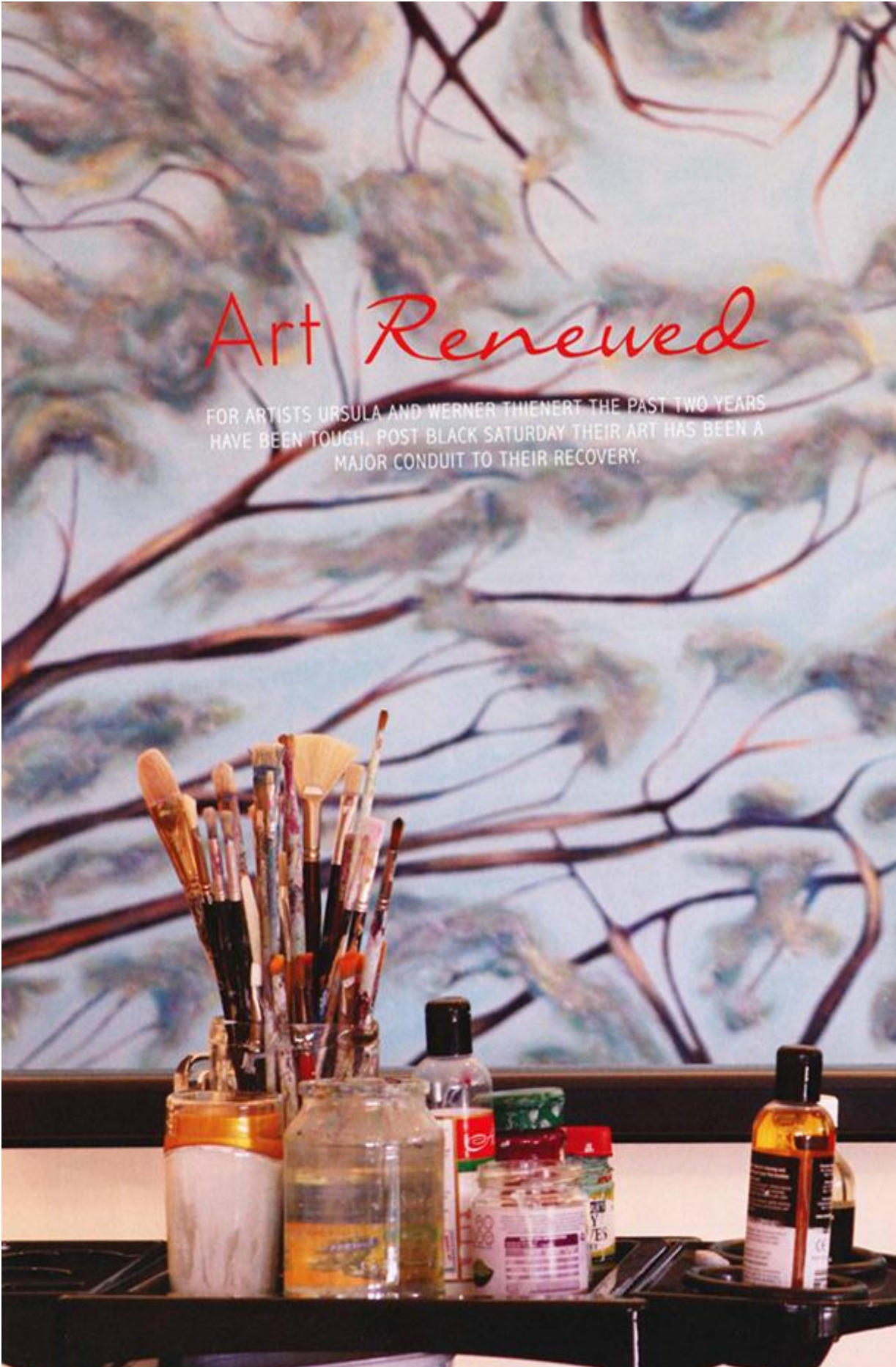




Art Renewed

FOR ARTISTS URSULA AND WERNER THIENERT THE PAST TWO YEARS
HAVE BEEN TOUGH. POST BLACK SATURDAY THEIR ART HAS BEEN A
MAJOR CONDUIT TO THEIR RECOVERY.



