

THE ARTS ISSUE

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**FUTURE  
FACING**

*Ballet gets in step with  
modern Australia*

BEYOND

THE

BORDER

*Story* • JANE O'SULLIVAN

*Portraits* • LOUIE DOUVIS & JOSH ROBENSTONE



Australian visual artists have traditionally struggled to find traction offshore. But that's slowly changing – exhibition by exhibition, fair by fair.

**T**he second half of 2015 was a pretty crazy time for Patricia Piccinini. The Melbourne artist opened a large exhibition of work in Hobart in June. No sooner had she closed that exhibition than it was on to solo shows in Galway, Istanbul, Montreal and São Paulo. The South American exhibition

moved on to Brasilia at the start of this year and will end up in Rio de Janeiro in April. Meanwhile, Piccinini's work featured in a group show in Seoul, a joint venture between South Korea's National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

Piccinini's weird and wonderful creatures, which explore issues around science and medical developments in a deeply human way, drew big crowds on the other side of the world.

"It was amazing. I would go into cafes and people would be talking about it," Piccinini says of her *Skywhale* hot air balloon, which flew over Galway as part of that city's international arts festival. "I don't know if that will ever happen to me again. It probably won't."

It did. Just a few months later, Piccinini's work was attracting crowds of 30,000 a week in São Paulo, where her unsettling creatures appeared on the front pages of two of the city's most important newspapers.

It was, she says, "sort of amazing for an Australian artist, a girl from Canberra".

She's not wrong. People from Italy to Argentina would probably recognise Australian actors such as Cate Blanchett, Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman and Russell Crowe. Companies such as Circus Oz, the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Sydney Dance Company and the Australian Ballet also have strong reputations offshore, albeit less high profile, having toured internationally for many decades.

Australia's visual artists, by contrast, have not enjoyed anything like the same global recognition. There are no Australians among the star artists the world's top dealers clamour to represent; no Antony Gormley, Damien Hirst, Ai Weiwei, Anselm Kiefer or Anish Kapoor. No Jeff Koons, Richard Serra, Ed Ruscha, William Kentridge or Takashi Murakami. The Australian contemporary artists best known internationally would probably be Ron Mueck, who has lived in London since the 1980s, and Tracey Moffatt, who lived in New York through the 2000s.

While some contemporary Australian artists are represented in international art museums, their work is rarely on permanent display. And while Australian artists are turning up at international art fairs in ever increasing numbers, it's mostly on the booths of Australian galleries in the side alleys rather than hanging front and centre on the stands of global gallery juggernauts like White Cube and Gagosian. Australian galleries, in fact, are rarely invited to participate in the northern hemisphere's top international art fairs at all.

Michael Brand worked in North America for 12 years, including running the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, before returning to Australia in 2012 to become director of the Art Gallery of NSW. He's thought a lot about the lack of recognition for Australian artists abroad.

"If you compare the knowledge and the collecting of Australian art internationally, say, with the recognition of our musicians, our actors, our film directors, our dancers even, it is lower than you'd hope," he says. "It's clearly not a matter of lack of quality from our artists. There's no doubt we have artists who are as good as anyone else in the world."

The Australian art critic Benjamin Genocchio, who recently left journalism to head up New York's biggest art fair, The Armory Show, puts it down to distance. "It is impossible for an Australian artist to make it internationally while living and working in Australia," he says. "History bears that out."

Genocchio's definition of "making it" has been forged in New York. He's lived there for 16 years, where he wrote for *The New York Times*, was editor-in-chief of the magazines *Art & Auction* and *Modern Painters*, and most recently launched the global art site *Artnet News*. New York is the traditional epicentre of the art market; it's where you'll see an Ed Ruscha painting fetch \$US30 million at auction and an Isaac Julien exhibition draw crowds of almost 500,000.

