

INTERVIEW:

RENOWNED SYDNEY CROATIAN SOCIAL WORKER AND ARTIST, VESNA TENODI

Death of artistic freedom in Australia – local council supports the vandals

Vesna Tenodi is a well known personality in the Sydney Croatian community. For many years she worked as a translator and interpreter for the Australian Government, and lately also as a community worker with the Croatian Australian Community Council (CACC). In recent years, she – along with husband Damir – renovated a house in the Blue Mountains, turning it into a quaint art gallery and wellness centre.

ModroGorje, which is located on the busy road to the magnificent Three Sisters lookout in the popular tourist village of Katoomba, has in recent months become embroiled in a rather controversial dispute with sections of the local Aboriginal community, who were upset with Vesna's book "Dreamtime Set in Stone – the Truth about Australian Aborigines" and with the creation of an 8.5 tonne sandstone sculpture entitled "Wanjina Watchers in the Whispering Stone", carved by Sydney sculptor Ben Osváth, in front of the ModroGorje Gallery.

This matter is shaping into a huge story and has raised quite a few issues of national and historic significance. The Tenodis' work has been widely explored in the media since March, with ABC Radio's Law Report dedicating a half-hour program in June, as well as on 23 October, while ABC-TV news aired a segment about the issue last Saturday.

According to Tenodi herself, several universities in Sydney are developing research papers, more than hundred lawyers were looking into this convoluted case and no one is able to find anything wrong with either the book or the artworks, but keep scratching their heads as to how to handle it.

The Croatian Herald caught up with Vesna Tenodi during the week, as she explained what was developing with her battle for artistic freedom and democratic rights – a battle she is adamant will be won.

■ **Croatian Herald (CH):** There was a lot of discussion in the Australian media about your Wanjina Watchers in the Whispering stone sculpture in front of your ModroGorje gallery in Katoomba. It was vandalised in March, and the local council was under pressure from local Aborigines. They ordered you to lodge a development application for the sculpture, what was the outcome?

– Vesna Tenodi (VT): The council made a very strange decision, to approve our gallery and sculpture garden, but at the same time to issue an order for the sculpture removal. The only reason is that the local Aborigines do not like it. The council also intends to demand a development application for every sculpture we plan to display in our sculpture garden, to make sure the locals like its design.

So they allow us to run a gallery and create a sculpture garden in theory, but in practice are determined to paralyse our work and make it impossible. No one ever heard of a case in which the local council wants to exercise the power to decide and dictate what artwork a gallery should display.

This is an unprecedented case of local bureaucrats meddling in art. Legally, they need to stick to planning and development rules, and are not supposed to act as art critics, censoring artists.

Last month, there was a case of a large mural in Newtown (Sydney), which upset some people who complained to the local Marrickville council. That council issued a press release clearly stating that art is out of their jurisdiction, especially when it is privately owned artwork, on private land. They told the objectors to make an appropriate application to the appropriate court, making it clear the local council is not the place to argue their objections.

Only a few weeks ago, local Aborigines in Wollongong objected to an exhibition by Paul Ryan. The local council in Wollongong did not interfere. But the Blue Mountains council is unable to deal with this issue. There is a lovely group of sculptures by Terrance Plowright, called "Three sisters and a Witch Doctor" at Scenic World in Katoomba, installed almost ten years ago. To this day, it remains unfinished, because the same group of violent locals – who harass us – also keep harassing the council for the removal of the Plowright's sculptures. They call them pornographic, lewd, disrespectful, and distressful and the local council is unable to deal with that nonsense.

So, we are just the last victims in the long history of harassment over art, which actually should not even be an issue in this day and age. The RSL club, across the road from our gallery, has a huge cannon in front, and every refugee can claim it reminds them of war and causes them great distress. But they would not think of removing it. If you were to remove every piece of art that upsets someone, we would be left with no art at all. That should not even be contentious these days, but some people just cannot accept it.

■ **CH: Are you going to fight that order for sculpture removal?**

– VT: I don't know how far that will go. The NSW Department of Planning guidelines for exempt development that every council has to follow are very clear, but the mountains council decided to ignore them. They are trying to placate the vandals.

■ **CH: You mean those who attacked the sculpture?**

– VT: That's the same group of militant hotheads who started harassing us back in December last year, making all sorts of threats, including death threats, initially because of my book "Dreamtime Set in Stone", so the sculpture was just the last target of their hate-campaign. Did you know that Vandals were a tribe in 5th Century Europe, who kept destroying the glorious artworks of the classical period of Greek and Roman art? That is why those sculptures usually do not have penises nor noses.

The Vandals used those as a target for their sling-shot practice. That's how "vandalism" became a name for those who willfully and ignorantly destroy or damage art, those unable to appreciate beauty. The local Aborigines behave like vandals, like destroyers and haters of beauty.

■ **CH: Where do you stand legally?**

– VT: Legally, there are no grounds for anyone to object. Copyright law is not applicable to prehistoric imagery. It is in the public domain and every artist can draw inspiration from cave art. Intellectual property law does not apply to ideas, and every artist can explore the divine.

Over the last six months, at least one hundred lawyers and art experts confirmed that to be so, I have been saying it all along, but we still have to deal with these stubborn people who say they don't care about our "white people's law". We expected the local council to help in bringing those violent individuals to their senses, and to educate the locals.

■ **CH: Are you going ahead with your Wanjina Rising project, after all these difficulties?**

– VT: Absolutely. We have about 30 white artists exploring Wanjina imagery. We started an art competition, and now our partners in Croatia are also preparing a dance performance. Musicians got involved in our SongLines initiative as well, so artists from different areas are joining our DreamRaisers initiative.

■ **CH: How can our readers find out more or join your initiatives?**

– VT: All the information is on our website www.modrogorje.com. Our Wanjina Watchers sculpture can be seen on the internet and everybody can purchase handmade replicas in terracotta and papier-mâché. So, the vandals actually achieved nothing – it was ridiculous that Aborigines would attack their own deities with an axe – it is as if I ruined a sculpture of Christ and poked out the eyes and hacked him a hundred times to show how sacred that image is to me. Ridiculous, but you don't look for logic when dealing with irrational people.

■ **CH: In a recent interview, you mentioned Mary MacKillop, likening your situation to her life?**

– VT: Yes, people forget that she was excommunicated from the church at one point, because she was surrounded by fools who could not understand what she was doing. It took a while for the world to catch up. I can certainly relate to that, it was not easy to go to Katoomba week after week, to find things broken, things stolen, and our property damaged. We were so exhausted while being targeted with all that anger and hate. We are constantly under attack from people who have no vision nor capacity to understand what our work is about.

But we are determined to keep developing our project, both in Australia and overseas. That's our commitment, to beauty and creativity and the truth – those are the most powerful forces in the universe.