

From John McDonald

16 November, 2018

This week's announcement that Lisa Havilah will be the new CEO of the Powerhouse Museum brings another twist to this painful saga. We already know the decision to move the Powerhouse from its site in Ultimo to Parramatta - a distance of 25 kms at a cost of not less than \$1.5 billion – is the worst, the stupidest, the most evil and destructive thing a state government has ever done to a cultural institution in this country. There is no cultural, economic or demographic justification for this move when it would be much simpler, cheaper and more effective to build a new museum from scratch. Why destroy an institution that is 129 years old and housed in an award-winning building?

Lisa Havilah has been extremely successful as the director of Carriageworks, turning a moribund venue into a thriving enterprise. The Powerhouse, however, will present a much bigger challenge. What does it mean, for instance, to be appointed as CEO rather than director? Perhaps the most important point is that Lisa will report directly to the Minister, Don Harwin, rather than the trustees of the museum. This is an unsavoury little detail that serves to centralise power in the hands of the government and lessen transparency.

We now hear that an international design competition for the new building will be launched in December, with the winner announced in the second half of 2019. The X factor in this plan is the NSW state elections, which will be held in March 2019. This government is roundly despised and distrusted, and has already been punished in by-elections in Wagga Wagga and Orange. There is an excellent chance they will lose power.

This has been made more problematic by Luke Foley's undignified implosion as Opposition leader, even though this may be a blessing in disguise. The question is: 'Has Labor done enough to overcome the image of corruption and incompetence it created last time it was in government?'

The answer is probably 'No'. It would be reassuring if the ALP were to adopt a strong position vis-à-vis the proposed move of the Powerhouse. They are beginning to express opposition to the idea but it would be good to have a clear statement of intent: 'If elected, Labor commits to leave the Powerhouse where it is, and will undertake a new museum project for Parramatta that actually addresses the needs and desires of the local population. This will eliminate at least \$1 billion of cost to the tax-payer and get a much better result.'

If Labor wanted to be even more radical it might consider sending Sydney Modern to Parramatta, thereby killing two birds with one stone, creating massive savings, and leaving the green space of the Royal Botanic Gardens untouched. The AGNSW believes that Sydney Modern is a done deal, but we're yet to see a DA. I expect any rearrangement of the Sydney Modern plan is too far-fetched at this stage but it would be an utterly sensible thing to do.

This week's art column bids farewell to Watters Gallery, after 54 years. The 'end-of-an-era' cliché is only

too appropriate as there are no other galleries like Watters, and there probably never will be. Watters was a gallery that put artists first, accepting their changes or style and their unruly temperaments. The Watters crew charged the smallest of commissions, and expected artists not to make private sales behind their backs. They also kept prices at accessible levels for buyers, which meant that many artists left for more lucrative deals.

I've tried to put Watters in context, within a commercial landscape that is changing and globalising rapidly. Watters represents a kind of idealism that is swiftly disappearing and that's not something that should make us feel comfortable.

The film being reviewed is another swansong – Robert Redford's last acting job, in David Lowery's *The Old Man & the Gun*. Redford plays a real-life, geriatric bank-robber who gets such a thrill from his hold-ups that he simply can't stop. Redford's Forrest Tucker is the complete gentleman and the complete criminal in one package. It's fortunate he never went into politics.

John



Watters Gallery: The Last Opening

It was a typically understated opening night at Watters Gallery last week for Tony Tuckson 1921-1973, *Figurative Paintings and Preoccupations*.

...[Read More](#) (for Review of exhibition, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 15, 2018).

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