

# Vale Sue Hewitt (1941-2024)

An era has passed with the death of the former head of Christie's Australia.

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When I heard that my former boss at Christie's, one of the most capable, intelligent, energetically driven, thoughtful, kind, inappropriately loud and, at times, overbearing people in the Australian art world, had died, I immediately thought of Chairman Mao: 'All men must die, but death can vary in its significance...'

Never has a truer phrase been uttered, by the homicidally flawed Great Helmsman. Sue Hewitt was most significant in her life, and her absence will be a profound loss to all who knew her and worked under her guidance. Sue was Old School, she was Government House Old School, and Sue was THE BOSS.

Sue was a colossus of the Australian art world. A statuesque figure, steaming effortlessly through an auction house sale room or private drinks party like a Spanish galleon in full sail. Sue told you exactly what you needed to do because she could do absolutely everything she ever asked of anyone. Sue, managerially, taught me almost everything that you should do and, just as importantly, from experiencing her, everything that I would never do.

Sue was the first to arrive – except when she had her hair and nails done on a Friday – and the last to leave the auction rooms. She harvested up paintings for auction and catalogued them. Sue had the good sense to know what she did not know and when to ask for peer and academic opinions. Sue would store the artworks, organise the venue, banish bees from the sale room flowers, hang paintings, arrange chairs, direct the lighting and welcome collectors as they streamed through the sale room doors. With Thatcher-esque high hair, Sue just squeezed into, and then commanded, the rostrum and took the sale. If Sue said it was a good painting, it was a good painting.



Sue Hewitt. Photo: Supplied.

Sue led from the front, from the middle, and across the pack. At times, the pack experienced occasional emotional compression. She was *never* indecisive, and that is a most magnificent trait in leadership. On her deathbed, her friends called and were met with, 'Darling, I can't speak now, I am dying'. Emphatically she was. She rallied though, and was able to have her hair and nails done, and then Sue called it. Sue was decisively right, way more times than she was definitively wrong. But if she was wrong, there was a tendency for 'a member of my staff' to shoulder the blame and take one for the team. Another good lesson, not to learn, that I learned.

Sue was kind. It was a redeeming feature. No one ever went unfed or unwatered while working with Sue. The spread for all at any time was as good as the banquet placed out for our London directors. Every single fortnight, the entire Sydney office of Christie's went out to a Friday lunch, and we all took turns selecting a restaurant. I remember when the Australian visit from the London director, Lord Poltimore, coincided with a Friday lunch at the Watsons Bay Hotel. We liked the view. We all had lobster. 'Just call me Mark', Lord Poltimore rarely ate lobster and never with staff and never on the

company dime. He was floored and speechless, but not so speechless as to tell me that such a lavish, mixed lunch would never occur at Christie's London. God Bless You Sue.

Sue trained young people. Such art world mentoring just cannot exist today. No one has the time to train anyone in the art world, and few arts organisations have the financial wherewithal to employ and train up a green hand. Sue started at the beginning and got you doing. Under strict supervision, yes, but you did learn. Hundreds of people owe their start in the Australian art world to Sue.

Sue laughed hard, with her head thrown back. She demanded your full attention and fidelity. You did everything together. Like the obsequious minions that surround a stout North Korean Dear Leader, you waited at attention, with pad and pen in hand to receive instructions. In cataloguing paintings, someone measured the painting, someone read out the scribblings on the rear canvas. We discussed the artwork. Sue took control and announced value. Someone was dispatched for sparkling mineral water, and someone agreed to agree to everything. You saw, and experienced repeatedly, how things were done the Christie's way. The only way and, as it turned out, a right way.

Sue was entirely too relaxed, perhaps even an atrocious driver, and she owned a Volvo.

Sue loved a dinner party. Having formally dined as a guest in her house, many times, you were faced reassuringly with an old culinary friend. Sue did rare roast beef very well – 'Darling, stick with what you know'. She did and her voluminous red kimono somehow always founds its way into the beef juices.

Sue called for your attention, with an outside voice, indoors. Her cherished verbal signature was a sharpish "Cooee". She was not attempting to find a missing person. A longish "Cooee" was a "rally round your majesty" kind of thing, a call to arms if you will, whether in Double Bay, South Yarra or St James London.

Sue gave her professional and personal life to Christie's. Her life was other people. Christie's and her work always came first. Always. That lesson I took to heart. Christie's grew Sue and, to an unheard of degree in today's corporate world, looked after her. Sue's 20-plus Christie's years were a solid plank to her very being, almost all her friends and her professional world, in later life.

There is much more that can be said about Sue. She had an entirely amazing and extraordinary life before the Australian art world, working and mixing in Government House circles. After her Christie's years, Sue was active with the Australiana Fund and numerous regional and state art museums. Sue was a doing word. Most important people you could write a paragraph or two on. Sue is a good book. However, I will end my reflections here for now.

Sue, may you sail forth in all the splendid grandeur that you unquestionably earned.

Sue Hewitt, personal assistant to Lady Casey, wife of the then Governor-General Lord Richard Gardiner Casey, Deputy Chair of Christie's Australia, Managing Director of Christie's Australia, the first woman to run a major arts organisation and auction house in Australia, the first woman to conduct an auction worldwide for Christie's, an Australian art specialist, friend to many artists, private adviser, collector of drawings, lover of fine wines and good food. A friend that could drive me to the borders of anger, but one that I have always deeply, deeply respected and will think well of till my days turn to night.

### **Michael Reid OAM**

Michael Reid is a successful, hard-working, highly focused, of average height, fat, near of sight, follically challenged, dyslexic, meat-eating, art dealer who is ever so lightly brushed by high-functioning low-level autism. He has five art galleries – being two in Sydney, one in Berlin, Germany and others in Murrurundi, the Upper Hunter and in Berrima, the Southern Highlands of NSW. In addition to the physical spaces, there is an online platform Michael Reid CLAY. His galleries established the National Emerging Art Prize in 2020. Michael received an Order of Australia in January 2016 for his services to the art world and is just back from scouting for space to open a gallery, in Los Angeles.