



## Chapter 8

# Channelling Claudio

*'Adina', Margaret Preston, 1947*

Modernage: A New Approach to Textile Design.

**A**fter decades of being the object of scorn and snide jests, Tasmania — the mendicant state and the poor sibling to the south — is finally hip. Drawing visitors from around the world, the key components of that lure are some of the very things for which Alcorso laboured and lobbied. So many of Claudio’s dreams for Tasmania and Australia did eventually come true.

Just as Amilcare Alcorso advocated that quality sells, Claudio constantly asserted that it would be the quality of wine, rather than the quantity, that would set the Tasmanian product apart in the growing global wine market. He and his fellow pioneers fought doggedly and cannily for the implementation of appellation laws that have since protected the Tasmanian wine brand and secured its place — and its price — as a product of high quality. In 2018, one of Alcorso’s co-founding members of the Vignerons Association of Tasmania Andrew Pirie, proposed going a step further, with the registration of the appellation sparkling method through the use of Geographic Indicators. This would register not just the product,

but also the process itself as something distinctly Tasmanian, as in the case of *méthode champenoise*. Such a step could not be feasible had the bedrock of the original appellation standard for Tasmanian wine not been achieved at the outset of the state's industry by Alcorso, Pirie, Graham Wiltshire, Peter Hope, Bill Casimaty and their cohort.

Moorilla Estate survived the multiple calamities of the 1990s and now sits as one of the most recognisable and respected labels in Tasmania. Conor van der Reest, winemaker and champion of the Moorilla brand, is openly deferential of Alcorso and those that fostered the Tasmanian industry, many of whom are his contemporary colleagues in fine winemaking in Tasmania. One sign of this is the Cloth Label Series vintage that van der Reest released in homage to Alcorso on the fiftieth anniversary of wine making at Moorilla in 2012.

In 2011, a decade after Claudio Alcorso passed away, a publicity-shy gambling magnate raised in the northern suburbs of Hobart opened Mona to the astonished eyes of the art world. For years, Hobartians driving beside the River Derwent watched as the mammoth construction on the foreshore of Moorilla Estate grew, evoking the lyrics of a Tom Waits classic — *what was he building in there?* The pre-opening suspense was thrilling and the actual event delivered on the conjecture; a bacchanalian feast for an elite guest list, many of whom finished the night bark-at-the-moon drunk amongst the crowd scene playing out on the lawns of Moorilla. And that was just the opening. From one event to the next, Mona throws at the audience the full impact of a private gallery, with a unique collection assembled and

curated that never fails to delight and divide, free of the obligations that public galleries must meet.

Mona is magnificent. It shouts out what so many locals have known for decades: Tasmania is a socially and culturally complex ship crewed by some very creative and clever people; artists, audiences and stewards of the arts that are outward looking, self-aware, and philosophically inquisitive.

The efforts to secure the Sullivans Cove precinct as a welcoming place for the arts and artists in the 1970s formed a critical step in helping Tasmania to be able to express itself as place more than just a former prison island with a shameful history and postcard racks of colonial ruins and apple orchards. Just as Claudio had been working on the ground with post-war modernists to articulate an Australian aesthetic identity through Modernage, so too he was there with the artistic community to shape a physical and political space for the arts in a modern Tasmania. Elvio Brianese says that if he had to sum up Claudio Alcorso, he would describe him as an old-fashioned kind of statesman. Employing his business connections and networking genius, Alcorso helped to build the platform for the arts-led boom from which Tasmania is now thriving.

Not surprisingly, when the University of Tasmania's supremos mooted moving the Art School away from Hunter Street in recent years, old guard activists such as Geoff Parr who had helped bring the arts back into the centre of town, recoiled in horror. The arts precinct that Alcorso and his fellow visionaries espoused is slowly coming to fruition nearly forty

years after the Sullivans Cove Development Authority was established to formulate a vision for the area. The development of The Hedberg, the University of Tasmania's centre for music and performance that links to the Theatre Royal, features a foyer named for Claudio Alcorso. The Hedberg consolidates more of the creative community into the centre of the city, closer to other key cultural landmarks such as Salamanca Place, what is now called the Centre for Creative Arts, and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG). The addition to TMAG built in 1966 that Alcorso decried as ugly and unsympathetic has assumed its own status with its 1960s aesthetic. The international hotel, that prompted despair for Alcorso and the Sullivans Cove Development Authority as a failure in planning policy, is now the home of the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, adding further to the cultural precinct.

Across the world, artists are known to move into affordably shabby parts of a town and build on a community's creative atmosphere, until eventually distasteful addresses become sought-after suburbs. Tasmania is not immune to the competing forces of this gentrification that creates opportunities for some and robs others. As prices rise exponentially on Hobart property, previously unenvied postcodes are now less affordable than ever, including the suburbs around Moorilla. Alcorso was occasionally queried as to why a wealthy man like himself would not move closer to his peer group in Sandy Bay, the traditional address of the affluent and elite. He was bemused that the beauty of the northern suburbs, and the river flowing below the east-facing flank of the mountain, was so under-appreciated. While he might now feel vindicated

by the steady push of population into the northern fringes of Hobart, Alcorso would not be pleased by the continued entrenchment of social inequality that is the less trumpeted sub-text in stories of a flourishing Tasmanian economy.

