

Arts in the Sex Industry

by Lisa Marie Dallimore

Creating art is claiming your right to self-expression, so making a work of art is essentially a political act to begin with. A work of art demands to be seen/heard and sex workers around the world are increasingly using art to claim their space in the world and to say what needs to be said about themselves and their industry. Australia's Debby Doesn't Do It For Free, sex worker artist and performer collective, has seen several sex worker artists exhibit visual works and performance art. Most notably, a window gallery at Tap Art Gallery Theatre, cheekily set up under the banner of HJ Hooker, very close to the name of a certain real estate company, and using their slogan (no complaints were received), where workers occupied the window, to protest, amongst other things, the gentrification of the Darlinghurst area and its impact on local workers, as well as a nod to the famous window brothels of Amsterdam, currently under threat.

Sex workers everywhere are demanding an end to stigma and calling for decriminalisation of all areas of the industry. Every time a sex worker claims their space as an artist, they're insisting that the world sees them as something other and more. UK's Miranda Kane performs a one-woman show called The Coin Operated Girl which raises money for the Manchester-based sex work charity National Ugly Mugs (the movement was inspired by the Ugly Mugs register here in Victoria) because "there aren't that many women speaking openly about sex work." US comic Margaret Cho is open about her background as a worker.

What about work by women currently in the industry? For the last two years the London based Sex Workers Opera (SWO) has been selling out seats to their 'mish-mash of dance, physical theatre, theatre reportage, spoken word poetry, hip hop arias and jazz' devised by a group of activists creating a 'platform for sex workers' voices' telling stories from many different workers from around the world, including Argentina, Chile and Taiwan. As we know, the industry is as diverse as the people working in it and Sex Workers Opera is keen to keep things real. Creator Siobhan Knox says: "At least 50% of the people involved in SWO are sex workers, and everything about the show is sex-worker led." Workers in the UK are represented by Radio AvA, a community radio station for sex workers and allies Radio AvA which launched the hugely popular London Sex Worker Film Festival, about to go into its fourth year. London will also see Objects of Desire, a visual arts exhibition of

an archive of objects sex workers have been given by clients, displayed with the stories that go with them in video and sound.

In San Francisco the Sex Worker Film & Arts Festival takes place every two years, We might not yet have the numbers here in Australia to hold a sex workers' film festival but we can be inspired by the activity happening elsewhere, including the Desire Alliance in the US, a worker-led initiative designed to support sex worker artists and activists on all levels, working in harm reduction, direct services, political advocacy and health services. Desire Alliance hosted a conference, The Sex Worker Rights Movement: Addressing Justice in New Orleans. California also enjoys the support of The International Sex Worker Foundation for Art, Culture and Education (ISWFACE), a corporation formed as an art, education and resource centre for research into sex work and for the collection and preservation of art by and about sex workers. There's even a brothel museum in the US, the Dumas Brothel Museum in Montana.

Stories from sex workers in Australia were heard on the airwaves during the Vixen Hour, a Monday night slot on Radio Joy. The show is currently 'resting' but previous programs are available as a podcasts.

In 2015 the Vixen Collective, Melbourne held a Festival of Sex work. This was a Celebration of lives, skills, culture and community of sex workers. The festival included a sex worker art exhibition, film night, whoredrobe, sex worker only performance, a sex worker question panel and a Red Umbrella Rally event.

In London there are sex worker-run life drawing classes at Goldsmiths University, where sex workers are the models – something the RhED's Art Project in Melbourne, established to make a noise about human rights and workers' rights for sex workers in Victoria, is keen to make happen here. Watch this space! Life drawing is just one of the workshops that RhEds Art Project has planned so if you're longing to get your artist on, get in touch and make your contribution to the ever-growing movement of sex worker artists.