Ursula and Werner Theinert at home at their Callignee property. Werner's artistic photography makes a grand statement in the couple's gallery space.

Some people may have been puzzled by Werner and Ursula Theinert's decision to stay in Callignee after the Black Saturday bushfires swept through their property, but their lovely mudbrick home and the natural beauty of the area is intrinsically linked to their life as environmental expressionists.

In the 2009 bushfires Callignee artists Ursula and Werner Theinert lost their art studio, a section of their mud brick cottage, the magnificent gardens that surrounded it, and almost their lives. Throughout the torment of the recovery and the regrowth, their art has remained steadfast.

Before the fires, Werner was planning to retire from his career at the Yallourn power station to concentrate more on his unique artistic photography and for Ursula, the years were to encompass growing her folio of work and exploring her passion for environmental expressionism with a paint brush. But when the fires hit, Werner said it was, "like hitting the reset button on our life."

In the afternoon of February 9 2009, Werner received a phone call from a friend, alerting them to a fire nearby.

An hour later, the fire was tearing through the bush, and the pine and eucalyptus forest with a two kilometre front.

The fire was started at about 3pm.

Before the fires, the mudbrick home was surrounded by trees with acres of dense bush along one side and the house concealed from the road by flowering gum trees.

"It really was a unique event for us. We were prepared for a bushfire to come through the bush and we were outside wetting

down our whole area. It was totally dark, the noise was there and all of a sudden the sky lit up. We could see it coming. It was the one time in my life I didn't need to look up to see what it was," said Werner.

"You are in shock really, we were silent and apprehensive," said Ursula.

A stream of embers poured through the gaps in a door in the part of the house facing the fire front, the study. "Here I was trying with wet towels to stop it, but it was hopeless," recalled Werner.

"Then, at the end of all that, the bushfire came. Then it was really bright. All the trees were alight, we watched our sheds go up, our studio go up. We watched the tractor burning. I saw the house next-door blow up. It was like watching a match head light in slow motion."

The couple dived inside the house. "We had flames leaping around the side of the house and the back, going 70 or 80kms an hour. And that went on for five or 10 minutes."

"Then, the room at the house that was our study, had a fire in the ceiling and we couldn't put that out. We made a concerted decision to let it go and just shut the door."

Fumes from melting plastic were driven into the house. "so at the end of all this, we had to get out of the house. We were standing in the little alcove of the front door. It had plastic laser light roofing. Things that were on the veranda had melted and were dripping like honey. The laser light in the alcove had formed into



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the shape of three bathtubs. We were just standing there hoping it didn't give way. We went around the back; it was on for young and old. It wasn't a 'normal' fire. We were up to plan E or F by this stage."

"We couldn't go back inside the house. The Merbau deck around the spa was burning, but because it was so wet, it held on. So I just sat there, I had given up and then we remembered the water in the spa," said Werner.

"We had one stainless steel bucket. It was melted but big enough to scoop up some water. We opened the door to the study but were driven straight back, it was so hot. The whole of the ceiling was alight. I tried again from outside and the water smashed a window and that ventilated the house, getting rid of the smoke. It was then that we could put the fire out in the study. It was 12 hours from the start of the fire until we finally sat down and felt safe. Everything around was still alight."

The past two years have been busy for the couple and just before Christmas 2010 they finished the rebuild of the shed and the new studio and gallery.

"Although the artwork was gone you can rebuild buildings in a way. We were so grateful to be alive; the emotion was like a roller coaster. I can remember sitting outside holding hands. It was about 3am and we must have been a sight, and we said we had got to remember this feeling; we were so full of adrenalin, that we had made it. But, we knew it was going to be a shock in the morning," said Ursula.

"It was such an emotional time and we had so much support from the community."

"Everyday there was food and water and bits and pieces delivered to us. People wouldn't take no for an answer, they were so sweet. It was so touching and often we'd be in tears after they left, they were so nice."

