

Spirits in the Bush
The Art of Gippsland
By Simon Gregg, 2019 pp200-202



In 1982 Karen Bensley, the Tutor in Art History, served as Acting Head of School until the jeweller and silversmith Professor **Norman Creighton** (b. 1943) was appointed permanently to the role in the following year. Creighton has been an instrumental figure in the promotion of art in Gippsland in many ways. Born in Maffra, he trained as an art and craft teacher at the Melbourne Teachers College before commencing work in 1963. He subsequently undertook further training in Gold and Silversmithing at RMIT, and rose to prominence as a jeweller during the 1970s. His first major exhibition in Gippsland was staged at the Sale Regional Arts Centre in 1976. Two works acquired for the gallery collection, *River Mouth* and *High Plains*, reveal an interest in high country themes through hard-edged geometric designs. *Mountains and Mill*, a major work from the same exhibition, extends the theme with the inclusion of a windmill providing a reference to Creighton's childhood in Maffra, where a windmill stood sentry on his parent's property.

According to Creighton, once free of the influence of RMIT he 'quickly and completely' began creating silver works that referenced the landscape.

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When I started to look for landscape symbols it was definitely the Gippsland hills that were my hills and it was the Gippsland Lakes that were my waterways.¹⁸

Creighton's silver work from this period took its cues from industrial design and architecture of the 1960s, but softened the metallic edge of his works with natural themes to forge a synthesis between fabricated and organic forms. The artist's advanced design skills were evident in the abstraction of familiar motifs, and the manipulation of metals to create exquisite ornaments. While *River Mouth* and *High Plains* were designed as wall-pieces, contemporaneous works, such as *Neckband with Discs* (c.1974), in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, were designed as wearable jewellery that contrasted with the skin.

During the 1970s Creighton became heavily involved in the Crafts Council of Australia and the Crafts Council of Victoria, where he served as President for two years. During this time he was instrumental in helping develop Arts Victoria's state-wide Craft Festival, launched in 1978. His day job was as lecturer at Melbourne State College, where he taught metalcraft, jewellery and art education.

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As Head of the Gippsland School of Art from 1983 to 1999, Creighton oversaw the maturation of an entire generation of artists in Gippsland. From the moment of his arrival he brought a sense of stability to the School of Art, steering the institution's gradual transition from a free-form, unstructured curriculum, to a more regulated course structure. Creighton told the *Latrobe Valley Express* in 1983 that 'It's nice to think I can make a contribution in a region I have a real feeling for. My art's about Gippsland'.¹⁹ Remembering back years later, he recalls:

I was appointed with a challenge to bring the Art School into the wider framework that was expected in the rest of the Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education. What was needed was a new model and structure and new funding to give the students a formal program based on lots of studio time, and an atelier model of art education with practicing artists as their tutors and role models.²⁰

The demands of being the Head of the School of Art inevitably impacted on his own practice, and he ceased to produce art and to regularly exhibit in 1983. The school, under Creighton, also continued to act as a beacon for visiting artists through the 1980s, and as the heart of a growing network of galleries at Morwell, Sale, Bairnsdale, Warragul, and Leongatha. There was a sense of mutual respect and camaraderie, with Creighton recalling:

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My memory of the atmosphere at the Art School during those years is one of professionalism and wide support for art and artists in the region. Although the Art School was small, and the funding was always limited, there was an incredible level of seriousness and professional commitment to the program from a wide range of sources.²¹

In time Creighton and his wife Petah would establish their own gallery in Nungurner – the Artworks Gallery and Studio – on the shores of the Gippsland Lakes.