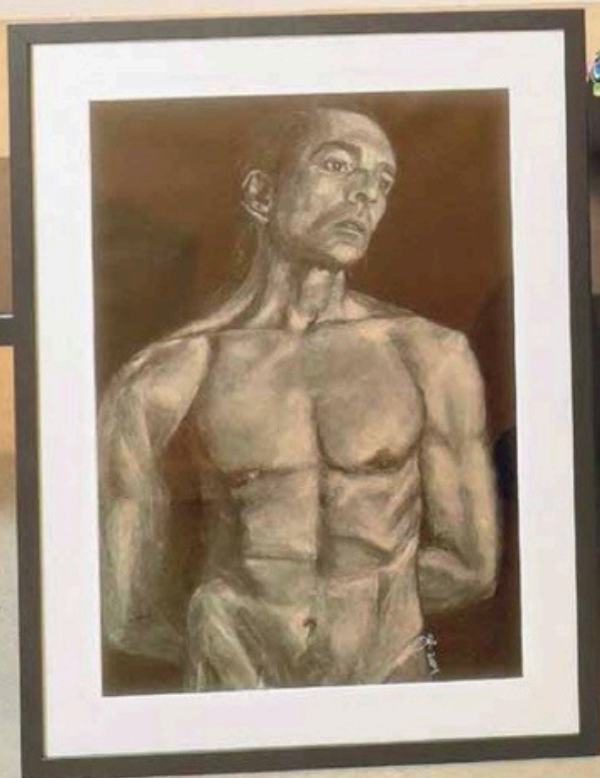


## NEW CHAPTER

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## THE ART OF RETURN

JEN CROMARTY CAPTURES HUMAN EMOTION AND ENERGY IN HER AWARD-WINNING ART. SHE TELLS TESSA HAYWARD WHY HER JOURNEY TO THE CREATIVE WORLD TOOK MORE THAN THREE DECADES



Having spent three decades in the corporate world, it was a surprise to Jen Cromarty to find comfort in art.

Absorbed in her career, it never crossed Jen's mind that there were opportunities as an artist as well.

And like many others, she was told art was not a career path after high school, despite art being her favourite subject.

As Jen reflects on her career she recalls thinking she wouldn't be able to make a liveable wage as an artist.

Instead she did a degree in public relations and that became her career for the next 30 years, working nationally in policy and government relations before becoming the chief executive for the Committee for Geelong.

"I was fully 100 per cent in my career plus I played a lot of sport so that absorbed a lot of my time," she explains.

However, Jen still found time to do the occasional life drawing class throughout the years. Her passion for art was still there.

Jen's perspective on life changed during the global pandemic.

"At my job at the time we had a lot of people very emotional and stressed. For me it was a question of, 'What does life look like now working from home?'," she says.

However, working from home took its toll on Jen's body. She was not walking to meetings or getting coffee, staying at her computer instead.

She ended up having a really bad back issue with a disc herniation. The surgery she underwent as a result then resulted in a golden staph infection.

"When you are an active and driven person and you are stuck on your back for months, you do a lot of thinking," she explains. "That was a circuit breaker for me."

Jen finished at the Committee for Geelong in 2022 and after taking three months to do some soul searching and have a break, she went overseas for two months with one of her daughters.

"I am notoriously bad at holidays," she laughs.

"When I came back I was still up in the air but my two daughters told me to do art.

"I had been drawing them religiously so I thought, 'Why not?'"

Jen says it felt like she was giving herself permission to follow her art. And in 2024 she decided to go all in.

She went back to basics and did graphite and charcoal pencil drawing. Life drawing and portraiture were always her favourite subjects, so she continued with that and for three months straight she drew every day.

"I still had some guilt, it feels silly but I felt I should be making money and doing things that felt more impactful. I felt a bit selfish," Jen shares honestly.

It wasn't until she started exhibiting that she realised it was more impactful than she thought.

She put one work into her first group exhibition and was completely blindsided when it won an award.

More recently Jen won Best in Show at the Daylesford Art Show with *Hello Thomas 4* and Best in Show at the Birregurra Art Show with *Girl with egg*.

"I haven't really understood what it all means. People you don't know think you are the best out of all the works," Jen says, still struggling to find the words about what it means to her.

When Jen was starting to put her work in exhibitions she started thinking about having her own gallery.

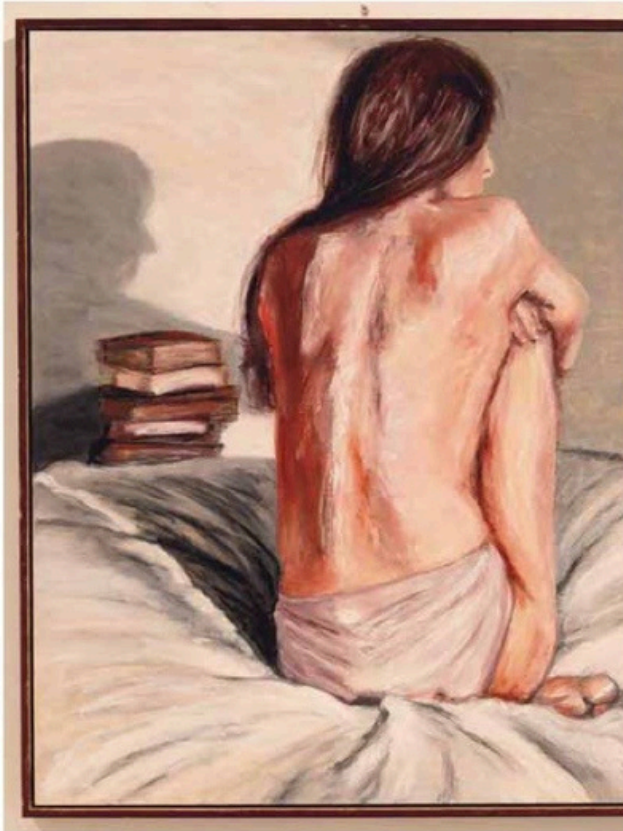
"I needed to understand what it was like and for me the quickest way to learn was by doing," she says of Untether Gallery, which opened in August 2024.

The gallery was stage one and other stages have followed, including May'd Shop, a retail shop that showcases the latest words from Creative Geelong members.

Jen founded Creative Geelong 10 years ago and it now has 180 members and is growing beyond what a small not-for-profit organisation can do.

The Creative Geelong Hub has also

Geelong Artist Jen Cromarty, pictured at her studio at Untether Gallery in Little Malop St, says art was a place of comfort after working in the corporate world. Photos: Mark Wilson



transformed what was a dark thoroughfare from Little Malop St to Ryrie St into a thriving mecca of people wanting to share their talent.

Untether Gallery is an extension of Jen's passion for supporting and nurturing the creative industries where everyone is welcome.

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When asked if she is proud of what she has achieved in a central Geelong location, Jen says "proud" is an interesting word.

"I get a lot of fulfilment and I see the joy in other people's eyes and it gives you incentive to keep going," she says.

Selling her own work also gives her a lot of validation.

Jen discovered pan pastel and hasn't looked back. She has a new solo exhibition she is working on for this year.

Her studio is her safe haven and her husband often remarks he feels her voice is lighter after being in the studio.

"I am much more measured, content and settled. I've been very anxious most of my life," she says.

"Sport was my outlet and I needed it to cope. Now, art isn't as physically challenging but it created that space to be peaceful.

"Art is incredibly healthy for me. This is what I am going to do for the rest of my life."



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