



# Drawing new attention

Australians are returning to art in retirement, renewing and, in some cases, discovering their talent, writes Jill Pengeley

**RICHARD** Westmacott is an artist. It's a title he's only been able to claim since June and it doesn't sit well, yet.

After all, he spent the first 87 years of his life not being an artist.

"I've never done art before anywhere," he says.

"It was never offered in my day, growing up in England, with the war.

"I've always enjoyed (looking at) art but no idea how to do it."

With his wife Denise, Mr Westmacott has started attending weekly art classes at ACH Group's Milpara aged care, at Rostrevor, where the couple lives.

For about two hours, twice a week, he draws, paints and learns techniques under the guidance of Milpara's artist in residence, Gianna Miller.

"I couldn't believe it when she said 'These are nice'," he says of her praise for his work.

"I wouldn't have thought I could do it — I'm still surprised.

"My mate Neil here has given me a few tips."

Mr Westmacott was a carpenter, a bus driver, taxi driver, nurse and teacher before finishing his working



**LATE BLOOMER:** Richard Westmacott displays his newly found skills, and below, in an art class at ACH Group's Milpara aged care, at Rostrevor.  
Main picture: TAIT SCHMAAL. Extra pictures: ANNA RANDELL

One in four Australians over 65 participates in visual arts or crafts, which is more than twice the participation of any other age group

life as a maintenance officer at Craigmore High School.

Now he is a contributor to ACH Group's exhibitions in this month's South Australian Living Artists (SALA) Festival. Ms Miller, who is curating

ACH's exhibitions, says she is impressed with her student's commitment.

"Richard's work is a wonderful example of how the creative process can open one to new ways of expressing one's creativity and that the capacity to learn is ever present," she says.

"I am amazed and delighted by his ability to focus for hours each Thursday and Friday as he endeavours to learn and improve his skills.

"He is truly a star surrounded by many others in the group who have found purpose through art making."

Australia Council for the Arts research released last month suggests retirement triggers a revival in creativity.

The third National Arts Participation Survey reveals participation in creative arts is highest between the ages of 15 and 24, when 69 per cent of Australians are involved in some form of creative expression.

The figure drops sharply for each decade of age, down to 35 per cent for those aged 55 to 64. The only reversal in



decline comes from 65 onwards, with 38 per cent of respondents reporting involvement in creative arts.

The arts categories include dance, music, theatre, writing and visual arts and craft.

One in four Australians aged 65 or older participates in visual arts or crafts, which is more than twice the participation rate of any other age group.

Ms Miller has taught students from Reception to Year 12 but says this is her first time working at the other end of the spectrum.

"Regardless of age, people find meaning and purpose through art-making," she says.

"In sharing with others, they reinforce a sense of community and respect for each other's efforts."

Although she is passionate about art for its own sake, Ms Miller says research has found the arts also have positive effects on health as people age.

Benefits of the expressive arts can include relaxation, reduced depression, improving cognition, increasing self esteem and reducing boredom.

COTA SA chief executive Jane Mussared says seniors may have more time to pursue art and may be more open to exploring possibilities.

"For some, it's a first-ever excursion; for others it's about resuming something they've given up. We feel very strongly that part of the shake-up of stereotypes about modern ageing will be managed through art."

She says people interested in trying art should check with their local councils.

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**DISCOVERY:** Milpara artist-in-residence Gianna Miller offers tips to a student during an art class.



# Art of ageing creatively



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Galleries may have names of art teachers, and WEA and Universities of the Third Age also offer courses.

Mr Westmacott's "mate Neil" is another Milpara resident — Neil Mathers.

Mr Mathers says he has always loved art and has been sketching and painting since he was a boy.

He has completed a range of art courses, including commercial art and clay modelling, but says art was always only a hobby.

"I was always busy working and never had enough time," he says.

"I love drawing animals, landscapes — anything, really. It's always enjoyable."

Ms Miller says she is impressed by his "keen eye" and devotion.

"Neil's talent and absolute love of art has seen him work passionately throughout his life with great thirst for learning new techniques and ways of representing the visual world," she says.

"His gentle and humble



manner is endearing and his work draws our attention to the delicate connection between artist and object."

Mr Mathers is another of the artists who will be included

in ACH's SALA exhibition. "SALA participation is an opportunity for clients to celebrate their efforts with the broader community and their families in a more public

forum," Ms Miller says. "It acknowledges the value of artistic expression as an integral part of everyday life for all." ACH clients' artworks can be viewed at Toop & Toop,

Plato's Philosopher's Kitchen and The Art Clothing Co. on King William Rd, Woodcroft Community Arts Centre and Milpara Residential Living, Rostrevor.

**KEEN:** Artist Neil Mathers, above, says he enjoys painting animals, left, and landscapes during his art sessions at Milpara, where some of his work will be displayed during this month's SALA Festival. Teacher Gianna Miller says Mr Mathers is particularly talented, committed and has a "keen eye".

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