

The Left Bank Art Gallery: Fresh strength from new beginnings



Situated on the Māwheranui River in the small, remote town of Greymouth, the Left Bank Art Gallery found itself in a true hermit kingdom during the Covid pandemic and as visitor numbers plummeted, the team decided to do something out of the ordinary – it displayed its entire collection. Thanks to this, the community began to recognise its artistic heritage and care for its collection with a whole new sense of meaning.

For many people living in the small town of Greymouth (popn: approx. 8,000), the idea of splendid isolation became quite real when Covid-19 descended in 2020, though Left Bank’s voluntary Acting Director, Casandra Struve, discovered that she could bring the most stubborn hermits to their doors.

“Typically we have around 20,000 people per year come through our doors, which dropped to 6,000 during Covid. A whole new level of isolation was felt within the community, so we looked at ways we could create an artistic space. During the winter of 2021 we knew it was going to be really quiet, so we offered workshops in the main gallery – pottery, painting, screen-printing.”

ABOVE: Acting Director and Chair of the Left Bank Gallery Cassandra Struve

Cassandra says that the workshops chimed with her personal philosophy, that the real value of art was in the “doing of it” so its success contributed to a shift in the team’s philosophical outlook. Since then, the gallery has been running this workshop series each winter, creating a place where people can come together to find, discover or reignite their creative spirit.

“During the workshops, run in collaboration with the Grey District Youth Trust a group of young people, including some LGBTQI+ and neurodiverse youth, came together to form an artistic collective.”



At the time when the gallery applied for the Museum Hardship Fund in October 2020, it had been running exclusively on the goodwill of volunteers. Each year, volunteers put in over 3,000 hours to ensure the doors stayed open though during Covid the workload fell unevenly on those volunteers that weren’t at risk. Though they had an active crew of volunteers at the time, because its base skewed older three volunteers were left to do everything from hosting to administration, volunteer and committee member Kay Costley recalls.

“We were nervous for the volunteers when we re-opened and we had to be quite careful about the vaccination issue, so that we came from, and projected, a non-judgemental stance. And although it was just three of us initially, we later got an influx of younger volunteers so we have managed to fill the gap.”

Thanks to receiving the Museum Hardship Fund in round one, the team were able to hire an administrator and financial advisor for 10 hours a week to provide relief for the gallery’s overworked

volunteer base, enabling them to concentrate on long-term plans. By hiring two people with a diverse set of skillsets, the two could work through a number of tasks such as cataloguing, marketing, financial planning and photographing the collection.

Cassandra says the importance of the fund was something that couldn’t be underestimated given the ongoing battle to acquire resources and funding.

“Getting funding often feels like a competition, but this felt like real support because it recognised it was a necessity for us to stay open. In 2020, we couldn’t pay our administrator and because there were so few of us, we were doing all jobs voluntarily. We were struggling to stay open and keep our spirits up, so to have a fund that recognised we were running on empty felt like such a relief.”

Cultivating a proud artistic heritage

As the only public art gallery on the West Coast, Struve realised that a greater focus on the collection was required to bring focus to its artistic heritage and with initial funds from the first round of the Museum Hardship Fund, the team was able to gain a much better sense of its breadth and condition.

“The permanent collection is a mixture of purchases and donations that includes works by Toss Wollaston, Allan Holcroft, Olivia Spencer-Bower, Yvonne Rust, Peter Hughson, Russell Beck and a large collection of contemporary pounamu. It started with a donation from Toss Wollaston in 1985, and since then it has grown to 131 items,” says Cassandra.

ABOVE LEFT: During Covid, Left Bank Gallery opened up their space to create a number of artistic workshops which lifted the spirits of the community.

With small numbers of visitors going through the gallery and a cancelled show leaving a gap, the team decided it was an opportune chance to put the whole collection on display for a one-month exhibition. Struve says one of the surprising impacts of that exhibition was seeing the community take greater ownership of it. Through the process of looking at

their home ground through the eyes of local painters and artists, coasters began to gain a greater sense of pride in their artistic heritage, Cassandra recalls.

BELOW: A few members of the team behind Left Bank Gallery (from left to right) - Fred, a volunteer who developed an artistic collective during Covid, Andy Ross, a committee member and fellow collaborator, Acting Director Cassandra Struve and one of their regular volunteers Taylor Smith.

“When displaying the collection, many of us participated in the work of re-packing the collection and preserving it, and as we got to know it better our pride and excitement grew. There is now a common feeling that we are kaitiaki of a precious community asset. We have collectively strengthened a sense of understanding and achievement.”



A collection in need of better protection

Cassandra says thanks to the initial funding from Museum Hardship Fund, the committee was left with a better picture of the value, condition and breadth of their collection which spurred on a secondary project to better conserve it.

With support from the Museum Hardship Fund's third round in October 2021, they were able to purchase a burglar alarm system, a dehumidifier and data logger to track humidity and get the whole collection digitised for insurance and outreach purposes.

“It was like having a large house with ten rooms and they're so messy you can only live in three of them. Having that work done means we can start working on other things, like refreshing our pounamu collection.”

Ultimately the Museum Hardship Fund has enabled Cassandra and the committee to take care of those much-needed projects and tasks, freeing them up to focus on the gallery's vision and its place within the wider artistic community. Indeed, currently the gallery's governing body – the West Coast Society of Arts - is focusing on an arts strategy for the Grey District which Cassandra says requires fuel in the tank. “We're looking at how we can re-invigorate the arts scene and all that takes time, energy and planning, so to know everything in a good place at Left Bank is such a relief.”

Already this work is well underway with the gallery connecting with the Wikipedia community to create pages on West Coast artists that have found inspiration in its landscape and surrounds, such as painter Toss Wollaston, the potter Yvonne Rust and Olivia Spencer Bower.

“A lot of behind-the-scenes stuff starts to pile up and it can get quite demoralising, the Museum Hardship Fund helped tremendously in this respect, we are now leaps and bounds ahead in not only caring for and protecting our permanent collection but giving our community a better sense of the West coast's artistic heritage,” says Kay.



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