

THE AIR IS FREE: JAMES FARDOULYS & DEAN MANNING



James Fardoulys (1900-1975) was born in Potamos Kythera at the age of 14 years arrived in Australia. In around 1960 Fardoulys took up painting and quickly established a reputation for works which were redolent of brilliant unmixed colours and reflected what has been described as an “eccentric approach to perspective” and a “continuous colourful pantomime” which fused both historic and imagined outback scenes in a whimsical and unique “fantasia of Australiana”. This last comment was appropriately written in an article entitled “In a Land Far, Fardoulys Away”.

Greece and Australia, for those with Hellenic roots, are both and at the same time real and imaginary. The Romantic poet Shelley remarked “we are all Greeks” in recognition of the contribution that Classical Greece has made to western civilisation. In our case, Greek-Australians yearn for an imagined homeland whilst recognising our place in the diaspora down under.

Those competing impulses have found artistic expression in two impressive bodies of artistic work on display at the Delmar gallery at Ashfield featuring the late James Fardoulys, arguably one of Australia’s greatest primitive or naïve (ie self-taught) painters, and Dean Manning, a composer, musician and self-taught artist.

The title of the exhibition, brilliantly curated by Catherin Benz, Convenor of the Society of the Arts and Curator of the Delmar Gallery, is “The Air Is Free” which is borrowed from the name of a painting by Fardoulys depicting a boat under full sail.

The Air is Free



James Fardoulys, and as portrayed by Dean Manning

Dean Manning has also come to the visual art medium relatively late after an auspicious career in music. Dean’s father Nick Maniarizis (anglicised to Manning) originally came from Corfu but settled in Volos until he left for Australia in 1948. Dean’s maternal grandparents from the village of Akrata arrived in 1915.

Dean Manning came across Fardouly’s work some years ago and was immediately inspired by his story and his distinctive art. The exhibition features Manning’s storyboard of Fardouly’s life, The Love song of J Nicholas Fardoulys, which traces his life journey from Kythera to Australia. Fardoulys recalled carrying important people around on his donkey on Kythera and that he made more money on the island when he would meet the boats than the wages he earned in his early years in Australia. He then worked in various cafes in Northern NSW and Queensland before marrying and settling in Brisbane. Fardoulys ironically ended up driving a taxi for almost 30 years before taking up painting.



The artist Dean Manning with the Lovesong of J Nicholas Fardoulys



Dean Manning captures Fardoulys's use of alternate taxis in Kythera and Brisbane

impregnation... What a marvellous cultural cross fertilization to see brumby, windmill and parrot take the old Greek gaze."

Fardoulys was in fact asked about the possible influence of Greek iconography. He famously replied: "I do not think Greek icons in churches when I was a child have influenced my work. I want to put a bit more crudeness in it."

Dean Manning, inspired by Fardoulys, has made several trips to Greece in recent years, the most recent being in early 2016. According to Dean, a journey is a way of finding out what you miss as much as discovering what you never knew you needed. And so every day he would get up and venture around Athens and end up with an image which he would transfer into a visual medium using traditional dry Greek pigments (as used by iconographers) to etch out fragments of Athenian life, ranging from the resurgence of rembetika music in nightclubs and bars to street graffiti, refugees in Athens and café conversations. Dean was struck by the incredible sense of community and heritage in the Greek capital.

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Blue Roses

One of this writer's favourite Fardoulys works on display was Blue Roses (originally named Betty the Barmaid). This painting captures the essence of Fardoulys's chaotic colours in the flowers and backdrop complimenting the alluring and arresting beauty of the barmaid, with a white horse rearing on its hind legs as if echoing her exultant mood.

As the artist Roy Churcher described Fardoulys's style:

"The naïve painter is uninterested in painting, his interest is in pictures, and he uses his paintings solely as a vehicle to carry his memory visions. One never feels the style in which they are painted is consciously arrived at, but instead is again the result of conscious visual





Birds in Disney's Paradise



Athens 2016

The imagery of Athens that evokes reactions (from top left clockwise) are graffiti, the wise owl of Athens, the signs on buildings for sale or rent, the effective means of transport, the sad death of the rapper Pavlos Fyssas (at the hands of the Neo-Nazi Golden Dawn), and koulouria.



Rembetika

The music of Rembetika created a great “vibe” for Dean Manning who referred to this work as the height of his green period.

Another theme about which Dean Manning had read and which intrigued him was the myth of Ariadne and the red thread and the Minotaur and the underlying theme of finding your way out. As Dean explained, his feelings are best described by a piece of graffiti which he recently saw in Sydney: “In the labyrinth one does not meet the minotaur, one meets oneself”.

The Minotaur: “In the labyrinth one does not meet the minotaur, one meets oneself”

Dean’s homage to the Greeks of the diaspora and the internal conflict that forced separation brings is well captured in a suite of sailor paintings, including Sailor #3 which shows the artist with one foot on Greek soil and the other on a boat. But also acknowledges Greece’s maritime traditions.

And for those of us who remember the 60s as we grew up, Dean’s oil painting dedicated to Kensington Primary (where he went as a boy) will strike a cord with its allusion to crayons, milk bottle (often drunk when warm), sunny-boys, playing marbles, the moon landing and many other images that remain in our consciousness.

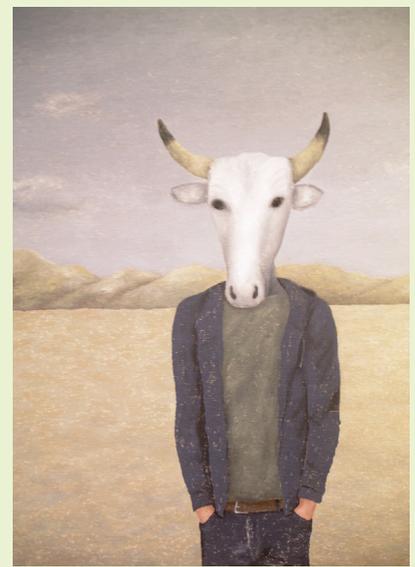
This was a wonderful exhibition that reunites two painters who, although a generation apart, share a common Greek heritage and spirit which has been creatively reproduced in paintings and other visual media that will always intrigue the viewer and enhance each artist’s extraordinary legacy.

George Vardas

July 2016

The artist describes Kensington Primary (circa 1969)

Editors Note: Dean Manning was a finalist in this year’s Archibald Prize for his portrait entry of comedian Lawrence Leung, currently on display at the Art Gallery of NSW.



Sailor #3

