Deputy Chancellor, Mr Henry Smerdon; Vice Chancellor and President, Professor Ian O'Connor; Members of the Official Party, Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thankyou for inviting me to present the Occasional Address on the occasion of today's Graduation Ceremony. Today is a very special day for me, not only for the honour bestowed on me by Griffith University but also at a more personal level, for the opportunity it has provided me to reflect back over the last 20 years of my life, particularly in relation to my collecting Contemporary Australian Art and by doing so gaining a better understanding of the influences on me to acquire the art that I have.

The beginning, as is often the case in life, began in a quite casual and unpredictable manner. It was an invitation by my brother Michael to attend a gallery opening on a night when I didn’t seem to be doing very much. It was to get me out, meet new people, have a drink. That opening night would become one of the most important evenings of my life. My love for and passion for collecting contemporary Australian Art began that evening. I bought my first painting that night and that painting now resides in the permanent collection of Griffith University.

[Note: the work is by Andrew Arnaoutopolous ‘Logos:IBM’ 1989-90 acrylic on canvas GUAC ‘The Paul Eliadis Gift’]

The initial attraction for me towards a work of art has always been aesthetic. This attraction is nothing unique. It is what drives us all. We are all attracted by beautiful things. Many years ago, and well before I began collecting art, I became interested in the Ancient Greeks. One author, Professor Kitto characterised these ancient people as lovers of beauty and lovers of freedom. At the time I didn’t really understand how truly profound Professor Kitto’s proclamation was. I had just scratched the surface, shrugged my shoulders and moved on. It was only later that I came to appreciate that to be a ΦΙΛΟΚΑΛΟΣ (Trans: Philokolos), a lover of beauty, was a basic tenet for a civilized life. We are all attracted by beauty. It is beauty which has ultimately brought us all here today.

A beautiful work of art draws us near to itself. It is only after this initial attraction that I may be fortunate to understand the work more profoundly or intellectually. To understand a great work of art may take a long time. Complete understanding may remain elusive for ever. The journey to comprehend, however, is often interesting and enlightening in its own right.

In his great poem “Ithaca”, Cavafy says, and I quote:
“May the road be long;
that there may be many a summer morning,
when with what delight, what joy,
you’ll enter into harbours yet unseen”.

In the words of Elaine Scarry:
“Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself”.

Beauty is the starting place for education. Not just for creative and performing artists, and for graduates such as yourselves, but for all students, no matter what their faculty may be.

An artist whose works I love and collect with a passion is Gordon Bennett. He is a past student of the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. He has produced works of stunning complexity, conceptual power and beauty. It is this beauty, utter, simple and unadorned, which has always attracted me to his works. However, as the work attracts you closer, you find yourself often confronted by brooding themes.
Gordon Bennett’s work has been motivated by three main ideas: (1) the idea of art, (2) the history of Australian Painting, within concepts of art such as Modernism and world art, and (3) issues of identity, particularly in relation to indigenous people in Australian Society. By being a ΦΙΛΟΚΑΛΟΣ (Trans: Philosophos) Gordon’s work takes you by the hand, but more often by the throat and mind, and one becomes a ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΟΣ (Trans: Philosophos), a lover of wisdom and knowledge.

The most famous of the Delphic Proverbs was ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ (Trans: Know Thyself). The ancients meant by this: “know that you are mortal, know that you are not a god”. In the final analysis, everything that we own today will one day be the property of someone else in the future, after we die. We are merely caretakers of our possessions, looking after them and handing them on to someone else in the future. ΦΙΛΟΚΑΛΟΣ (Philokolos) underlies the ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΟΣ (Philosophos). Ultimately the ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΟΣ with ΙΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ (Trans: knowing thyself) becomes a ΦΙΛΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΣ (Philanthropos), a lover of humanity, of mankind.

I believe it is important for a collector to ultimately consider where their collection shall reside in the future. I also believe that art best serves its function in the public domain where the largest number of people are able to see or hear it, to appreciate the artist’s work. It needs to return to the community from which it was originally conceived, and I mean this in its broadest terms. To imagine a great work hanging in a secluded place frequented by few is a tragedy, and at odds with what the artist probably intended originally. I believe collectors have a responsibility to support artists particularly through acquisitions for and donations to public collections.

In closing, to all you new graduates: today is the first day of the rest of your life. You may feel that you have completed your studies but I suggest that they have just begun. To each and every one of you I wish you every success in your chosen careers. May the greatest accolade that follows you in life be ΦΙΛΟΚΑΛΟΣ, ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΟΣ, ΦΙΛΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΣ. (“philokolos, philosophos, philanthropos”).

Thankyou.

[Transcription from original speech notes by Simon Wright, Director Griffith Artworks, proofed and approved by Dr Eliadis]