

Curator helped us get over the cringe

OBITUARY

John Stringer

Art curator. Born Melbourne, October 2, 1937. Died Perth, November 13, aged 70.

JOHN Stringer was enticed back from New York in 1988 by Betty Churcher to be senior curator at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, where she was director. When she moved on to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, the job at AGWA became too administrative for him.

He resigned in 1992 and Kerry Stokes promptly offered him a job unlike any other in Australia.

Stringer became curator of the media tycoon's personal collection but was also expected generally to promote WA art. It was a dream job for a former artist who enjoyed mixing with artists. It continued very happily until his death this month.

Stringer's former wife June Webb, in Perth for the wedding of their daughter Chloe, found him at home when he failed to turn up for a photo shoot. Back from his early morning swim at the beach with his kelpie-tingo Adhara, he was dressed in a new Versace suit for the shoot.

Stringer, who turned 70 in October, was an adventurer in more ways than one. The invitation to a celebration of his life last week carried the words "John Norris Stringer, explorer", and a photograph of him gazing into the future beside an iron-red hill at a pink salt lake in WA. Always whippet-thin and fit, cool and wonderfully considerate, and engaged with the wonders of the natural world as well as new international art, Stringer was going to be a great new septuagenarian.

He graduated from art studies in Melbourne, but he wasn't destined to be a great artist. The art museum profession first knew Stringer when he became assistant curator of prints at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1957; well-known scholar and curator Ursula Hoff was his first mentor.

He shifted into exhibition management and was co-curator with Brian Finemore of The Field, a great splash of unfamiliar contemporary Australian art, for the 1968

opening of the NGV's new building on St Kilda Road.

The previous year the Museum of Modern Art in New York had sent to Australia a big contemporary American show, Two Decades of American Painting. MoMA's international program director

Waldo Rasmussen was impressed by the young exhibitions officer and enticed him to New York in 1970 as assistant program director. International exhibition management for MoMA involved sending shows to Europe,

Latin America and Australasia. In 1975, Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse, from MoMA, was the first huge box-office art exhibition presented in Australia.

Stringer returned to Australia, temporarily, to head the fledgling Australian Art Exhibitions Corporation while it toured a Chinese archeology blockbuster and his own initiative, El Dorado: Colombian Gold.

But he preferred the contemporary scene in New York. He was back there from 1978, briefly as an independent curator. He mostly did Latin American exhibitions for a gallery in Brooklyn, but he also showed Melbourne minimalist Robert Hunter and Sydney funk jeweller Peter Tully.

Then, for nearly 10 years, he ran visual arts at the Centre for Inter-American Relations, founded by David Rockefeller. Churcher saw an exhibition that Stringer curated there and tempted him to WA. But, Churcher wondered, would Stringer really want to live in WA? And would his children — twins Phoebe and Simon, and Chloe — approve of leaving New York? He was already divorced from June, but what about his close friend Eduardo Serrano, an art critic in Colombia?

When Churcher once released Stringer for a few days to join me on a drive through WA to see the great Aboriginal rock engravings on the Burrup Peninsula, it was easy to tell he loved the west. He travelled overseas often,



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still seeing Serrano and, he said, planning to live with him in old age on the Pacific surf coast of Colombia. (The long-distance relationship inevitably ran its course.)

The Stokes collection, when Stringer arrived, included 17th-century maritime material and contemporary Australian art. During Stringer's time, the collection acquired two Monets, one of them a *Waterloo Bridge* bought this year; a Matisse *Notre Dame*; and four Picassos. Pop art and minimalism are the classic movements of the recent past, exemplified in the Stokes collection by Warhol's soup can and electric chair screenprint suites, abstract paintings by Bridget Riley and Agnes Martin, and sculptures by Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt and Yves Klein.

Australian and New Zealand works include WA's Howard Taylor, Juan Davila's notori-

ous *Stupid as a Painter* and, bought this year, John Brack and Michael Parekowhai.

Stringer's Cross Currents, the latest biennial survey of Australian art at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, closes on Monday. PEEP, an international contemporary selection from the Kerry Stokes collection, opens on Sunday at the TarraWarra Museum of Art outside Melbourne.

The exhibitions show how Stringer nurtured Australia's present-day confidence in the international art world. He recognised excellence in local work, then proved it by a survival test in challenging international company. He told us that Hunter could be as good as Warhol.

Daniel Thomas