

If Harris mural stays, perspex must come down

Description



The Rolf Harris mural in the loading bay of the Lighthouse Theatre, Warrnambool, as it looks today with black perspex over it. Image provided by the Warrnambool City Council.

Analysis – Carol Altmann

If it is decided – as looks likely – to keep the mural by convicted child molester **Rolf Harris** in the Warrnambool Lighthouse Theatre, we must also decide to remove the perspex and present it in its full glory.

Otherwise, what is the point?

The arguments have been coming thick and strong from some in our community that the mural should be treated as a sacrosanct piece of art, up there with the likes of works by other “immoral” artists such as Caravaggio and Picasso and Rubens (none of whom, by the way, were convicted child molesters).

If we really believe this, we must take down the perspex and put the mural on show like the work of these masters.

There has also been the argument that art must be viewed as completely separate to any appalling crimes of the artist.

If we really believe all art work stands alone, why would we want to keep the Harris mural covered?

Indeed, if the mural stays – [as the local newspaper and others have argued it must](#) – then we need to stand by our conviction that any piece of art comes first, ahead of all else, and be proud of our decision.

The council could go even further and promote the fact that Warrnambool has what we consider to be a treasured work by Harris available for viewing, given that around the world his art has either been taken down or, as in the case of a [similar impromptu mural in Melbourne](#), painted over.

A small sign could be added to explain that it was decided to keep the mural after a robust public discussion conducted largely through Facebook because the Warrnambool City Council, which owns the mural, failed to offer any leadership on the issue.



The Rolf Harris mural as it looks under the perspex. It was painted in the same period where he committed his crimes against children. Image: Jeremy Lee, ABC South-West Victoria.

Indeed it has been eight months since the future of the Harris mural was first [raised in July last year](#), and [again in September](#), when **Mayor Michael Neoh** said it would be part of a council briefing paper in the near future.

It is now almost March and there has been no formal discussion either in the council or outside of it, perhaps in the hope that it would drift from people's minds.

The only reason it is being talked about again now is because **Cr Peter Hulin** – who supports its removal – [raised it](#) and, like **Cr Jacinta Ermacora** before him, he plans to bring it up at the council briefing on Monday (16/2). These briefings are not open to the public.

Meanwhile, amid all the bluster about the dire consequences of removing the mural, there has been little regard for those who have suffered at the hands of child molesters like Harris.

These voices have been absent, despite assertions last year that they would be taken into account.

I contacted the **South Western Centre Against Sexual Assault** this week to see if they had been approached by anyone within or on council about the mural. No, they hadn't.

I also contacted **Emma House Domestic Violence Services** to see if they had been approached by anyone within or on council about the mural issue. No, they hadn't.

There are plenty of other people, however, prepared to give their views on what survivors of sexual

assault might think.

One, bet-each-way argument they offer is that the mural must stay, even if covered, because it would serve as a permanent reminder of the evils of sexual abuse.

No it wouldn't.

It would only serve as a permanent reminder that we lacked the courage as a community to roll over an impromptu mural because, according to some commentators, we would be morally obliged to also start demolishing Catholic churches and destroying every piece of art ever created by an artist who had committed a crime.

How ridiculous.

This is a very specific situation that demands a very specific response.



Frank Penhalluriack wasted no time in covering an impromptu mural by Harris in his Melbourne paint store after Harris was found guilty of his crimes. Image: [Herald Sun](#).

As has been said before, murals are – by their sheer nature – temporary. We had no qualms about recently freshening up the Lake Pertobe maze, for example, with works by **Bonsai** and **Ghost Patrol**, and it will no doubt be freshened up again in years to come.

What is not temporary, however, is the impact that the actions of sexual predators like Harris have on those they abuse.

The sick reality is that [one in three girls and one in six boys](#) are sexually abused in Australia and while we wring our hands about this shocking statistic, we too often shrink back from the opportunity to take a bold stand.

This is one such opportunity.

Instead of hiding Harris's work behind a plastic cover, I would rather see an artist like **Jenny Altmann** (*disclosure: my former sister in law*) whose work often deals with the gritty themes of domestic violence and sexual abuse, be invited by the Mayor to re-interpret this mural.

This is not a debate about book burning, or slashing the canvases of Caravaggio, or demolishing places of worship.

It is about replacing a mural with a mural – and sending a strong message that when it comes to sexual abuse, perpetrators have nowhere to hide.

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