Clockwise from above: Patricia Piccinini's *Skywhale*; her *Big Mother*; and *The Welcome Guest*, all on show in São Paulo, Brazil. The artist, far left.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, CENTRO CULTURAL BANCO DO BRASIL SÃO PAULO

But below this headline-grabbing, multimillion-dollar stratosphere – where let's face it, only a small number dwell anyway, whether it be in film, music or the visual arts – there are signs that things are changing for contemporary Australian artists. Nobody has anointed Australian art the next big thing the way they did Chinese art in the 1990s and 2000s, and they are unlikely to. But what was once an almost entirely parochial market, with only Australians buying, selling and exhibiting Australian art, is very slowly becoming less so.

Piccinini's success is just one example, all the more impressive because she's had it while remaining living in Melbourne with her husband, fellow artist Peter Hennessey, and their two children.

"I haven't moved, and I don't want to," Piccinini says. "It's been a handicap, being so far from the centres, which are New York and London. In Australia I'm connected to most of the people in the museums and they know my work, and every museum has some of my work. But that isn't the case in America and Europe, simply because I'm not there."

Other contemporary Australian artists *have* moved offshore over the past decade or so, becoming part of the fabric of the artistic communities in which they live and gaining from that immersion. David Noonan and Shaun Gladwell both live in London, Ricky Swallow and Paul Davies in Los Angeles; Moffatt, as mentioned, lived through the 2000s in New York.

Edmund Capon, who ran the Art Gallery of NSW for 33 years before handing over to Brand, credits artists themselves with changing things, bit by bit, exhibition by exhibition.

"Clearly now, the institution of Australian art has got a problem but the individual artists are working away and they're doing a huge amount," he says. Capon points to recent exhibitions by Janet Laurence and Alex Seton in Paris and says it's artists like them who are "absolutely in the vanguard in terms of presenting Australian art around the world".

Mark Hughes is an Australian art consultant who lived in New York for a decade through the 2000s, working as a director of two Chelsea galleries, Gladstone Gallery and Galerie Lelong. He says interest and representation of Australian artists in New York grew during his time there.

"At the start, the only Australian artist people really knew was Tracey Moffatt. She'd had quite meteoric success after her 1997 show at the Dia Art Foundation, and she moved to New York following that," he says. "But during my time there, more Australians who live in Australia started showing in New York, and a nice appreciation of Australian contemporary art grew as a result. Bill Henson and Patricia Piccinini showed at Robert Miller, James Angus at Gavin Brown, and we started showing Rosemary Laing at Galerie Lelong."

Australian collectors, dealers, art advisers and philanthropists play an ever-increasing role in all this. They turn up in droves to the world's big art events, from the Venice Biennale to Art Basel fairs in Basel, Miami and Hong Kong, sharing stories of artists and artworks with their international counterparts along the way. Some, such as Simon Mordant and Anita Belgiorno-Nettis, sit on the international councils of prestigious institutions such as the MoMA PS1, the Tate and the Peggy Guggenheim. All this helps the cause of Australia's visual culture, if only to make it slightly less foreign – and thus a less risky proposition – to foreigners.

Others, such as collectors Penny Clive, John Kaldor and the Museum of Old and New Art's David Walsh are busy staging grand international projects back home, bringing artists of the calibre of Marina Abramović, John Baldessari, Gilbert and George and Bill Viola to our shores. These also do their bit to help enmesh Australia into the global art scene.

Our commercial galleries are also looking outward, participating in art fairs, working alone and with government to get their artists into international triennales and biennales and, in some cases, setting up permanent spaces overseas. The art fairs Australian galleries are accepted into tend to be in this region, most notably in Hong Kong and Singapore. While



these cities are not the centre of the art universe, they are becoming much less off-Broadway than they once were, as the world's axis shifts towards Asia and as fair powerhouses such as Art Basel set up in the region.

"The closest thing we have to what you'd call a nodal point to art world success is the establishment of Art Basel in Hong Kong," Genocchio says. "That's clearly a pathway to international recognition and success for Australian artists."

Acquisition and exhibition in major international museums remains the biggest challenge but in that sphere, too, there's reason for hope. Late last year, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia announced a deal with Britain's Tate to co-purchase work by contemporary Australian artists, funded by the Qantas Foundation to the tune of \$2.75 million over the next five years. It's a potential game changer.

"Exhibitions come and go, critics write what they write and then it's gone, but if your work is within the context of a major collection, it'll get shown alongside your international peers," MCA director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor says of the program.

