



Resilience in Regional Creative Arts Communities CASE STUDIES: **Petrus Spronk**



(supplied, Petrus Spronk)

Place of arts practice or work:

Hepburn Springs

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SlowLooking

<http://www.petrusspronk.com>

Australian Galleries:

<http://australiangalleries.com.au/artists/petrus-spronk/>

Arts Atlas Central Highlands

<https://www.artsatlas.com.au/petrus-spronk/>

Dutch Australians at a glance:

<http://www.daaag.org/node/petrus-spronk/> and Story Collection:

(1) [Childhood Memory](#); (2) [War Story](#); (3) [Yellow Tulip](#); (4) [Sinterklaas](#)

Personal vision and background

'Trade the concept of pride for that of delight and see your world change'.

Part of the delightful dilemma in writing about Petrus Spronk, is the breadth of his interests, interviews and exhibitions; he willingly shares his arts career with all its vulnerabilities and discoveries. Petrus Spronk sees the artist 'as a storyteller, making stuff up':

...the area where the truth and lies overlap is where art and poetry exist. ... They [poets and artists] awaken in us a sense of wonder, which is the driver of a creative life. They take us on a journey, a special journey in a world where we are perishing for want of wonder, not for want of wonders. <http://www.petrusspronk.com> – autumn blog

Petrus combines the cerebral with the practical, the hands-on development of his art and the daily slow thinking as he walks through his local forest. He gave deliciously poetic directions to his house and studio near Daylesford. '...The forest opens up into a most wonderful curve in the road...', leading to his home and studio, with 'warm timbers, lofty ceilings and cosy, earthy feel. A place of calm and creativity where nature is his neighbour.' <https://viva70.com/petrus-spronk-50-faces-50-lives/>



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Coming to Australia in 1957 as a teenager with his Dutch family, Petrus had found schooling not so interesting, a reaction reflected by the comment at primary school: 'Petrus has a bit too much imagination for his own good, but don't worry, we'll help him get rid of that problem'. His secondary schooling fared not much better, so Petrus left school and experimented with his pastry skills for five years. 'Follow the poet and the baker, they both nourish the world', he says.

Petrus' summary of schooling is that 'reality is the invention of unimaginative people', as he explored in his 80th birthday speech:

... when creating one of my ephemeral sand works as part of the Melbourne art festival ... I was approached by a guy who, upon asking me what would happen to my work when I finished it, and I told him that it would be removed by the council that evening said: "what a fucking waste of time". Upon which I couldn't help to ask, ... "and what do you do"? He answered with some pride "I work for the council". What could I not say but: "what a fucking waste of time".

Petrus discovered the South Australian School of Arts in 1966, and felt that he had come home. He specialised in sculpture and ceramics, with a minor in design and photography, and his movement between disciplines and projects has continued to be interdisciplinary. There have been collaborations with others in joint exhibitions, ceramics and art awards, multimedia exhibitions, works in major collections and commissions – he was commissioned in 2004 to create a bowl for his Holiness The Dalai Lama (photo below supplied, Petrus Spronk).



All parts of his life are the potential for arts projects. The ephemeral sand works concept arose when his ceramics work was not selling during a recession, and his mother reminded him of how he loved to play as a child in his sandpit. 'Ten Minutes to Midday' was an art project which ran from the 13th October 2003, till 12th October 2004, with photos of events each day at the time he was born. It



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started in Daylesford and ended in Seoul, Korea. In 2012, he chronicled 'staying creative with cancer', with ABC Open Ballarat (<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2012/06/19/3528737.htm>). And he embraced growing old with a project he called 'strong old age', still his guide:

Good exercise (daily walk of five kilometres),

Good diet (fresh food, no stuff from tins and boxes),

Good thoughts (which I keep positive and sane by my work in the vegetable garden and studio and my forest walks),

Good work (work with a creative aspect),

Good friends (people you can trust with your happiness).

Over his career there is a panorama of experience – his association with a range of capital city galleries and the three year association with the Australian Galleries, his exhibitions at local, state and global levels, his writer in residency experiences, and commissioned works such as the sculpture outside the State Library in Melbourne, featured here in the ACCA digital Melbourne Public Art Trail.



Petrus Spronk, *Architectural Fragment*, Port Fairy bluestone, 1992. (HxW) 250 x 700cm. Commissioned for the Swanston Street Walk Public Art Project, 1992. City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection. Photographer unknown. <https://acca.melbourne/art-file-public-art-correct-draft/melbourne-public-art-trail/9-petrus-spronk-architectural-fragment-1992/>

Spronk said in a 2016 *Advocate* interview for the 'Change and Growth' exhibition at The Lost Ones Gallery in Ballarat, that he studied with the American Indians of New Mexico to refine his ceramic technique to the 'simple way of making'.

'I live in the forest and my work has always been inspired by the beginning of things,' he said.

'I get my clay, I get wood from the forest, I live a simple life in the forest. I think if you want to make strong work you have to live in a strong place, and the forest is that.'



