In the Beginning...

In 1982 Adelaide Central School of Art, billed as ‘The Alternative Art School’, opened in a large space in Bloor Court, just off Currie Street in Adelaide. The School was the brainchild of Rod Taylor and Heather Nicholson, and the School’s original premise was to provide studio spaces and informally assessed tuition in the visual arts.

The first courses on offer at the School included Drawing, Painting and Visual Design Fundamentals, with lectures in Printmaking, Tapestry Weaving, Sculpture and Drawing for the Crafts added soon after. The instructors teaching these classes were all practising artists, with Founder, Rod Taylor, adamant that ‘teachers would only be employed who actually worked as artists’. This principle continues at the School to this day.

In addition to tuition, the school established studio spaces for artists. Central Studios would become a hub where artists could rent studios in the unique and dynamic teaching environment of the School.

Bloor Court was the first of the School’s locations. After came Gilles Street, Adelaide, and Osmond Terrace, Norwood, until the School’s exciting move to the Glenside Cultural Precinct in January 2013. Central Studios remained on site at each of the School’s locations until 2003, when it moved to Grote Street, Adelaide, evolving to become a separate entity to the School.

To commemorate the School’s historic journey, three exhibitions celebrating the last 30 years are scheduled for 2013-2014. Each exhibition will document the influence of lecturers, artists and associates involved with the School. In the Beginning... is the first of these exhibitions and presents the work of nine artists from the Bloor Court period: Peter Baka, John Hinds, Kay Lawrence, Leo Neuhofer, Christopher Orchard, Anna Platten, Rory Richardson, Rod Taylor and Hossein Valamanesh.

Curated by Ingrid Kellenbach and Gloria Strzelecki.
Recollections by the artists from Bloor Court

Rod Taylor (Founder)

I mostly remember Bloor Court as hard work, and much of it physical. Initially, I think that the old three storey red brick building in which we began had been used to manufacture parts for the car industry. In the 60s/70s, our floor, the top floor, was the home of the Women’s Electoral Lobby, and later it was a disco. At the time that we signed the lease in 1982, it was used for band practice and the walls were covered with car tyres, apparently to improve the acoustics. It was a mess: full of junk and quite filthy. Heather Nicholson (my wife at that time and still a very dear friend) and I removed the tyres, cleared out the junk and rubbish, cleaned the floors as best we could and painted the whole place white using a spray gun. Heather also decorated and made welcoming the stairwell from the small foyer on the ground floor to our double doors at the top. I built all the tables and heavy duty easels with the help of Tony Colangelo, who cut all the parts to size. The rest of the furniture and equipment we scavenged or got from second-hand places. It was in the middle of summer and the building was like an oven. The physical work continued for me throughout the six years of our tenancy in Bloor Court. At the end of every day I would clean the teaching studio, toilets and kitchen ready for the next day’s classes.

It wasn’t just hard work though. In fact it was exhilarating effort and lots of fun. We had exhibitions, parties and regular after-class drinks and discussions. Very importantly, we felt that we had the enthusiastic support of the arts community and many friends. It also happened that the School and studios (Central Studios) were immediately successful. Very good artists wanted to teach and/or join the studios, and a surprising number of hopeful students enrolled in the School as soon as the doors opened.

At least, that was how it was in the first year. In the second year, things declined. Enrolments were very low and discouraging, although the studios remained mostly full. At the end of that year I came close to abandoning the whole project. The trouble was that I still believed in it, and so it seemed did many others. We felt that it offered something good and quite different; something that was concrete and valuable. I made some changes to the course structures, timetable and what was to be offered, and committed to making it work. And, strangely perhaps, I must have believed that it would.