"I WAS IN THE  
CENTRE OF THE  
ACADEMIC WORLD  
IN THE UK."

Christian Thompson

From top: Christian Thompson's video and photographic work includes *Dead Tongue*; *Ellipse*; and *Refuge*.



**In a short space of time, Christian Thompson has gone from** being a little-known emerging Australian artist to one showing his photography, video and performance work internationally as well as back home. His art has featured in group shows in Spain, Bangkok, Berlin and South Korea and was included in the National Gallery of Australia's 2013 *Australia* show in London. Becoming part of an academic, artistic milieu, first in Amsterdam then in Britain, helped. Thompson studied in the DasArts theatre program in Amsterdam, then at Oxford, where he recently completed a five-year fine arts PhD.

"It's quite informal, but at the same time I was in, I guess, the centre of the academic world in the UK," he says.

It worked, he believes, because he's not too aggressive about his career. "If anything's too forced, it repels." Moving overseas was more about pushing himself than getting ahead commercially. It left him unafraid of making mistakes.

"DasArts was tough. Tough," he says. "I remember one of the dramaturges saying 'I just think that your work is pfffft'."

Thompson flips his hand dismissively. "I just remember thinking 'What is the definition of pfffft? Can I Google that?'"

David Noonan is another artist making inroads into Europe. Based in London since 2005, he shows his screen-prints, collages and paintings with Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney and is represented in Europe by Belgian dealer Xavier Hufkens, who looks after megastars Antony Gormley, Tracey Emin and Erwin Wurm. Hufkens sold several pieces from Noonan's last show into private collections in Europe and says there is also interest coming from the US and Asia.

Noonan credits a one-year residency with the prestigious MoMA PS1 contemporary art museum in New York with helping him break through. Artists in the program would work on joint exhibition projects, and introduce each other to curators they'd met. The collegiate kick-start helped Noonan get into a group show in New York, which led to exhibitions in London and Brussels. All this was invaluable when he finally moved to London, though that didn't make it easy.

"I still felt like an outsider for quite a long time. Even now I feel a difference between myself and, say, friends and colleagues who studied here at Goldsmiths and more recently at the Royal Academy," Noonan says.

The Los Angeles-based Ricky Swallow craved being in the wider world when he left Melbourne in the early 2000s. "I wanted to be somewhere making sculpture – looking at sculpture – where I felt there was less isolation and a broader history available, or in the air so to speak," he says.

He represented Australia at the 2005 Venice Biennale and in the years since has shown in London, New York, Dublin, Vienna and LA, as well as back in Australasia. In 2014, his art was included in *Made in L.A.*, an exhibition held at LA's Hammer Museum, and in the Whitney Biennial, and he is represented by dealers in both London and LA.

Swallow's work has a certain cross-cultural appeal. His cast bronzes play with ideas about our relationship to objects. That aside, he would not have been considered for these high-profile US art shows if he'd stayed in Australia.

Swallow says he doesn't know what Melbourne's like now, but at the time he left he felt there was "room for only a small group of artists to be successful and promoted in their careers and supported curatorially" and that "being part of that group seemed like a fiction".

It's a blunt sort of pragmatism that echoes Piccinini's experience graduating from art school a decade earlier. "People still thought they had to be chosen," she says. "I never thought that would happen for me. I just thought, well I have to show my work somewhere so I'll just open a gallery."

The artist-run space lasted three years during a recession that turned the art market to mush but also forced real estate prices down, the reason they could stay afloat. "That was our real education in art, and what art can do in a society. Who looks at art, why we make art, the potential of art," she says.

It grounded not only her work but her approach to her career. She sees a similar mindset in many young artists coming through today. "They're much more proactive than we were three decades ago. They're much more media oriented, they're much more able to connect with people than we were."

Connections are important because, as much as the art world is about art, it's also about people. And it is connections to the upper milieu that Australian artists have historically tended to miss out on. "The large, influential global galleries, the powerful and influential collectors, the major world museums, the international art fairs – on a day-to-day basis that infrastructure doesn't exist here in Australia and there's just no pathway to access it," says Genocchio.

