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A Few Words From Down Under

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Festival, or to put it more correctly, we all practice the Cultural Cringe. I'm sure you know what an "art festival" entails but perhaps you may not understand just what constitutes the Cultural Cringe. Basically it means; "If he, she or it originates here - he, she or it can't be any good," and refers to anyone in the arts.

The Cultural Cringe is a no win situation. Allow me to explain: If you have talent and choose to remain in your own hometown, it's assumed you're not good enough to make it "out there". If you do leave, make good and don't return, you're accused of being ashamed of your heritage. If you go "out there", make it big and come back the celebrity, you're showing off. I can't figure it out.

With this in mind, consider our annual Art Festival of the International kind. Its purpose, as I see it, is to perpetrate the notion that we do indeed appreciate "kulcha" as we annually present an Art Festivals where 99.9% of the art is imported from some place, any place, beyond our own city, state and/or country's borders. As for visual arts, well that isn't even on the agenda, except if an unknown painter from Anywhere finds himself inadvertently stranded in Australia with a steamer trunk full of works, or a highly celebrated sculptor from Someplace wants to erect a styro-foam effigy of himself, in the nude, seven miles out in the desert, then it's hey, come on down and show us your stuff. Nope, it just doesn't compute.

Not wanting to sound like a parochial snob, I appreciate the opportunity to experience cultural activities from another nation, and certainly understand the advantages local performers reap from dialoguing with visiting artists. However when the price of admission to some events are beyond the reach of the average citizen, when local professional practitioners are treated like amateurs or locked out of participating in events, how valid is the exchange? And when many of the visiting acts are by full

time festival entertainers (groups of performers who make it to all the international gigs representing a country they haven't lived in for more than a decade) just how honest is their cultural presentation?

I'm not the only one to note how the influx of alien artists to this town in summer pushes the local talent beyond the periphery. In the past, marginalised artists got together and presented an artistic tantrum in the guise of an annual "fringe" festival. The Fringe presented a broad program of free, open to the public, events and exhibitions that ran outside the parameters of the International Art Festival's costly elite events. Just about the only thing the Fringe had in common with its International twin was both festivals had some real "clangers" in their program. The Fringe survived more than a few years with word of mouth promotion, volunteers, private contributions and good audience attendance. Then, do to the lack of assured financial aid, it faded away. Meanwhile the yearly International festival continues, with vast amounts of state funding, despite showing financial losses on a regular basis. I still can't figure it out.

Is it really the same everywhere or is this art snobbery the result of my town being the Most Isolated Capital City in the World? Why do we pay top dollar to see an aging British rock star stomp across a weirdly lit stage, and ignore the local songster who puts on a free show in the park under the stars? Why is it that Ellen, who has a natural talent for drawing but didn't complete art school, needs to go to Scotland to find an appreciative audience for her colourful contemporary graphic works on paper? Why do we ignore her and give kudos to a well-educated European artist who filled a city construction site with balloons while explaining how modern urban architecture is alienating? He has a valid point but since the invention of CCTV, security shutters and electronic entry codes,

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all modern architecture - urban, suburban, even rural - is alienating. Why doesn't he fill backyards in the "burbs" with balloons or send them bouncing across parched wheat fields? Never mind, this one I can figure out myself.

Ellen came home, just for a visit to get the winter chill out of her system, but will return again for the Northern Hemisphere summer. Although I know she is a very good artist, I have to wonder if the uniqueness of her Australian accent, amid a plethora of Scottish brogues, is opening doors for her. Is some struggling highland lad, with paintbrush in hand, being pushed aside to let the sunny southern lass through? I'm afraid to ask only because I'm sure the answer will be yes. In a way that's comforting, to know the folk of my town are not the only "reverse" snobs in the world. But then again it's discomfiting, to entertain the idea that Cultural Cringe is a universal malady.

I firmly believe exposure to art from other cultures has a positive effect. At first it seems strange, especially if the play is in a foreign tongue or the music is high pitched and monotonous. Our response when we can't engage with the presentation, or if it's not to our taste, is to dismiss it as "bad". It's a natural reaction. However by experiencing new things, like them or not, we broaden the mind and that's good.

By all means bring on the weirdest and most wonderful of art practitioners - singers and dancers, musicians and composers, painters and sculptors, actors, authors, and acrobats - from all corners of the earth so we can experience their performances, discover new tastes, be inspired or question their motives, and learn another way of expressing the self. But please, not at the cost of our own, those whose talents we talk down but secretly enjoy between festivals. We don't want them all to be lost to Hollywood, some Parisian atelier or become a Highland fling. We all have to help prevent Cultural Cringe from becoming a global artistic epidemic. Go to a local galley, say something nice about the art. I figure it'll help.

Judith McGrath lives in Kalamunda, Western Australia, 25 minutes east of Perth. She received a BA in Fine Art and History from the University of Western Australia. McGrath lectured in Art History and Visual Literacy at various colleges around the Perth area, and was an art reviewer for *The Sunday Times* and *The Western Review* both published in the Perth area. McGrath was also a freelance writer and reviewer for various art magazines in Australia. She also co-ordinated the web site *Art Seen in Western Australia* found at (<http://www.artseeninwa.com>). McGrath is currently enjoying retirement.



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