

COVER STORY

# The ties that bind



**E**ven by the gargantuan, larger-than-life standards of Ray Hughes, it's an epic couple of days.

Yesterday, he and son Evan hosted one of their famous alcohol-fuelled lunches, sometimes portrayed as a cross between an intellectual salon of the Belle Epoque and a debauched scene from a Fellini film.

Tonight, Evan's godfather, Tony Bilson – almost as divisive a figure within the Sydney dining scene as Ray has been in the art world – will cook a meal for 50 in the gallery downstairs (“suckling pig stuffed with foie gras and truffles in a PVC pipe, poached at 90 degrees in water, followed by duck confit and lyonnaise potatoes,” Evan explains).

Tomorrow, the public gets to see a new exhibition by Joe Furlonger, the Queensland landscape artist who has held 21 exhibitions with Ray Hughes since 1985 and who they believe will one day be spoken of in the same breath as Fred Williams and Bill Robinson. Except this Furlonger exhibition is different. It's the first planned, curated and hung by Evan, not Ray.

Behind the scenes, there's even more drama going on. Ray, who hasn't been well for years, with lungs barely functioning after a lifetime smoking four packets of cigarettes a day (he gave up four years ago), has just been diagnosed with pneumonia. At 65, he looks at least 10 years older. He's been for a CAT scan this morning. Evan will be taking the images to their doctor after our interview.

They've already had to cancel a trip they were planning to New York, Chicago and Europe (ever since Evan was a boy, Ray loved taking his only child on trips to the world's greatest centres of art). But Ray's latest brush with mortality has brought matters to a head.

Just over a week ago, they finally resolved the succession plan. From now

For a quarter of a century, Ray Hughes has been charming and offending the Sydney art scene with equal aplomb. Now son Evan is taking over, short fuse, flashy neckwear and all, writes STEVE MEACHAM.

on, the Ray Hughes Gallery will be no more. The font will remain, and only three letters require replacement. But The Hughes Gallery, as it will henceforth be known, succinctly captures the passing of the generational baton.

Father and son have agreed that Ray will no longer guard the gallery entrance in his lurid ties and bright-red socks like a particularly malevolent and irascible garden gnome. His temper has become even shorter, his patience even thinner. He'll ponder his unique art pairings in his penthouse apartment above the gallery while he reads *The New Yorker* or completes David Astle's crosswords in the *Herald*.

Meanwhile, at 27, the newly married Evan (wife Kate is a lawyer specialising in arts litigation, he explains – “I lucked in on the one girl I've ever hung out with who loathes art parties as much as I do”) will become both frontman and chief executive, taking The Hughes Gallery to destinations unexplored.

That includes opening a new space devoted to the secondary art market. A first show of old works by Bill Robinson (one of those artists who had a spectacular falling-out with Ray in the 1990s) is planned for next year, “with Bill's blessing”, Evan points out – though Robinson and the older Hughes haven't spoken since the split.

Why now?

The past four years have been “hard work”, Ray says ponderously, struggling for each breath as the three of us drink coffee in his apartment.

“I never thought it would wear me

down, but it has,” he says. “I'm less patient with people now. With my mates and artists, [it's] fine. But with [the public] I'm less comfortable.

“The other thing is that Evan has now got a true handle on how to do it ...”

“I couldn't have done it earlier,” Evan interjects. Four years ago, father and son had a furious row every bit as cataclysmic as those Ray has had with artists such as Robinson, Davida Allen (Evan's godmother) and 2012 Archibald winner Tim Storrier.

It culminated with Evan moving out of the converted furniture factory in Surry Hills that has been Ray's home and gallery since 1988. The son closed his own eponymous gallery on the top floor, above his father's, and pledged to give up the art game once and for all, enrolling at the University of Sydney to study law.

He had been warned not to go into business with his father, that it would all end in tears. The pundits seemed right. After all, the list of artists, staff, rival gallery owners and arts administrators who have decided they can't work with Ray Hughes reads like a who's who of Australian art.

“We had a massive spat,” Evan admits. “I was pretty stropky, I guess. Ray was getting grumpier and grumpier. He was nightmarish in his moods. And I was too. It was very demanding. Ray had alienated too many clients, too many staff. But it was the pressure of the recession as well.

