

Speech by Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO

Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

Opening of the Margaret Olley Art Centre

Tweed Regional Art Gallery

Saturday 15th March 2014

My friends, Good Afternoon

I want you to know how delighted I am to be sharing this joyous celebration with you.

A very special occasion bringing together the best things in life – the lovely things that make our heart sing: art, beauty, generous spirit, community, friendship.

All in glorious landscape.

Lush green, blue green, golden green, mountains, valleys, hillsides.

Mr Mayor,

I am most complimented by your invitation to open the Margaret Olley Art Centre in your magnificent Tweed Regional Gallery.

I know it means so much to each one of us to join this memorable gathering, feeling proud, exhilarated, inspired, by what we see around us.

Splendid achievement, hard work, creativity, innovation, enrichment of our cultural life.

This Gallery has captured the imagination of its Murwillumbah community, this much loved Northern Rivers region, and art lovers across our country.

We have watched its development since Doug and Margot Anthony gave the land from their dairy farm.

Bud Brannigan won the national competition to design the building.

Everyone got on with the task.

The first stage was completed in 2004.

At the opening, of Stage 2 in 2006 Margaret Olley was guest of honour.

The Gallery made a deep impression on her.

Its elegant architecture, its setting in gentle curves of the countryside she'd always loved.

"The Tweed is really where my childhood began" she recalled in evocative reminiscence with Meg Stewart.

I love the stories of Margaret's childhood. Idyllic --- the perfect word to describe halcyon days in the midst of nature, rambling in long grasses.

Flowers, bees, plants, fishing, crab pots, magical places.

Family love and security, plenty of room to move for a free spirit, to imagine, to observe.

Experiences and influences that never left her --translated into her vigorous support and advocacy for regional galleries.

My friends

The significance of galleries in our regional cities and rural towns must never be taken for granted.

They are vital to the wellbeing of our country in a myriad of ways that I know you well understand.

This afternoon we laud an outstanding example.

Stage 3: incorporating a treasure trove, the Margaret Olley Art Centre.

A re-creation of the most famous rooms in Australian art, so over-the-top, so adorable, so charming, the artist's working tableaux, elements of her home and her paintings.

Today we are filled with wonder as we sense the aura of our artist.

Her chaos, clutter, piles of bric-a-brac, her gear, and tackle and trim.

This studio re-creation is a first for Australia and it is exquisitely executed.

Here we see the very essence of the artist.

We see Margaret Olley herself.

The woman our country loved, the subject of spontaneous outpourings of warmth, respect, praise.

She connected to all manner of people.

A very human being.

Smiles come as we share memories, indulging in delightful nostalgia.

A little of my own if I may.

My first Olley exhibition in Brisbane, 1962 at the Johnstone's.

It was springtime: the gallery swam with flower paintings: the great nudes – 9 of them – took everyone's breath away.

The show included drawings of Tweed Heads fishing-scapes.

I have seldom missed an Olley exhibition since.

Some I've gone back to again and again, especially to see Zinnias, ranunculi, poppies on the entrance wall at Philip's.

Outrageous pink, orange, yellow, red; jammed into pottery jugs; and then the subtle quieter flannel flowers, banksias, pears in a wide silver dish.

In latter times, enchantment in the Yellow Room.

Usually I sat in the chintz chair – as familiar to us as the terracotta wall colour, the Degas paintings, the Mirandi etchings, burnished khelim underfoot

The last time, there was nowhere to sit.

Canvasses, took up every space, every surface.

Margaret on a mission putting on last touches for her coming show.

Narrow black apron covered in layers, swipes of colour.

I'd packed a picnic – her favourite tidbits.

Four of us squeezed right in at one end of the table, knees knocking, elbows connecting, Michael, Philip, Margaret and I.

In our midst, stems of early palest peach blossom soared up into the skylight.

Intimacy, affection, togetherness.

Conversation winding in and out.

Margaret's gift of a beautiful Ethel Carrick beach painting to GOMA.

"Oh, they liked it, did they?" she asked.

With that dreamy, slight surprised expression, part of her repertoire of beguilement.

Philip was instructed to get out the Picasso intended for the National Gallery.

I felt a little nervous as it was passed around like a sheet of old tissue.

These, my friends, were the preliminaries to a sensitive question.

How did Margaret want to be remembered?

We tossed around ideas, places, museums, galleries she truly loved; her deep commitment to the regional.

There was no awkwardness, no unease, there was a seriousness of purpose.

Philip raised the subject of a substantial donation to this Gallery.

Margaret's response was instant. "I really think that's a wonderful idea, I love that Gallery," she told us.

As I put my hand over hers I observed on her face a paler cheek, a transparency I thought, a difference in her from last time

We moved on; holding up the paintings around us.

Still some finishing to do.

Time to go.

Hugs and kisses.

As I stepped out into the courtyard, the ferns, the cyclamens, afternoon light, cast shadows on our backs.

I closed the gate on that magical encounter.

I knew I would not see its bright star again.

Next day Philip and Margaret measured up for the framer.

Philip home to Brisbane.

Margaret to her nest, with that contentment she found in her later years, a calmness in being on one's own.

Her settling in, assured by Philippa, bringing down her tea, sharing a last cigarette.

The following morning, Margaret's death was reported on the front pages.

Universal fondness, words of gratitude.

What was it about her that brought her into our hearts?

Yes, the paintings – 60 years of work.

They speak to us of a beauty and form that we recognise, that we understand.

But it is the woman who painted them, her reassuring, endearing, qualities that light our lives.

Qualities planted in girlhood,

The impishness.

The infectious joie de vivre that infused every undertaking.

Her ticklish sense of humour, those wicked asides.

Intellectual rigour, honesty, straightforwardness, the characteristics we Australians value -- toughness, gutsiness, a certain self-effacement.

The courage she found inside herself to conquer despair, depression, disappointment.

Her capacity for friendship, richly rewarded by the comings and goings of dear ones who ensured that she could live the way she wanted to in her last years.

We loved her way of ageing.

We sensed the wisdom, experience, insight, the authenticity.

That's what drew us to her.

The way she was always herself.

Margaret gave so much.

The glorious great art for our Galleries, for all Australians, support for emerging and maturing artists and musicians.

I know for certain that she would be overwhelmed by this Centre.

And I know for certain, too, that this is exactly how she would want to be remembered.

My friends, we owe a debt of gratitude to everyone who contributed to this brilliant Margaret Olley Art Centre. On behalf of our fellow Australians – thank you for what you have given to our community – to our country.