

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5756

Whiteley, Wendy Susan

(1941 -)

Born 1 January, 1941, Sydney New South Wales Australia

Summary

Wendy Whiteley OAM was best known as a model, muse and advisor to her husband and renowned artist Brett Whiteley. After the death of Brett Whiteley she has stayed in the public eye with ongoing support of the visual arts and her work in establishing a public garden of significance.

Details

Early Life

Wendy Susan Julius was the first daughter of George 'Gentleman George'. Yelverton Julius and Daphne May Mackenzie and older sister to Aileen. Her grandfather was Sir George Julius, the inventor of the totalisator and co-founder of the CSIRO. Her great grandfather was Charles Yelverton O'Connor who was the engineer for Fremantle Harbour and the Kalgoorlie Pipeline.

Wendy's parents had a troubled relationship and Wendy's life changed significantly aged 6 when her parents separated. She saw her father only once more before his death. Her mother remarried Albert McKenzie and the family moved to Lindfield on the Sydney north shore in the early 1950's. Two more children were born. Ian who died tragically from cancer in his 20s and Caroline (Caro) a successful film producer and assistant director to successful director Peter Jackson.

As a child Wendy identified strongly with her great aunt Kathleen O'Conner (1876-1968). Kathleen travelled to Paris to study art and live a bohemian life style. She exhibited her art on Paris and London and it is displayed in the National Library of Australia.

Wendy was educated at Lindfield Public School, Hornsby Girls High School and East Sydney Technical College where she studied art. She won art awards and a David Jones Drawing Prize.

Art & Family

In 1957 Wendy met her future husband Brett Whiteley who was to become the forefront of Australia's avant-garde art movement. From the start their lives were wrapped in the art world. Their first date was to a sketch club at Northwood on the Sydney lower North Shore where they sketched an artist's model. There was an instant strong attraction and after several months Wendy moved into the Longueville home of Brett and his father Clem.

In late 1959 Brett won an Art Travelling Scholarship which was judged by Sir Russel Drysdale. This was another turning point in Wendy's life. Brett left for Italy and Wendy worked two jobs to make enough money to join him. They were eventually reunited in Paris. She was 19 and he was 21. In Paris the Louvre provided a lasting impact on Wendy. She was moved by the masterpieces and started a lifetime of refining her visual intelligence. Wendy and Brett settled in London and married at the Chelsea Registry Office in 1962.

Wendy herself had given up painting. She had shown talent and promise at art school but didn't have the drive or ambition she felt necessary. She dedicated herself to working with Brett, modelling, working in the studio and becoming his critic and counsel.

Their daughter Arkie Deya Whiteley was born on November 6th 1964 at the St George's Hospital in London.

Wendy, Brett and Arkie moved to New York in 1967 and lived in at the Chelsea Hotel. After two years In New York they went to Fiji and had intended to return after a show in Sydney. However Brett was banned from re-entry over an incident with opium. On returning to Sydney they fell in love with the Lavender Bay area which Brett called optical ecstasy.

Both Wendy and Brett developed heroin additions in the mid-seventies. In 1987 Wendy finally conquered her addiction but Brett did not and this eventually ended their marriage. Brett moved from the family home in 1988 to his Surry Hills studio and they divorced in 1989. Wendy stayed in the Lavender Bay property.

Tragedy and Healing – Wendy’s Secret Garden

Brett Whiteley (OA) died of an overdose on June 15th 1992. The grief of that loss found a physical outlet when Wendy began clearing and planting the vacant land between her home and the disused railway track. It was a mammoth task to clear lantana, blackberry, privet and large quantities of dumped rubbish. Wendy later commented that she just started clearing the land and just kept going. She funded the garden from the beginning. It’s not known how much money has been spent but over the years but, in addition to plantings and landscaping, she has employed for two gardeners from around 1996. No local government or state government approvals were sought for the works however no legal or civil challenges against the work were issued.

On September 12th 2001 Arkie told her mother she had been diagnosed with adrenal gland cancer. Tragically only 3 months later, on December 19th 2001, Arkie died. She had been an accomplished film and television actress and had recently remarried for a second time. She had also worked on the garden with her mother.

The entrance to the garden is through the council recreation area called Clark Park. Wendy’s Secret Garden is now the backdrop for many happy moments. Every weekend couples are married or pose for their wedding photos with the garden and Sydney harbour as the magnificent backdrop. The park is popular with tourists and families and referenced frequently in travel guides.

Wendy was awarded an O.A.M. (Order of Australia Medal) in the Queen’s New Year’s Honours List on January 26th 2009 for her services to the community through the establishment and maintenance of a public garden at Lavender Bay, and as a supporter of the visual arts.

As at 2016 Wendy Whiteley still lives in the house at Lavender Bay that she shared with Brett Whiteley and her daughter Arkie. Both Brett and Arkie’s ashes are buried in an undisclosed location in Wendy’s Secret Garden.

“I’ve loved making this garden. It’s been a great gift to my life. It let me find myself again, and it’s my gift to share with the public”.

Published resources

Book

Wendy Whiteley And The Secret Garden, Hawley, Janet, 2015

Whiteley: an unauthorised life, Hilton, Margaret and Blundell, Graeme, 1996

Author Details

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