“I had to learn what a recession was. I'd worked in a gallery in London during

a boom. I'd sell \$400,000 paintings and have to carry them to New York. It was lots of fun.

“Then I came back to Sydney [in 2008] and we were selling things into China and doing quite well for a year. Then the recession hit.

“It threw me. The last four years have been about me learning that [in a recession] you still have to put food on the artists' tables.

“You still have to keep them in the visual psyche of the collectors.

“And you,” he looks over at his father, “you were haemorrhaging staff halfway through the spat. I looked at it and said, ‘We'd better put this behind us. Work together and pull through.’

“Things started going very well [between us] as soon as I came back. Ray went travelling. We sold out a Lucy Culliton exhibition. I sold four or five Furlongers, and we started selling pictures to old clients from the 1980s.”

As they sit together, it's obvious the influence father has had over son, even the way they dress. Both are wearing colourful ties, scarves and pocket handkerchiefs in their well-cut suits, though Ray's solid, medicine ball stomach must be a challenge to any tailor. Evan favours the odd-sock eccentricity made famous by Edmund Capon, the former director of the Art Gallery of NSW: “Except in 10 years' time no one will know who Edmund is, while I'll still be wearing them.”

If Ray's latest health scare prompted the name change, it has been coming for some time. “Effectively, I have been running the gallery for the past 12 months,” Evan says.

“I just got grumpier, and Evan just said ‘Piss off,’” his father adds.

“And you don't like being told to get out of your own gallery,” the son continues. “It's really hard. But if it was up to Ray sitting down there [in the gallery] waiting for someone to buy something,

“Very, very funny”



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we'd be closed. And I'd be putting him in a home somewhere ..."

Ray Hughes grew up in Brisbane above a corner shop, with hard-working parents who knew nothing about art. After briefly flirting with the idea of becoming a painter himself, he decided he could best serve art by becoming a dealer, setting up his first gallery in 1969, aged 22.

He learnt the skill of being a gallerist from, among others, Kym Bonython and the Czech-born Rudy Komon, "who were all generous and kind to me". In Brisbane, "no one else was doing what I was doing. There was Philip Bacon, but he was showing Pro Hart."

Hughes's big break came in 1984

***If it was up to Ray sitting down there [in the gallery] waiting for someone to buy something, we'd be closed. And I'd be putting him in a home somewhere ...'***

when, on the eve of the '80s art boom, he negotiated a stunning deal with Komon's widow to buy their enormous stock of paintings and drawings, stock-room warehouse and the remaining lease on their Sydney gallery.

The deal was done at Kinsela's in Taylor Square, then dominated by Tony Bilson (with a young Tetsuya Wakuda making sushi).

"It was Tony who introduced Ray to

the Sydney scene, wasn't it?" Evan says. "Yes," his father says. "The Whitlams would have a table. Tim Storrier would have a table.

"Evan was born in 1985 and we'd take him in a shopping basket so he could sleep under the table. As we left, they'd play the *Teddy Bears' Picnic* for him."

Much of Evan's childhood was spent at such social functions, even when his mother, Annette, left his father in 1994.

"There used to be me, Victoria Firth-Smith, Clementine Blackman and Isidore Tillers chasing each other round the galleries as seven- or eight-year-olds," Evan says. "We became good friends because our dads would be at these art parties. Ray would go to the opening of a car door in those days."

"Sydney was flat in 1984," Ray recalls. "A bit too self-satisfied. People said, 'It's good you're coming down here to shake things up.' Then after a year-and-a-half, they'd say, 'We didn't want you to shake it up that much.'"

"Sydney's flat again now," Evan continues. "It's partly the recession, but it's

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also a result of the emperor's new clothes which were sold in this town. They're now flooding back on to the market. Artists are depressed, galleries are closing.

"We flicked through an old copy of *Art & Australia* from 2010 at the doctor's surgery this morning. It was a veritable list of 'where are they now'. Galleries had closed. One is in court. And most of the artists are showing elsewhere."