It is amazing that the school, and Heather and I, survived Bloor Court; unfortunately, our marriage didn’t. Although there were indeed many intangible rewards, we had so few resources, the business generated so little income and it was such hard work and long hours. We had two small children and to survive financially, I taught a few sessions a week at the South Australian School of Art and sold a few paintings. Heather got a job as an art teacher in a high school. Without accreditation - which was not possible at that time - we had little to reward students except a personal reference and a portfolio that assisted them to enter formal study elsewhere. Nonetheless, during the following four years enrolments steadily grew until 1989, the year we moved to much more spacious central studios at the Adelaide Central School of Art and sold a few paintings. Heather also decorated and made welcoming the stairwell from the small foyer on the ground floor to our double doors at the top. I built all the tables and heavy duty easels with the help of Tony Colangelo, who cut all the parts to size. The rest of the furniture and equipment we scavenged or got from second-hand places. It was in the middle of summer and the building was like an oven. The physical work continued for me throughout the six years of our tenancy in Bloor Court. At the end of every day I would clean the teaching studio, toilets and kitchen ready for the next day’s classes.

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Peter Baka

Recollections of a small time artist with grand delusions.

Late one summer afternoon in the Bloor Court studios, sitting on paint tin, my son, aged four, watched me struggling with a large painting. Frustrated I went to the toilet. On returning, I noticed my son holding a brush dripping in white paint and smiling. My painting ruined. He spanked his bottom. Crying and bewildered he dropped to the wooden floor. I felt like shit that I hurt him. We left pushing the stroller down Rundle Street to our favourite Italian café and ate rice cake while looking at each other in silence. I realised then my son will always come first before my grand delusions of being an artist.

John Hinds

I cannot remember how I discovered Central!

I was just back from a trip, and needed a space.

Before my arrival the list of names was impressive: Bill Young, Chris Coventry, Dell Plummer, Damon Moon, Marg Hooper and Jeff Moore.

When I moved in there was Sally Smart, Chris Orchard, Christian Kokai-Kun, Peter Baka, Andrea Num and Rod Taylor.

During my two years, there were quite a few entrances and exits: Anna Best, Elias (Lew) Kathrepsis, Lodi Kramer, Scott Chaseling, John Ullinger, Tony Kastanos, Anna Platten, Pauline Robinson, Suzanne Elborough, Keith Najan, Jeff Carter, Heinz Vohman, Nick Brown, William Powrie, Stefan Twaine-Wood, Sarah Ratche, Chris Bryant, Jane Newberry and Derek O’Connor.

Downstairs was Finmark, which imported paper from Europe. Once you climbed the stairs, the School took half the floor. I had the studio space nearest the entrance, the only enclosed space. The rest was open and dusty, with bitumen over a crumbling concrete floor. Artificial light was needed as most of the perimeter windows faced other buildings. I later measured the floor and painted white lines, to define equal spaces.

Atmosphere was friendly, with comings and goings. The only unfortunate incident I remember was some late night vandal throwing a brick through the plate glass doors downstairs!

Kay Lawrence

I taught a course on woven tapestry at Adelaide Central that began in May 1983. It was held upstairs at the Bloor Court premises in the evenings. I’d arrive at dusk, park in the alleyway (that was possible then) and cart my materials, notes and tapestry samples upstairs to the big white room where the class was held. I recorded in my diary after the first class: ‘I think I’ll really enjoy it, apart from the hassles of rushing the children around.’ Having my young children cared for so I could teach was clearly not easy to manage.

I don’t recollect much more about the classes or the students I taught. It was only a couple of months after the trauma of the Ash Wednesday bushfires coming to within 50 metres of my house in Crafers. That event blotted out memories of my day-to-day experience at the time.

I do remember Rod Taylor though, when he was conceiving the idea of the Adelaide Central School of Art with his wife Heather Nicholson earlier the previous year, trying to persuade me to open up my own private art school, teaching woven tapestry. There was a big studio down the back of the Crafers house that was perfect for teaching he kept telling me. But I didn’t have Rod’s entrepreneurial instinct and was much happier to teach a class in his and Heather’s art school instead. Tapestry was only taught once during the early years, when the focus of the school was still consolidating around drawing as the key practice that underpinned other disciplines, just as it underpinned my own practice.

Although I was known at the time as a tapestry weaver, drawing was fundamental to my practice, as the means through which I tried to make sense of my experience. After the Ash Wednesday fires I spent a month,

Image In the beginning... Rod Taylor and Heather Nicholson at Bloor Court premises, 1983
sitting on the blackened earth near my home, drawing the devastation around me. Despite the appalling damage to the natural and the built environment, there was something aesthetically beautiful about the ground, cleared of vegetation and intersected by the blackened trunks of trees.

