

Notes for opening speech for the exhibition Eirene Mort – a livelihood at Canberra Museum and Gallery 29 September 2017

It is a great pleasure to share this exhibition opening with you tonight for two reasons.

First, I admire CMAGs commitment to advancing the combined agendas of a social history museum and an innovative art gallery – these are not always easily reconciled roles: they can pull in different directions, proceed from different assumptions, and appeal to different constituencies

- CMAG's initiatives in insisting on the synthesis, fusion and dynamic of both agendas is striking, exciting, and bold: we should be grateful for it
- From *Head Full of Flames* to *Bush Capital: the natural history of the ACT*, CMAG has insisted on the interdependence of creative work and social context, experience, and the testing of the relationships between them
- *Eirene Mort: A Livelihood* – even in its title – captures that synthesis: and the title, as you will soon see, is beautifully realised in the gallery – my thanks in particular to Dale Middleby for that

Second, because it has been my pleasure and privilege to work with Pam Lane, whose research so deeply informs this exhibition, over the past three years in the School of History at the Australian National University.

- Pam came to me with a passion to 'recover' Eirene Mort as an artist, with a vital place in Australian creative life that, she has insisted, is too often written out of art history – with its preoccupation with the 'greats' – and too little represented in social history, with its tendency to default to the representative.

- Eirene Mort, Pam argued, might not fit neatly into either category, but she certainly captured a rich, suggestive and – if I can step aside from being the dispassionate academic supervisor for a minute – the profoundly moving, engaging, challenging, ambiguous space between such settled categories
- Eirene Mort might not be a ‘great’ figure in Australian art history – that role would be more readily attributed to the several women artists who caught the wave of Modernism that Eirene, by philosophy, temperament, class and generation both missed and rejected
- Nor might Eirene be ‘representative’, precisely because of the same reasons: she defines a point, several points, of transition between the customary terms and categories with which we understand Australian history, and specifically the role and experience of women in that history – from empire to nation, from private to public, from ‘place’ to politics and so on
- But – as Pam has resolutely insisted – Eirene Mort is profoundly revealing as an artist, a woman, a person, for precisely those reasons
- And the testament to, the proof of, Pam convictions, is in also powerfully realised in the gallery that will open to you soon.

Anything that I might say about Eirene Mort is, then, second hand: it has been my privilege to work with Pam in her quest to identify that place Eirene should have in Australian history, and – not insignificantly – Canberra’s history

- I first became aware of Eirene as an artist through the work she undertook in 1927 to document that point at which Canberra passed from a pastoral landscape – with which Eirene had close personal connections: the ‘Mort’ is of that great Australian pastoral and entrepreneurial dynasty – to a national capital.

- As you enter the exhibition you will see the great care with Eirene captured the landscape, lives and labour that was about to disappear from the Limestone plains
- When I first saw these works, I dismissed them as sentimental, nostalgic, ‘the world we have lost’ – but, as with CMAG’s wonderful Elioth Gruner exhibition, you can’t also help pausing with the arresting feeling that here is some more fundamental, formative, enduring understanding of our place that resides still beneath what seems still both familiar and all too new. A bit of history does you good.

But there is a deeper, personal resonance to ‘the world we have lost’: for here we have a woman who flourished – really flourished, personally, professionally – in the early years of the twentieth century, and in a world that was far from archaic, or nostalgic, or lacking in ideas and innovation – but was becoming aware of a very different pulse of change around her

- Not, I suspect, an unfamiliar feeling for many of us

And her work – the great diversity of her work, the almost irrepressible energy, curiosity, experimentation, and perhaps also the earnest desire to both please and instruct that drove her work – captures that change

There are many aspects of Eirene, and of the careful construction of this exhibition, I want to encourage you to reflect on as you move through it – and don’t move fast: don’t just ask – do I like that; ask – what did it take/mean to create that

One aspect is the simple versatility of Eirene as an artist and – as Pam would insist – an artisan: someone who was driven, in the Arts and Crafts philosophy she embraced – to make things that were both beautiful and useful

- There are the ecclesiastical robes she designed for her clergyman father – radical in his own ways
- There watercolours, etchings, pencil, pen and charcoal drawings, linocuts, metalwork, poker-work, bookplates, toys, games, postcards, bookplates, wall-paper, tablecloths, embroidery, tapestry
- There are materials produced for homes, for schools, there is an arresting photograph of Eirene – young, buoyant – among a group of equally young but suddenly desperately old returned soldiers of WWI whom she helped with carpet making, leatherwork, basketmaking in one of the early programs of occupational therapy and rehabilitation
- And Eirene is in that photograph with her life-partner, Nora Weston, who as an artist and artisan and as a companion in the deepest sense was integral to much that Eirene was able to achieve

So that versatility makes a point – this is a life determined to be applied, and perhaps determined to be independent.

When you look at the taste, the aesthetic, that drove this work, there is also another point:

‘Let us have no more sprays of meaningless blue daisies that are being painted on plates, cups and jugs of proportions and shapes preposterous enough to break one’s heart. Let us have something of our own ...’

Eirene is, to put it simply, a nationalist – it might be a nation conceived in still protean, imperialist terms (there is the rather awkward example of her Australian Animal Alphabet, produced on blocks for children, which began ‘A is for Aborigine’) but it is a nationalist on which others could and would build

But that question also begs a question: why was such activity necessary? what drove it? What was she seeking to achieve.

‘I did not have time for a career’, Eirene reflected on her life: she was, to put it bluntly, too busy to achieve the standing that later artists found, following in some of her tracks, but also finding new and more opportunities of their own

Pam makes a very strong case for Eirene as a ‘New Women’, a figure of the turn of the twentieth century determined not be defined by the conventions of marriage, domesticity and maternity: she *would* be independent

But there is one arresting newspaper article accompanying a very impressive tapestry she was commissioned to produce in 1930, replete with more Australian motifs than you could poke a stick at. It advises ‘the pessimists who fear for the domestic future of women, and who shake their heads sadly as they watch the good old-housewifely virtues supposedly being swamped under an orgy of bridge playing’ to observe ‘the revival of needlework’ in recent years, in which ‘every second flapper and her mother has a piece on hand’

Eirene’s tapestry was a private commissioned, at a scale that meant it had to be printed in France, and it took her client sixteen years to complete

Eirene couldn’t win: she didn’t win – the rooms you are about to view reflect the intense and passionate industry, determination, creativity and adaptability of a women who didn’t have time for a career

Her work deserves to be celebrated: it is clever, inventive, playful, generous and quietly didactic – thank you, Dale, for such an engaging reflection of one woman’s life work

But is also demands reflection – thank you, Pam, for the care, the love, you have devoted to giving us this ‘livelihood’

Thank you both, and to the families of Eirene and Nora, for making this synthesis of art and social history possible.