"I think the sense of the community was starting to build up again so we did decide to stay (after the fires)."

Apart from the studio, losing the garden was one of the hardest hits for the couple. "Even though we saved the house, the garden is gone and everything looks so different to what it did before. It was the garden and the surroundings that had drawn us to the property in the first place. There was always

something in blossom and blooming. It was about 1.5 acres of exotic garden."

The couple purchased the property in 2003 while living in Bahrain, where they had spent the previous 11 years working. "When we came back from Bahrain I said to Werner, now I want to do something for me."

They had both dreamed of together studying art and ceramics. Ursula reclaimed her artistic life through ceramics, and then photography and drawing.

"It was so exciting and fun. Werner saw me doing that and got very jealous, so he started doing ceramics," said Ursula.

Now Werner teaches photography at TAFE and works at Yallourn two days a week.

"We actually ended up doing a photography major together, so we shared our journey."

"The art side of our lives started to take over. I am full time now. If I'm not painting, I am organising something to do with painting," said Ursula.

"I am very interested in environmental subjects," she said, "I started looking into forest management, because when we came back from Bahrain, we fell in love with Australia all over again. It is so beautiful and unpolluted. It is so green, it almost hurt our eyes," said Ursula.

"We are surrounded here by pine plantations and on walks I started to look at them differently. First I just thought they were beautiful and green and sustainable, but when you look into it, they are all just pine needles, and sterile. And you think gosh, there are thousands and thousands of acres taken away from the native flora and fauna. So I started to investigate what we are not aware of and our general awareness of the environment was starting to grow."

The couple, with a group of other Gippsland artists, joined a new art movement, known as environmental expressionism.

"We wanted to talk about the environment through our art in a less threatening way."

"Most people aren't aware, as I wasn't, and it just makes you question things. Where are the corridors for the animals, and when they do come and cut down the trees, there is so much waste. I don't know what the answers are. I believe we have a

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very profound spiritual connection with nature and we yearn for this connection."

For Ursula, her painting is clearly an expression of spirituality and the connectedness with nature.

"I am just painting my surroundings. Some of my new paintings after the fires are just of the trees, and questioning how we actually survived it, and the whole idea of the different decisions you make. There were three or four times during the fires for us when things really could have gone the other way."

"My painting called fire angels doesn't have angels in it. But, when you look up at the burnt trees, there is a sense about it and you can't help but think that something was guiding us, whispering to us. We didn't make it on our own. We were calm, whether we just knew we were going to be ok. I don't know. We know of others who fled and died."

After the fires, Ursula took a few months before beginning to paint again.

"We had nowhere to paint. I didn't have an easel or paint brush. We had to get life back to a certain kind of normal first."

Once the shed was rebuilt and with donations of paint and brushes, and a new easel made by her father, Ursula began painting again.

Ursula bases her paintings on photographs. "I do a lot of mirror images and patterns. To give the idea of reflection and a panorama. My new work is getting more spiritual."

"We are both into manipulating the edge or the connection between pictures," she said. "We find something magical happens at that connection. We are investigating new paths, new doorways and again the whole idea of looking at things in a different way. Trying to stimulate the viewer into a new way."

"The art has really been wonderful for us, it has helped us through a grieving process and has definitely helped us come to terms with it. And now, from the fire series we have done, we are going through the regeneration," said Ursula.

Werner used images taken the day after Black Saturday for a whole series built around the event.

"I wanted to combine environmental issues with photography. Artist Peter Biram got me into using multiple images in the darkroom; taking an image and pasting it together to create an illusion and pattern. I found that really difficult in the darkroom. So I tried it on the computer using Photoshop, starting to play with multiple images, creating things like spirals and all the meanings that go with it. That's where the adventure began and I have slowly developed the process."

For Werner, his new works represent the regrowth. "My fire series was really dull, black and white, grey and colourless. But now the new stuff is really bright and effervescent. It is about the regrowth. We have come through to the other side. The colour is back in my life." ☺