These drawings were added to my archive, and every now and again one would seem to have a particular resonance that would warrant its translation into woven tapestry. Working on a small scale enabled me to work in a more intimate manner than the large works I was creating at the time. The scale also lent itself to weaving, which I had studied at the Art Centre in Adelaide in 1980. I found the process of weaving to be a meditative one, allowing me to reflect on my experiences and emotions.

I also made drawings that explored my experience as a woman and a mother. When she was seven my daughter Ellie made a drawing of a house and the identification of the house with the self. All the books I was reading at the time seemed filled with images of houses as symbols of the pleasure and the constraints of domesticity. Over the intervening decades I have retained my interest in drawing, and my current work still draws on my experience and reading. These days though, without responsibility for young children, I’m more inclined to the pleasures than the constraints of domesticity.

**Leo Neuhof**

I left art school, then located on Melbourne Street North Adelaide, half way through the first year to travel overseas in 1976. I started work as a production potter at Bennett’s Pottery in the suburb of Magill in 1979. In the late 80s I took life drawing classes at Adelaide Central School of Art. I joined Central Studios at Bloor Court and had several exhibitions of paintings during that period.

My immediate thought when asked to remember the Bloor Court studios in 1987 is of Rory bringing in his girlfriend to stay overnight in his space next to my space. I’m not sure why that should stand out as a significant memory. I recall Heinz Vehra and his intricate theories about his art and other people’s work. We would look at others’ and our own work in the studio and discuss its merits or otherwise. Having a space next to Rod was great because, although our approach to making was different, I found the contrast invigorating, and Christopher seemed like a kindred spirit at times. I remember Anna’s persistence with getting her work “right”, which she always did, and me hoping for some more abstraction in her work, which she never did! I admired her skill then and now. It was a great albeit brief period in my career.

I left the Studio soon after the move to the Gilles Street building. At the same time I had also moved to the Jam Factory on Payneham Road to throw functional clay vessels for potter Lincoln Kirby Bell. I set up my own ceramic studio in Prospect, pursuing painting, drawings and clay works. I have had several residencies where I was able to make large sculptural work using the large kilns of the Jam Factory, now located on Morphett Street Adelaide, and at the University of South Australia Ceramic studios in the West End.

In 2004 I completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) in ceramic sculpture at Uni SA. In 2005 I won the South Australian Ceramic Award. In 2007 I had a major show at the Jam Factory during the SALA Festival and have shown locally and interstate regularly since.

**Christopher Orchard**

Bloor Court and the Duke o’York.

1982. I’m working as an education officer at the Art Gallery of South Australia. That was my day job and time was very flexible. My studio was at Bloor Court on the first floor and included two large delivery doors that I could swing open to overlook the Queens Theatre, which was derelict and used for car parking. I would eavesdrop on classes in ACSA, being taught by Founder Rod Taylor, Sally Smart and so on, and wrestle with my muse as I attempted to move my work from 3D to 2D or some place in between.

I reckon there was about 10 of us in the studios, including Rory Richardson, Peter Baka, Anna Platten, Christopher Kokai-Kun, Stefan Twaine-Wood, and Rod Taylor, to name a few. We began to formalise the studio entity and registered as an “Inc.” Meetings were held at the Duke of York Hotel in Currie Street over pints and roll your own. An exhibition was conceived, involving all studio artists, but there was no room to set up a show, no walls, no lights etc. So ingenuity kicked in. As I was at the Gallery next door to the Museum, I knew there was a temporary display system in store at the Museum. I talked them into loaning us the screens, which were made from Archmesh steel and welded steel frames on wheels. Each one weighed an enormous amount. The delivery doors off my studio included an inoperative gantry pulley … hmmmmm … rope, hook, muscle (and brute force), and we hauled the screens up into the studio and into the space occupied by the school - about 12 of ‘em.

We then hung works on the screens and from anywhere else that stood still long enough. It was an exciting moment as a new entity was born and celebrated by a large number of inquisitive visitors, mostly other artists sniffing around to see what was happening.

It was all up from here for Central Studios and the Adelaide Central School of Art.