International art fairs are the biggest factor changing that. The proliferation of fairs around the globe – some 180 major events at last count – is fuelled by one thing: money. The European Fine Art Foundation estimated that these big art fairs generated €9.8 billion (\$15 billion) in 2014, accounting for a phenomenal 40 per cent of all dealer sales.

Sydney-based sculptor Alex Seton had a solo show at Art Basel Hong Kong in 2012. Staged by his Sydney dealers Sullivan+Strumpf, it proved a pivotal moment at a relatively early stage of his career. Images of his theatrical display, in which a marble hooded figure was watched over by marble security cameras, were picked up by the local media.

“That was a whirlwind,” Seton says. “Getting on the cover of the *South China Morning Post* was quite something. To have people so aware of the work that they come to find it ... And they wanted to meet the artist.”

Among them were collectors, curators and art consultants, some from the many private museums being set up in China. These museums, run either by wealthy über-collectors or private foundations, are providing another opportunity for Australian artists. In May, Piccinini will open a solo exhibition at the Yu-Hsiu Museum of Art, a new private museum in Taiwan. “They have also purchased a fairly major work for the show. This will be my first solo show in Taiwan, where I have exhibited a few times in group exhibitions,” she says.

Seton is more interested in longer-format projects these days but he still marvels at the wide audience reached through the Hong Kong fair. It led to conversations with Galerie Paris-Beijing, which held his first European solo exhibition last October. Dealing with asylum seekers, the show struck a topical chord in a city not known for its embrace of newcomers.

Seton’s dealers, Ursula Sullivan and Joanna Strumpf, were among the first to recognise what art fairs could mean for Australian artists. They’ve been attending fairs from Shanghai to Brussels for years, putting serious time and effort into making sure their exhibits stand out among the crowd. Since 2011 they’ve participated each year in Art Stage Singapore. In May they’ll go a step further, opening a gallery in the city’s Gillman Barracks precinct, home to multinational, Asia-based galleries such as Pearl Lam and Sundaram Tagore.

They will not arrive with an empty address book but nor are they expecting to make a quick fortune from this, their second gallery. It’s a long-term project designed to help develop the profiles of their artists in Singapore and beyond.

“Short-distance relationships are much easier,” Sullivan explains. “It’s about relationships with curators, collectors and artists.” It’s also about timing. “It was never really possible before. But with the advent of these art fairs, it’s opened up the door and somebody just has to walk through it.”

Art critic John McDonald has observed Sullivan+Strumpf’s evolution outward. “They understand that to be a player, you can’t just sit in Sydney and wait for the world to come to you.”

Other local dealers are also reacting to the shifts wrought by globalisation. Michael Reid, with his galleries in Sydney, Berlin and regional NSW, thinks the arrival of the multi-city mega gallery, with its stable of superstar artists, has upped the stakes for everyone.

“The very best of our Australian visual culture was – and is – at great risk of being swamped by the art juggernauts from North America, Europe and China,” he says. “Australian art must become more visible globally or it will be drowned.”

Adelaide’s Paul Greenaway, like Reid, has a gallery in Berlin, that affordable stepping stone into Europe. Last year he sold part of his own art collection to buy a warehouse on the city’s outskirts. He’s converting it into studios that he plans to rent to arts councils and universities for artist residencies.

There’s already a well-known residency program in Berlin, at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, where the Australia Council funds a place for Australian artists. But Greenaway feels it isn’t enough. His Phasmid Studios will be open to international as well as Australian artists, and he hopes it draws the attention of those who influence curators and collectors.

It’s an unusual move from a private art dealer; residencies have typically been the province of government, alongside touring exhibitions and showing at the Venice Biennale, where Australia last year unveiled a new national pavilion that many hope will foster greater interest in Australia and its art.



“GETTING ON  
THE COVER OF  
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SOMETHING.”

Alex Seton

Piccinini represented Australia in Venice in 2003 and says she still meets people who saw that show and remember it. “I had an exhibition in Lithuania in 2013 that came about because the curators saw my work at Venice,” Piccinini says. “This show in São Paulo happened because Marcello Dantas, the curator, saw my work in Venice.”