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My new series of work [at Australian Galleries] is concerned with the magic of the firing process. With this work it is the firing process in the wood-fired kiln where the emphasis lies. The enriching of a surface imbued with flame and smoke markings. Extracting from the kiln its visual magic. Enhancing the work with Kiln mysteries. Painting the surface of the bowl with a brush loaded with fire and smoke, creating landscape images in its primal form. Returning to the source. Always returning to the source. Something raw with something refined. And there lies the necessary tension in the work.
Petrus Spronk, 2017



MEDITATE NO-THING C. 2010-16

burnished wood fired ceramic, 12cm x 14cm x 14cm, AG308268

Artwork has been sold via Australian Galleries



FOUND FEATHER TURNED INTO A BOWL 2018-19

burnished wood fired ceramic and acrylic, 9.5cm x 13.5cm x 13.5cm, AG112413

Artwork has been sold via Australian Galleries



BLACK EARTH REFLECTING GOLD STARS 2018-19

burnished wood fired ceramic and acrylic, 10cm x 16cm x 16cm, AG112443

Artwork has been sold via Australian Galleries



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Step One on my Journey of the Bowl (supplied, Petrus Spronk)



Broken and restored (supplied, Petrus Spronk)

Personal engagement with community resilience building in arts practice

The basic driver for Spronk's work is his desire to make beautiful things with his hands. Hands which are connected to the heart, that combination of the emotionally attuned and the hands-on experience. He had been put into an apprenticeship when high school did not suit him, and by engaging with his hands the world started to make sense.

Part of building his own resilience has been to make positives out of the obstacles he encountered. After attempting teaching in art, he decided he didn't know as much as he thought he did, and travelled. Over eight years he hitchhiked around the world, finding his connections artistically and learning about the ceramics of different cultures. When he returned he had about 12,000 slides and stories, and was ready to share these in illustrated lectures and workshops, as well as delving into his own ideas for ceramic making. As he expressed it, he returned to Australia to have his own cave, to sit and consider all he had learned, and what to do with his journey. This cave, a studio that he takes with him wherever he settles, is now the forest next to where he lives and works.

His sand play ideas, a response to a recession with galleries closing and ceramics not selling, led to three-dimensional sand works of architectural details, and ideas for selling to various Art Festivals. The sand play of building up, breaking down again till it was right, led to a public art career as an artist on the street. His commissions included aspects of town halls, churches, banks and museums, and put him in direct contact with the public as he produced them.

The multi-faceted aspect of his resilience is how one thing leads to another. He wrote a column over eight years for his local newspaper, titled 'The Artist's View', and as part of this writing he earned a Writer in Residence project in Seoul, captured by The Korean Odyssey, all now in digital archives.

Identification of issues and gaps in regional creative sector

There are two major issues brought up by Petrus Spronk in discussing the artist's journey to consistent work and creative satisfaction – establishing work through galleries, and having the confidence to adapt and change artistic directions. For Spronk these issues lead to his philosophy: 'Water the seeds of joy first – follow your passion/lifetime direction – see your world change'. He found the travelling central to his learning how to focus on what mattered.



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Petrus has exhibited in many regional galleries and special exhibitions – Murray Bridge, Morwell, Ballarat, Kyneton, Daylesford, Shepparton and Bendigo, as well as galleries in capital cities and globally. His attitude to finding galleries is to approach the best galleries he could find.

He sees himself as a ‘troubadour’ artist, and he uses all his experiences – in a pastry shop, hitchhiking for eight years, working through recessions. Having that confidence and ability to turn to different forms such as the sand sculptures comes from a way of thinking, looking for opportunities and being prepared to take different directions. That is the experience he can share with others.

Potential strategies for building regional creative sector resilience

At the personal level, Petrus continues to set goals focused on the effect of words, in his own inimitable style. Each year he is open to a new word, one which will sustain him throughout the year. He applies this word when things get a little difficult. For the ‘Ten Minutes to Middy’ project in 2003, the word was ‘discipline’, so he took photos daily of each situation or place he was in, at that specific time. From his strategies come projects which are expansive and sustainable, exploring concepts which deepen his sense of his philosophy. Part of his philosophy is centred on giving it [his work] ‘attention’, as he describes in the meeting with Arjuna Govinda, recorded in 2015 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsuFJdFR8Ts>).

Petrus Spronk has learned much about himself and his art, and is now looking towards how people can change or move forward with mentoring. He has learned through mentors, and now feels it is his turn. He suggests that people can make an appointment to come to his house, to come and play with clay. If the studio is empty, then it may be possible for friends to share this positive space, perhaps for a painting exhibition. He has talked of the strength of the forest, there are options to combine a walk around the forest with projects, to share his philosophy and his vision. And he will always play with concepts and words:

I'll continue with my endless journey along the rim of the bowl

I'll keep going around in circles
which is like dancing the dance of life
the only dance there is.

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Researched and written by Dr Karen Le Rossignol, Deakin University, August 2020