**Anna Platten**

I had the back corner studio in Bloor court from around 1984 to when the School and studios moved to Gilles Street. It had a frosted window and was my haven for that time. I had rented a space twice before in-group studios, but it was in Adelaide Central Studios that I first felt a true sense of belonging. I felt less self-conscious there and more at home. Even so, I asked my boyfriend to drive me around the block a couple of times before I got the courage to get out of our car and commit myself to being there in my space for a whole day.

The place was well organised, freshly painted and clean, with lovely, generous and inspiring touches everywhere. Particularly impressive were the locally handicrafted mugs provided for student and studio member use and Peter Baka’s wonderful Marilyn Monroe mirror pictures gracing the toilet and kitchen walls. There was a rare generosity of spirit there, which I think characterises both Rod and Heather and the school they founded from its inception. Initially I shared that studio with a close friend. We were both drawn to Centrals because we knew that Rod Taylor painted the figure when hardly anyone else did, and because he had taught us (me particularly briefly) life drawing.

I was one of those students who found Rod’s direct approach pretty confronting; I didn’t understand at the time that he was merely trying to help me. I was so inarticulate in a language that all first term students at ACSA now take for granted. I learnt so much in an informal manner from him over time in that studio. Rod’s studio was in the front right corner of the building as you came up the stairs. In those days I remember him solely taking all the classes and still finding time in between classes to paint. I first met Chris Orchard when he returned from his time working in London and took over a small space with half stable type doors at the top of the stairs. He produced very large works in very small spaces at times.

Rory Richardson had the studio next to me. I loved his music and we had for a while a common habit of starting work there very early: me cycling in early to avoid the heat, and Rory after finishing his pre-dawn shift at
Hossein Valamanesh

I finished my studies at South Australian School of Art in the late 1970s, and with a number of fellow graduates and other young artists, started a group workshop in the city centre called ‘Roundspace’. Other groups were also working together in supportive environments such as Women’s Art Movement and South Australian Workshop (SAW). It was at such exciting times that Adelaide Central School of Art began. My involvement as a teacher in the school was brief. I taught a 3D mixed media course that was closely aligned to my own practice at the time. Over the years I have been aware of the changes and developments at Adelaide Central School of Art and have given talks about my work on a number of occasions. It is wonderful to see this new chapter in the School’s life with the move to Glenside. I am pleased to take part in this inaugural exhibition and to show some of my work from this earlier period.

Rory Richardson

I joined Central Studios when they were housed at Bloor Court in late 1986. As was common in those days, the building was a multi-storied, run-down, out of the way sort of affair. It was located just off Currie Street in the city, so we were one street away from the hustle and bustle of Hindley Street. My first solo exhibition of figurative but very expressive paintings was held at Artzone Gallery (an artist run gallery). Heinz Vohma was one of several artists running Artzone Gallery and was working at Central Studios. Heinz was the link for me to apply for a studio space. The application was a fairly simple affair, they had an empty space and needed someone to fill it so I was readily accepted and soon found myself as a member of Central Studios. The other artists there were Chris Orchard, Rod Taylor, Stefan Twaine-Wood, Anna Platten and Leo Neuhofer. Rod, Anna and Chris became my mentors, to whom I owe most of my current painting and theory skills. In all fairness Annette Bezor who joined us at Norwood has also been a major mentor and supporter of my work. Chris was working on a series of figurative, geometrical, industrialised landscapes. Rod was doing realistic figurative work and Anna was doing the same but at the time she was still working in acrylics. As a consequence, my art tuition was similar to what had been common place for centuries before the art academies and schools were formed: that is, a promising young artist would be accepted as an apprentice into a well-known artist's workshop, where that artist would learn the skills and techniques and do preliminary work on the master’s paintings until they were ready and skilled enough to pursue a career of their own. However, my apprenticeship was more learning by example than hands on, though technical and theoretical advice was given quite often by my peers. Apart from the expressionist paintings, I previously mentioned the majority of my work incorporated hard edge shapes with figurative elements. I basically spent 15 years exploring various techniques and formats prior to settling into the works I now produce, which I began around the year 2000. My artistic concerns have always been shape and form and the work that can be produced from these foundations.

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