Venice was important to Piccinini for another reason. A New York dealer spotted her work in *The Art Newspaper*, and it led to her first relationship with an international gallery. A staff member moved on and she moved with him, eventually ending up with the well-regarded Haunch of Venison, which at various times has had galleries in London, New York and Berlin. It was a blow when the gallery stopped representing contemporary artists but Piccinini subsequently signed with another offshore space, Hosfelt Gallery in San Francisco.

Securing representation with a reputable international gallery can be critical for an artist. Old hierarchies still underpin the art world and brand power dazzles. “It’s unlikely that the Metropolitan Museum is going to buy something



*Clockwise from below:*

Alex Seton's *Last Resort* struck a chord in Paris; his Hong Kong art fair show featured a hooded man and security cameras; more of his work in the Paris show.



from an alternative space," McDonald says. He points to Ben Quilty, who has begun showing with Pearl Lam Galleries, which has spaces in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore. "That opens up an Asian nexus for Ben, it also opens up with someone who's rich enough and prepared to show the work at art fairs all over the world. He will be seen and collected in America and Europe on that basis."

Visiting curator programs are also gradually bearing fruit. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was immersed in Australian art when she directed the 2008 Biennale of Sydney. She went on to include Australian artists in her Documenta show in Germany in 2012 and more recently in the Istanbul Biennale. The MCA's Macgregor thinks the long-term benefits of fostering such relationships should not be underestimated.

"If someone gets appointed to a major job or a major biennale, you can immediately fire off an email and say 'I can get the Australia Council to help bring you down. When would you like to come?'" she says. "Getting curators here is much more important than financing exhibitions – our exhibitions – to go overseas, because at the end of the day, good curators make their own decisions."

We're not talking big numbers but nor is the world of global art influencers very big. In 2015 the Australia Council brought 13 curators out for Brisbane's Asia Pacific Triennial. Private collectors are arguably doing just as much. MONA hosted 16 international curators last year and John Kaldor has permanent ties to advising curators such as Christov-Bakargiev.

Capon believes that with ambitious exhibitions that wink seductively at those on the global art trail, the likes of Walsh and Kaldor have "stolen the march on promoting Australia as a centre of interest" internationally. Genocchio agrees. He likes to tell a story about the American art critic Clement Greenberg's visit to Australia.

"He was asked this question: 'What more could be done to help promote Australian artists here and overseas?'" Greenberg sat there for a minute and then he responded to the journalist: 'You need more millionaires'." Arguably, we now have them.

**The tyranny of distance has stuck to debates over Australian art for decades.** In the early 20th century, it centred on the art: Why don't they like it? Is it too Australian? Not Australian enough? In the 1970s, art historian Terry Smith wrote about "the provincialism problem", giving a name to an ingrained sense of cultural subservience to Europe and America.

That all seems rather quaint today. Artists in 2016 don't so much have a fear of being judged as a fear of missing out. Globalisation has rewritten the provincialism problem.

"That issue's gone," Genocchio says. "There's nowhere any more that's beyond the reach of an internet connection. People, ideas and objects travel much more freely, the world is far more intimately connected. Provincialism, in so far as it exists in Australia or London, Paris, New York or anywhere else, is attitudinal and in some ways about a creative choice."

Capon observes that Australian art used to be "completely determined, dominated and defined by place that it almost couldn't move out of it", but that artists such as Piccinini and Swallow have the advantage of no "made in Australia" label.

In the end, the change is not simply about Australia being more outward looking. The rest of the world is, too. Frances Morris, newly appointed director of Tate Modern, says the Tate's co-purchasing deal with the MCA is part of its slow evolution beyond seeing international art as pretty much confined to France and North America. That shift only started with "the beginning of biennale culture and the more integrated digital world after 1989".

Biennale themes often relate to conflict zones, places where issues of 21st-century humanity burn brightly. Perhaps that's why the lens has never really settled on a country as stable as Australia. It's neither exotic, politically interesting nor familiar. "Australia is both far away and very close," Morris muses.

A little less far, perhaps, in 2016. ●