

Art on the menu

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A Chippendale church is the new home of an altruistic gallery and restaurant.

THERE IS A certain symmetry in the fact that Daniel Halabe's painting Heroin has just been hung in a restored 19th-century mission church.

The young man grew up in a broken home in one of Sydney's toughest neighbourhoods and was heading into troubled waters before he found salvation in art.

"If I wasn't doing this I think I'd probably be in some serious trouble," Halabe says.

"I was getting into some bad stuff - stuff I'm not happy about. It started off with a bit of graffiti and then ... I wasn't doing too good, I'll put it that way. Some of my mates are in jail."

The way out of the downward spiral came in the form of Mission Australia's Creative Youth Initiative - a program that helps troubled youngsters learn to express themselves through art. Halabe thrived under the instruction of the tutors in the program and began to develop the artistic techniques needed to express his own unique style.

"I've always been into drawing, right from when I was a little kid drawing Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig, but I didn't really think I could make a go of it," Halabe says.

"I think CYI gave me the confidence."

So rapid was Halabe's development that when art dealer Nicky Ginsberg saw his paintings at a recent Mission Australia exhibition she immediately asked him to produce a piece for her new Chippendale gallery - a restored space inside Sydney's first mission church.

The gothic-style building, completed in 1880 on Little Queen Street, Chippendale, has been converted by Ginsberg and restaurateur Piera Potter into the NG Art Gallery and Mission Restaurant and Bar.

The new venture was christened on Monday night with the opening of there is no place like home, an exhibition featuring new works by

some of Australia's finest contemporary artists as well as several emerging artists, including Halabe.

All proceeds from the show will go to charity - a contribution that Ginsberg and Potter will repeat with three major exhibitions each year.

"From the start, the idea was to make a donation from the proceeds of the venture to charity as well as to give young artists such as Dan an opportunity to exhibit their work," Ginsberg says.

"When we stumbled across this beautiful old church there was an obvious connection there to the mission, so it made sense to continue that by working with the CYI program.

"We'd been looking around the Chippendale and Redfern area for weeks and suddenly there was this place on Little Queen Street.

"We got there and just thought, 'This is amazing.' It just felt like it was meant to be."

Joining Halabe's work in the new exhibition are paintings by Archibald Prize winner Euan Macleod, Reg Mombassa, Peter O'Doherty, Patricia Casey and the director of the National Art School, Bernard Ollis.

Among the works is Ollis's A Day in Life - an idyllic snapshot of Australian life.

"It's the ultimate mundane image of lying there on a Saturday afternoon," Ollis says.

"The child sprawled across the floor, the dog and father with a glass of wine and a cowboy flick showing on the television. It's those ... things that we take for granted."

There's no place like home is a eclectic collection featuring vastly divergent interpretations, a feature that Ollis regards as a strength rather than a weakness.

"I think the idea of having major significant artists showing together - Archibald winners alongside some emerging artists as well as people who have never exhibited before - is wonderful," Ollis says.

"It's a really interesting thing to pull off."

Maintaining a financially viable independent gallery in Sydney while donating to charity is likely to be challenging as well as "interesting". But Ginsberg and Potter believe they have hit on a successful formula that will keep Sydneysiders coming through the door.

"We see this not just as a gallery and a restaurant bar - we're envisaging a meeting place," Potter says.

"It's a feast for the palate as well as for the eye - somewhere that doesn't stand on ceremony. People can stay as long as they feel like and eat whatever they feel like. We want to relax the rules."

Ginsberg believes the concept will broaden the audience for contemporary art.

"Art galleries are fabulous, but not enough people visit them," she says. "If we can find another way of getting people through the door, then that has to be a positive thing. This isn't just another cafe with some pictures on the wall.

"Our goals from the start have been to give new undiscovered talent the opportunity to have their work exhibited, and to promote established artists to an audience that might not otherwise experience contemporary art.

"That's our mission."

Mission Restaurant and NG Art Gallery, 3 Little Queen Street, Chippendale, 9318 0815. Restaurant open daily, 9am to 10pm; gallery open Tues-Sat, 11.30am-5.30pm.