Tasmania is experiencing a supercharged tourism boom as a direct result of arts-based tourism. The sale of the Conservatorium of Music building to hotel developers, in perfect proximity to Salamanca Place, keenly highlights that while the makers make the art, the property developers make the money. What would Claudio say if he knew that the time had come when two of his beloved cities — Venice and Hobart — were both struggling with the same dilemma: what makes them alluring and attractive is threatened by an ever-increasing number of their admirers. Possibly he would defer to one of his favourite thinkers, EF Schumacher, who asserted that small is beautiful, and that by honouring the scale of the island and its cities, development does not need to devour its essence.

Were Alcorso still penning his letters to the editor he would find that some of his pet topics have not changed markedly: Tasmanian Aborigines continue to struggle for recognition and protection for their cultural landscapes; the system for educating Tasmanians lets many people down; there is a renewed vigour in the Republican movement for an Australian head of state; homelessness and entrenched social inequality abounds. The gambler that bought Moorilla is, ironically, the protagonist behind some difficult conversations being had about the adverse effect of poker machines in Tasmania.

It is easy to imagine Alcorso's thoughts on these issues filling the Letters pages, and he would likely be a visible presence in the crowds or on the stage at rallies to protect the takayna coast and stop cable car developments on kunanyi/Mt Wellington. Claudio would surely add a strident voice to the concern about planning issues across the state, and it is likely that he and Lesley would once more join in the efforts to stymie helicopters and hotels in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Areas and National Parks that they would have thought were already long protected.

While there is little left of the once-thriving textile printing and manufacturing industry, there are some sweet and subtle legacies. Stories of former STP employees and Hobart residents tell of a time when heading to Derwent Park to sift through bolts of fabrics was a regular Saturday afternoon activity. Fabulously bold paisleys, spots, florals and Japanese-inspired prints produced at the factory lurk in cupboards and drawers throughout Hobart.

At a practical level, the STP experts that came from around the world to Hobart are important contributors to Tasmania's renaissance. Kerry Carland, the man who turned off the lights at Sheridan, belongs to the celebrated winemaking community, as does his daughter Greer, a well-known winemaker who at one stage was employed by Julian Alcorso at his later venture, Winemaking Tasmania. Chemist Brian Hinson, no longer mixing cocktails of colour, runs a thriving distillery producing boutique whisky and gin in the burgeoning Tasmanian liquor industry.

There has been a profound maturing of Australia's cultural identity since Claudio, Orlando and Paul Sonnino arrived in 1939. The

diverse weave of Australia's social fabric, championed at a political level by the likes of Whitlam, Grassby and Coombs, in the social sphere by Ken Myer and family, and by many millions in the community sphere, is uncontested. Yet there still lurks the same political fear and systemic meanness of spirit that saw the Alcorsos, Sonnino and many more incarcerated for years. Back then, it may have been justified as Australia was at war, however today, the terms of the conflicts are less clear, but the outcome is the same, with hundreds of young men seeking asylum interned for years, an act made more bereft of humanity by outsourcing the prison facilities to neighbouring island nations and commercial security service providers. One can only imagine the flood of correspondence this scenario would have inspired in Claudio.

Alcorso was just one of so many immigrants to Australia who graciously overcome the barriers of prejudice and find their way through the bureaucratic mazes. Claudio had the benefit of affluence, education and proficiency in several languages to help him clear the obstacles placed in his way. Few new Australians arrive so well equipped, which prompts the question of what other great gifts could be brought to this country by generous-hearted people who ask merely for home soil in return?

Some of the Alcorso landmarks have faded and some have endured. In Rome, the premises of Piperno Alcorso on Via del Corso is one more in a chain of global fashion labels. In Tasmania, Alcorso Village has been absorbed by the suburbs of Glenorchy, and the STP factory is now the headquarters for an industrial equipment business. The Sydney Opera House is a Wonder of the World, and is finally being refurbished to





*above Lesley and Claudio at home,  
early 1960s*  
*opposite 'Sea fantasy' by Alice Danciger, 1947,*  
Modernage: A New Approach to Textile  
Design.

better accommodate modern opera; everyone now admits that the Opera Theatre was never as adequate as it should have been. Moorilla Estate is now Mona, and the cool climate wine industry forged there has flourished across the state.

The fact that another single-minded, unapologetic lover of art and beauty owns Moorilla Estate is quite a coincidence. When asked the question, 'what would Claude have thought of Mona?', the answer from those who knew him well is invariably the same: he would have loved it. And in many ways, we have him to thank for it.

