

Art displays, as well as working demonstrations, keep the atmosphere lively, creative and educational at the Queenscliff gallery space.

IN PRAISE OF ART, AN OLD CHURCH FINDS NEW LIFE AS A GALLERY

FROM HIGHLY SOUGHT AFTER ARTISTS TO EMERGING TALENTS AND STUDENTS, A NEWLY OPENED GALLERY IN QUEENSLIFF IS BRINGING THE CREATIVE PROCESS – AS WELL AS THE FINISHED PRODUCT – TO THE PEOPLE, WRITES SUZIE COFFEY



Theo and Soula Mantalvanos are the owners of Queenscliff Gallery & Workshop in Hesse Street. Photography: Mitch Bear



The rustic detail of the former Wesleyan church works in well with art pieces in the gallery.

Set against the crisp white walls of a refurbished Wesleyan church in the heart of Queenscliff, a beautifully detailed piece by renowned artist Graeme Peebles makes an instant impression.

Titled Periwinkle Midden, the artwork is a striking example of the mezzotint printmaking medium, an extremely time-consuming process requiring a high level of skill to produce.

Peebles' work is held in galleries around Australia including the National Gallery in Canberra, Artbank in Sydney and most state galleries.

That it is also on show in the newly launched Queenscliff Gallery & Workshop is a coup for the small business and its visitors alike.

Nearby there are works by highly sought after artists such as Angela Cavaleri and Andrew Gunnell.

But the gallery, the brainchild of dynamic couple Theo and Soula Mantalvanos, is more than just a space for established artists.

Also lining the historic walls are pieces by emerging artists and students, many of whom are local.

The space also serves as a workshop where visitors can try their hand at traditional printmaking techniques, partake in art

workshops, attend a meet-and-greet with artists and watch demonstrations.

"We are a commercial space but we are also here because we love art and we love showing people art," Theo explains.

"We are more than just a polished gallery. We want people to understand the work – the processes. The techniques and the workmanship involved in each piece.

"We are always up for a decent chat about the artworks in order for our visitors to appreciate what goes into creating a piece."

"Our favourite people are those who come in and look and every piece, and say 'thank you' and walk out," Soula, an accomplished artist whose work is also on display in the gallery, says.

"Not everyone who comes through is going to buy a piece, but we are happy if we can maybe impact their day a bit.

"Maybe they'll walk away with a nice mood, a nice feeling. And that's special to us."

Queenscliff Gallery & Workshop opened its doors late last year after Theo and Soula decided to make some life changes to accommodate Soula's chronic pain issue and the subsequent restrictions it placed on everyday life.

By combining their shared passion for art and the creative connections made throughout their careers, the idea for a gallery and workshop was born.

Based in Collingwood at the time, the couple began exploring regional areas in search of a suitable location when Queenscliff, with its strong artistic culture, presented itself. The availability of the 1868 Wesleyan church cemented their decision.

"We fell in love with the building and the decision to move to Queenscliff was cemented," Theo explains.

"We love the area, the feel. We thought 'let's commit and secure ourselves in this wonderful precinct'. And housing techniques which are traditional and old – it works with the building."

Inspired by galleries around the world the couple had a clear vision of the business they wanted to create.

The pair says the support of the township, the council, sister galleries and the artists helped bring the concept together.

They acquired a large printing press, renovated the building – which included opening up a mezzanine floor – and set about curating the ever-changing collection of works that are being housed in the gallery.

"Some people might come in and say they are just looking, and they feel guilty about that," Soula laments.

"But we want people to come in and look. And we want people to come back.

"We change the walls so as when people come back there's something new."

"The idea is to stop people. We want people to visit Queenscliff and spend some time here," Theo adds.

"If we can have them lingering it's good for the town, and can benefit every business."

"We have travelled extensively and one thing that has really inspired us has always been walking into a gallery and see printmakers at work," he continues.

"You feel so special. They are happy you have come. It's not just someone standing at a counter trying to sell you something.

"They knew we weren't going to be buying a \$20,000 piece but they were happy for us to have a look around, and happy for us to enjoy the space.

"It was so warm and welcoming."

Soula and Theo have taken a similar approach when considering the Queenscliff Gallery & Workshop. Pieces for sale range from around \$200 up to about \$8000, with over 30 artists represented.

"We buy art because we love it and we hope people do that too," Theo says.

"And that's what makes it beautiful," Soula adds.

Queenscliff Gallery & Workshop is at 81 Hesse Street, Queenscliff. It is open six days a week (closed Tuesdays). For more information visit qgw.com.au or phone 03 5258 4927.

