

SALA FESTIVAL KEYNOTE ADDRESS
KHAI LIEW
ELDER HALL, ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
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Deputy Premier, honourable friends, Penny McAuly, Connie Wilson, members of the SALA Board and fellow artists, I would like to say how proud and honoured I am, as a designer, to be standing here tonight representing the visual artists. Thank you for this great privilege.

I would also like to thank Nick Mitzevich for inviting us to celebrate the work of living artists in this beautifully refurbished Elder Hall; the gesture is warmly appreciated by us all.

Congratulations also to Hossein Valamanesh for your beautiful monograph; you are truly one of our most inspiring artists.

I arrived in Australia forty years ago and spent the first year of my life here in a Catholic boarding school in Somerton Park. Lunch at this school in 1971 meant the choice of meat pie with sauce, pasty with sauce or fritz sandwich with sauce, all washed down with a glass of full cream milk. Every mouthful said 'welcome to Australia.'

South Australia is a very different place now. These days you can order decaf soy latte in small country towns and, conversely, bush cockies can be found in city restaurants wielding chopsticks like a birthright. The cultural changes have been immense; so *many* things have changed. One thing that's unfortunately still familiar, however, is that artists are still poor and the relentless cry for arts funding remains loud and clear.

That's why I can't stress enough how important the SALA Festival is to us all. It's by far the best thing that has happened. The wider community's perception of living artists and their worth has changed dramatically thanks to this celebration. Thank you Paul Greenaway.

This is our time to speak up. It's the individual expression of over 4000 artists being heard at the same time. Much will be critiqued and debated. Much will be passed over, much will be admired and celebrated, but at the end of it all, what we get, what is distilled is the essence of our collective dreams, our aesthetic judgements, our aspirations, our wisdom, our concerns and our courage.

As a barometer of our cultural temper, SALA defines us as a community at this moment in history, and the collective output of our work provides a useful picture of our cultural worth. It also illustrates the spirit and timbre of how we are thinking, and more importantly, whether or not we are brave enough to say what we are thinking. So the SALA Festival should also be looked upon as the celebration of freedom of expression, freely encouraged – a right to be jealously guarded and never to be taken for granted.

And since we are in the spotlight, we should not be afraid to ask: What then *is* our cultural worth? Are we able to get a clear picture of who we are? Putting it very bluntly: is our work up to scratch? Is the cream of our collective output exciting and intellectually muscular enough for, say, Nigel Hurst, Director of the Saatchi Gallery to welcome from us a reciprocal exhibition in London, entitled "South Australian Art Now"? How would the critics and the London public take to such an important exhibition? Are we even ready for such an undertaking?

In my humble opinion, the answers are an emphatic 'yes!', 'very well thank you!' and 'yes!' again. Collectively not only are we worth it, but we are worth a lot. I believe the world is absolutely ready to hear our story through our hands and our eyes. We have given them a taste, but we need to give them more. I'm proud to report that not since the days of Sid Nolan, Albert Tucker and Arthur Boyd has there been so much Australian visual art represented abroad... and the South Australian component is up there leading the way.

Earlier this year, assisted by the Integrated Design Commission, I had the enviable task of taking the work of seven Australian artists to London's Design Museum. The works were for an exhibition showcasing the best designs of 2010 from all over the world. Six of the artists, I'm happy to say, were from South Australia and, amongst the best, their works sat proud.

Many of our artists have works in prestigious private collections and museums: museums such as the Victoria and Albert, London, the Museum of Decorative Arts, Paris, and the national galleries of Australia and Scotland, just to name a few. Many have won major international awards. They are represented by some of the world's finest galleries and most influential dealers. Thanks to the good work of the JamFactory, one such dealer in London has three of our artists in his formidable stable.

In short, we're well liked, well respected and our work is well sought after. We're starting to make a difference to the international visual arts landscape. These are early days, but they are exciting days, and it's vital that we build on this momentum to consolidate our presence.

However, being well liked and respected critically, does not necessarily translate into food on the table, and money to pay the people who provide the infrastructure for our work.

To cement a decent living for ourselves, we and our gallerists need to be market savvy. Some are already showing the way. Art transactions are increasingly crossing borders and the art market is, like everything else, a global market. It is vital that our work continues to be promoted and sold on the international marketplace. And not only should we put our work out there, it is imperative that we show our face, engage, sign off on the deals and seal the exhibition dates.

No longer should we allow the old nemeses of funding and distance hinder our place in the visual arts sun. Neither of these factors was part of the equation when we, as a company and then as a state, first conceived a utopian vision that embraced the key ideas of hope and a better society. Underlying that first vision of South Australia was the need for economic viability. We've got the vision, a good society and the hope – it's that damn economic viability we have to nail.

Thank you, have a great night and viva la SALA!