

**Dr Maudie Palmer AO,  
Vice Chancellor's Professorial Fellow, Monash University**



Maudie Palmer (2020)  
by her dear friend Jacqueline Mitelman

It is with deep sadness that TarraWarra Museum of Art Board and staff honours the life of Maudie Palmer AO—a truly extraordinary figure in the Australian art world. Maudie was a trailblazer. From the 1970s onward, she shaped the cultural landscape with vision, determination and an unwavering commitment to contemporary Australian art. She will be remembered for her passion, integrity and tireless advocacy.

Maudie believed in the power of art—not only to reflect who we are, but to help define our national identity. Maudie championed living artists while also acknowledging the importance of modern Australian art. She was a passionate advocate for the environment, creating art projects that celebrated and highlighted the fragility of our natural terrain. Growing up on a farm in southwest Gippsland, she carried a respect of Country into her work, fostering cultural revival in regional areas.

Maudie's commitment to amplifying First Nations voices was profound. Through her friendship and collaboration with Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin AO, Senior Wurundjeri Elder, she sought to ensure that Indigenous stories were heard and celebrated.

Maudie was also a generous mentor—guiding and inspiring several women curators and Museum directors, sharing her wisdom and supporting their vision. And she never stopped fighting for artists, working tirelessly to secure the resources they needed to thrive.

In her 2021 Graduation Address as the Vice Chancellor's Fellow at Monash University, Maudie highlighted the three most significant aspects of her career: embracing change, bringing together artists with communities, and the urgent need to look after our land, using creativity and passion to bring it back from the brink of extinction. Her unrealised vision was for 1000 indigenous trees to be planted on the Birrarung in collaboration with Wurundjeri artists and curators as a Cultural Pathway.

**During her address she commented:**

*We live, like everyone else, in uncertain times. With that uncertainty comes a conservatism driven by simple economics. The humanities, art and design among them, don't fare well in that equation because the riches they bestow don't always translate into numbers that can be counted. But the riches of the arts means so much more than numbers. Their meaning comes through what we see, what we touch, and what we hear. The arts can change ordinary lives. Creativity can influence every aspect of what needs to be done, whether that creativity comes through art practice, scholarship, design, architecture, or arts administration and management.*

**Director of TarraWarra Museum of Art, Dr Victoria Lynn comments:**

*Maudie was both a friend and mentor to me. She was driven, passionate and committed, devoting much of her time and energy to supporting artists, often conceiving original and imaginative approaches to raising the profile of art and the environment. Maudie was an exceptional writer about art, capturing both the integrity and poetry of contemporary creativity. She was determined to ensure that the legacy of Eva and Marc Besen would be honoured and the Board and team at TarraWarra are proud to continue her work as inaugural Director of the Museum. Maudie leaves behind a legacy of courage, generosity and transformative impact. Her zeal and fortitude live on within us. Her spirit will continue to guide us. We send our deepest sympathy to Maudie's daughters Greta and Alice and family.*

## Biography:

Maudie was a trailblazing curator and Director, emerging at a time when very few women held senior positions in Australia's arts sector. After beginning her career as Assistant Director/Curator at the University Gallery from 1975 to 1981 (now Potter Museum of Art) at the University of Melbourne, Maudie held various roles including that of founding Director and Curator of Heide Park and Art Gallery from 1981 to 1996 (now Heide Museum of Modern Art). At Heide she was the Project Director of the major buildings from the initial stage of developing the vision and writing the brief for the architect Andrew Andersons. After Heide, Maudie worked on the realisation of TarraWarra Museum of Art, from 1999 – 2009 and then again in 2011.

TarraWarra Museum of Art opened to the public in 2003. From the late 1990s Maudie worked closely with Eva Besen AO and Marc Besen AC and family, to establish the Museum as a not-for-profit charity, creating an independent board and constitution. Not only did she collaborate with the Besens to select Allan Powell as the architect, but she also project managed the building and oversaw the first 9 years of the Museum's programs, including developing a collection for the Museum to amplify the Besen's generous gift of their personal collection. Maudie launched the acquisition of First People's art for the permanent collection. Highlights of Maudie's tenure include the establishment in 2006 of the TarraWarra Biennial, an exhibition that has evolved into a nationally significant event. Important curated exhibitions include *Danie Mellor: Exotic Lies Sacred Ties*, 2014; *John Nixon*, 2007; *John Young, A Survey of works 1979-2005*, 2006; *Charles Anderson, A House for Hermes #01: The House of my Father*, 2007; *Echo*, 2004, co-curated with Diane Morgan. Maudie returned as interim Director in 2011 and from then on continued as an advisor to the Board up until the time of her passing.

In 2014 Maudie worked as part of the Simon McArthur & Associates (SMA) team to deliver the Feasibility and Development plan for a new Shepparton Art Museum. In the same year, she was also part of the SMA team working on the Warrnambool Art Gallery Business Case and worked with SGS Economics and Planning and MvS Architects, to deliver the St Arnaud Precinct Plan for the Shire of Northern Grampians.

In 2017 when McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park was in a transition period between directors, she worked for eight months as a strategic manager and initiated the design (with architect Kerstin Thompson) and the building of the Sarah & Baillieu Myer Education Pavilion. In 2019 she completed similar strategic management and curatorial programming work at Hamilton Art Gallery.

Maudie consulted on a wide range of contemporary art projects with artists and architects, from the conceptual stage to execution including: Moët and Chandon Australian Art Foundation (1996 - 2001); New Commonwealth Law Courts, Melbourne (1999); Parks Victoria, Yarra Valley Artists in Residence Program; Herring Island Environmental Sculpture Park and the Melbourne Festival Visual Arts Program (1997 - 1999). She was the art consultant on the AAMI Stadium and the Barak Bridge.

Maudie served on numerous committees including completing a full nine-year term in 2009, as a Trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria. In 2006 she was made an Officer of the Order of Australia. In 2011 she was appointed as an Honorary Fellow of Monash University. She was a recipient of the Rotary Club of Melbourne Vocational Service Award and has been a member of the Yarra River Keepers' Association Committee and was a founding Ambassador of CLIMARTE, Melbourne. She also served on the Monash University Museum of Art Committee.

As a Vice-Chancellor's Professorial Fellow at Monash University, Maudie initiated the cross-faculty Birrarung Project, which encompassed Indigenous heritage, history post settlement, art, architecture, environment and sustainability. At the completion of this appointment in December 2016 and after working with Monash Art Projects, she delivered the collaborative project, *Birrarung: Art Water Refuge Tumbleweed*. She also completed the film *Birrarung*, a culture/nature visual poem about the Yarra River from its source to the sea. In 2017 the *Birrarung Art Water Refuge Standing Wave* project was further developed with artist James Geurts, and the Bulleen Birrarung Cultural Precinct project was initiated. This was extended in collaboration with curators Stacie Piper and Eugene Howard to be a component of the proposed Birrarung Cultural Pathway – *A journey into landscape and imagination*.

In recent years Maudie continued to advise on the development of museums and galleries in regional areas, the fruits of which will emerge in the years to come.