them.

**So how do you amuse yourself on the Peninsula when you're not dealing art?**

By driving around the region and to the beach for visual inspiration – and while I am not in the right league as an artist, the painter inside of me is very much alive and kicking – everything is a picture. I remember as images what I see.

There are lots of paintings inside of me. I can see them and smell them and one day they will come out. I have sold my own paintings in the past... and they were better than bad.