Members enjoyed a memorable presentation by one of Australia’s most interesting personalities, international artist, humanist, film producer, director and writer George Gittoes. His partner Helen Rose, who also sang for us, accompanied him.

George spoke of his early life growing up in Rockdale, Sydney, his mother was an artist and potter and how both parents had encouraged his sister and himself to become artists. After dropping out of Arts at Sydney University, he travelled to New York and came under the influence of the social realist artist, Joe Delaney, whose work was influenced by his involvement in the civil rights movement. George’s art similarly veered towards the political, and in the US he began the Hotel Kennedy Suite, inspired by opposition to the Vietnam War.

In 1969 with Martin Sharpe he established the Yellow House Artist Collective near Kings Cross. It was a space in which artists, filmmakers and performers could both live and exhibit their work. In an Australia whose culture had been seen by many as stifled and colonial, the Yellow House was a revelation. George’s own particular contribution was a Mystical Puppet Theatre, in which he and assistants performed to enthusiastic audiences, using glove puppets he himself made.

George told how his work has consistently expressed his social, political and humanitarian concern at the effects of injustice and conflict. Until the mid-1980s, he said his work was chiefly done in Australia, but in 1986 he travelled to Nicaragua. This was a turning point for him and since then the focus of his work has been largely international. He told how through his art he could be an advocate for so many people silenced by poverty and conflict. Subsequently he travelled widely in many instances involving regions of conflict, including the Philippines, Somalia, Sinai, Southern Lebanon, Israel, Gaza, Western Sahara, Cambodia, Laos, Mozambique, South Africa, Congo, Rwanda, Yemen, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Russia, Bougainville, China, Taiwan, Tibet, Timor, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

From 1993, George’s career took a distinct new direction. Building on his work in Nicaragua and the Philippines, he made a long series of visits to war zones, initially those in which Australian military personnel were serving in multinational peacekeeping operations. George was never a designated Official Artist. Rather, he travelled under the auspices of and generally with the assistance of the Australian army, but remained free to express himself as he wished. On these trips he produced a large body of photographs, drawings and paintings.

In 1995 George won the Blake Prize for religious art a second time, for one of several versions of The Preacher, a powerful image of a preacher trying to bring calm to the people around him—and to himself—amidst the chaos and carnage of Rwanda (this picture is included in the slide collection below).

In 2007, George began an enduring phase of making films in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some of these are available at SBS on Demand.
In 2011 George and Hellen began a long period working in Jalalabad, in Afghanistan. Here he set up a new Yellow House to be a centre of production and education in art, filmmaking, music, dance and performance. Inspired like the original Yellow House of 1970–71 as an artists’ co-operative that can use culture to counteract the prevailing landscape of war and conflict. It provides a safe haven for women’s arts and philosophy groups. Yellow House features a cinema, traveling tent circus, rainbow painting studios, the Secret Garden Cafe and Rose Theatre outdoor stages.

Despite a nasty throat condition, Hellen Rose treated us to two beautiful and moving unaccompanied songs.

George funds his inspirational activities entirely from the sale of his paintings. Several members purchased his book “Blood Mystic” and CDs of the soundtrack of the film “Snow Monkey”.

Ray Hyslop, who also grew up in Rockdale, gave a vote of thanks that was vigorously supported.

Tony Andrew