

From Lismore to Shanghai – Caitlin Reilly connects the world through art

Moving to Shanghai for personal reasons proved a wise career move for one local artist, writes TRACEY HORDERN

Caitlin Reilly is one of those women that seemingly can do it all. Partner to a wonderful man, mother to three beautiful children, a successful artist, yoga teacher, and accomplished musician and singer. Originally from the Southern Highlands, Reilly headed to Sydney when her schooling was complete to pursue her first love, singing. From a musical family, Reilly easily found work playing piano in bars and jazz clubs. From Sydney, Reilly headed to Melbourne to conquer the burgeoning supper club scene. Again, success came easily, but at a cost. Caitlin describes her decision to move to the Northern Rivers as seeking a healthier lifestyle - "And

a chance to see daylight".

This decision proved to be the making of her. She began painting in earnest and knew instinctively that this was her true metier. "I decided to formulate my art practice with an academic grounding. I enrolled at Southern Cross University to complete a Bachelor of Visual Arts majoring in painting." Another consequence to her move to the Northern Rivers, is the creation of three beautiful children, as well as completing her yoga teacher training course.

Reilly began exhibiting – and selling her paintings almost as soon as she put paint to canvas. Gallery director Ruth Ryan from Bare Bones art gallery in Bangalow was

quick to recognise Reilly's ability and potential, saying: "I admire her work greatly; it has always sold extremely well for us and I believe she has a great future."

Almost 18 months ago Reilly, her partner and children moved to Shanghai from Byron Bay to expand her partner's business interests. The entire family saw Shanghai as a wonderful adventure; the New York of Asia would be their home for at least two years.

Reilly was looking forward to the impact a totally different culture would have on her work. Although she deferred her university studies, Reilly was determined to push ahead with her art, to let her exciting new city propel her work.

Within days of her arrival in Shanghai, Reilly attended a talk by celebrated gallery owner Elisabeth de Brabant and was struck by how eloquently she spoke, conveying with wisdom her informed love of art and the art world.

From that talk, the Elisabeth de Brabant Art Center, acknowledged to be at the forefront of contemporary and Chinese art in Shanghai moved to the top of Reilly's wish list for representation. A meeting followed and a short time later, Reilly was signed with the prestigious gallery. Within three months, Reilly held her first solo exhibition at the gallery. The exhibition, *Suspended Arrival*, was a beautiful collection of drawings that began in Byron Bay and completed and exhibited in Shanghai.

From that exhibition, the consulate staff of the Australian Embassy chose Reilly to represent Australia at the Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art to celebrate the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day in March 2010 and the curators from the Museum of Contemporary Art chose a drawing from Reilly's *Suspended Arrival* series.

Next came Reilly's critically

acclaimed participation in the Elisabeth de Brabant group show at the gallery's recently acquired space – a huge disused abattoir. Reilly recalls how her installation *The Ground Beneath our Feet* came about. "I was asked to respond to the amazing new space. It was such fun to contribute art to a space that was once so connected to death. I wanted to respond with affirmative life. I started to think, I have small children who were bought up in Byron Bay, and we all long for a place where we can walk on the grass, as the public gardens here have grass police! So it wasn't a stretch for me as a vegetarian, yoga practitioner from Byron Bay to install a space of real, live grass. I also wanted to give something back to the beautiful people of Shanghai and to create an interactive piece."

John Smith, the course coordinator of Visual Arts, at Southern Cross University (SCU) is Caitlin Reilly's painting teacher. Smith says: "For Caitlin to have gone over to Shanghai and in such a short space of time to be taken up by a well respected gallery that has galleries in Shanghai, Paris and Hong Kong is an amazing accomplishment. Then to have a solo show and to be chosen to represent Australia in a group show at the Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art is fantastic. Ultimately, Caitlin has the talent and ability to go as far as she wants. She also has the personality and drive to market herself, which helps enormously."

Looking Up From The Other Side Of The World is Reilly's next project. This, according to Reilly, is, "A dialogue of drawing conceived by Kate Stead, a friend and fellow artist and art student at SCU." This project has been chosen to be included in the Year of Australian Culture in China, also known as 'Imagine Australia' and organized by the Australian Embassy in Beijing. Imagine Australia will showcase some of Australia's best performing arts projects and visual arts exhibitions to promote Australia in China throughout 2010 – 2011.

Caitlin outlines her upcoming project, "Kate's in Maclean in Australia and I'm in Shanghai. We will both be looking up to the sky – the same sky that connects us. We will be drawing what we see - the sky or the buildings. But we also want to expand the cultural exchange beyond us to include children from each of these places. We will have students from Maclean Public School and my daughter Pearl's school, The Seventh Hour in Shanghai to also draw what they see in the sky above them."

Reilly and Stead are currently seeking funding from the Australian International Cultural Council to frame the work in archive format and to publish the drawings in a book, ensuring the exhibition is a major event. "We are exhibiting the drawings and the book in Shanghai in December 2010 at the Elisabeth de Brabant Art Center and then in Australia at the Lismore Regional Art Gallery in March, 2011," says Reilly, "With this project, I really believe that art can bring us together and make the world smaller – in a positive way."

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TOP: Guest contemplating the feel of real grass at Caitlin Reilly's installation *The Ground Beneath Our Feet* on the opening night of the Elisabeth de Brabant group show in Shanghai LEFT: From left; Author and artist Xiao Hui Wang, Elizabeth de Brabant and Caitlin Reilly ABOVE: Guests relaxing on the grass on the opening night. Picture: KYLE FONG