The younger Hughes speaks fondly of other senior gallerists, such as Rex Irwin, Roslyn Oxley, Philip Bacon and Frank Waters, who have advised him (even when they no longer talk to his father). As for Ray, he says his mentors, Bonython and Komon, taught him "to run galleries on the petrol of passion. Most of the young dealers today work on the petrol of fashion."

He elaborates: "Curators, museum directors, art dealers and many collectors are never going to discover an eccentric [talent], something special, because they are always trying to find something that looks like something [that is already in fashion]."

"You don't do this to get rich. You do it to have a life, a life you enjoy wearing. The life a lot of the young dealers want is that of the phoney celebrity, the fashionista."

Even those who detest Ray usually concede he has "a great eye", a knack of discovering new talent – even if his volatile personality means he can't keep them. So what's Evan's eye like?

"I will never be able to be independently judged until [Ray is] gone," the son concedes. "But I don't mind being judged together because I think we have a very similar eye."

"I took Kate to the Fred Williams show, and Ray called just as we were about to have lunch. I said, 'What was your favourite picture?' 'The *Tree loppers*.'

"It was mine, too. We'd seen the show at different times but picked the same painting. When I got back, dad said, 'You should write to Lyn [Williams, Fred's widow] and see if she's got a copy of the etching.' And I said, 'I did. Yesterday.'"

In a way, Evan has also grown up over the corner shop. "I said to the book keeper the other day, 'It's funny. Whenever there's a bit of money around, Ray is the kind of shopkeeper who will go out and buy stock. And I'm the kind of shopkeeper who will fix up the shop.'"

"But there's no point in having a pristine shop if there's nothing worthwhile to sell. And there's no point in having a stockroom full of gems if [the public] can't see them."

"Ray is a hoarder. He gets it from his parents. If ever there was extra money in the till, they'd go out and buy canned food."

How else do they differ?

Ray: "Are you more cautious?"

Evan: "I'm probably a little safer."

Ray continues: "One day Evan asked me if I had ever been scared. And I thought about it and said, 'No. I don't think I ever was.' I look back at a lot of things I have done and think, 'Why would a sane person have done that?' But it had a spectacular result."

Evan: "I'm very aware that someone like John McDonald could say, 'Young Evan's just like Stuart Purves [who runs Australian Galleries, established by his parents]. He's safe, stylish and boring. Not like his old man, who had this amazing eye. But I'm not going to force the point. The fact is we love the same things.'"

But Evan, at least, isn't as abrasive and confrontational as his dad? "I can be. People are already beginning to say, 'Oh f---. Which Hughes is the more grumpy?'"

## Let's do lunch



Lunch around the big table on the middle floor of the Hughes gallery has become one of Sydney's most celebrated invitation-only social and intellectual gatherings, often lasting well into the afternoon and ending in vino-inspired argument.

Last week's was typical. Guests included the NSW state architect Peter Poulet, veteran film producer Margaret Fink, *Herald* cartoonist Alan Moir, "a couple of interesting criminal barristers" – and artist Tim Storrier.

Storrier's presence was a surprise. Though Ray Hughes points out he first exhibited Storrier when he was 24 and this year's Archibald winner was 23, they fell out for much of the 1980s and '90s when the artist was a trustee of the Art Gallery of NSW. Hughes blamed "little Timmy" for his gallery's painters faring poorly in the Archibald.

Storrier recently had his own bust-up

with his old friend John Olsen when a dispute with Olsen's gallery-owning son, Tim, escalated.

"There was a very funny moment over lunch when we were talking about who to include [in a book about the most important people in Sydney's art scene]," Evan says. "Someone said, 'You'd have to have one of the Olsens.' Tim said, 'Yes, but which one?'"

"And dad said, 'Louise Olsen' [John's jewellery-designing daughter]. Tim cracked up completely."

Bob Ellis, a frequent lunch guest, was absent this time. "The last time Bob was here, he was waxing lyrical about how Malcolm Turnbull had given him non-specific urethritis," Evan continues. "He can be ludicrous."

"But he's sharp," Ray adds. "He was saying Greg Combet will lead the Labor Party to the next election."

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# The son also rises

Dust-ups, deals and the  
delicate art of succession

Ray Hughes Gallery

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