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Art in 2014: Archibald Prize gets better, Head On gets bigger and the Sydney Biennale draws heat

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COMMENT

The past year has brought mixed fortunes for Sydney's art institutions.



Douglas Gordon, "Phantom", 2011, installed at the MCA as part of the Sydney Biennale. Photo: Ben Rushton

The Art Gallery of NSW began with a weak [show of American art](#), and ended with the long-awaited [Pop to Popism](#) (until March 1); a distinct improvement, but possibly not the hit the gallery so badly needs.

In the meantime, there has been a dearth of exhibitions and a surfeit of internal unrest. [The annual report](#) showed attendances, revenues and benefactions in decline. Looming over everything is the shadow of Sydney Modern, the AGNSW's proposed extension that – for a mere \$450 million – will deliver twice as much exhibition space at twice the cost. For 2015, the only way is up.



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Kirrilee Edwards' family care for her in Joe Wigdahl's "Family Loss", winner of the Head On Portrait Prize. Photo: Joe Wigdahl

Happily, the gallery can always rely on the Archibald Prize as a reliable drawcard. [Fiona Lowry's portrait of Penelope Seidler](#) was a [predictable winner](#) for everyone but the betting agencies, which blunder into this contest like mug punters. The only controversy this time was that the standard of work seemed marginally better. If this trend continues, the Archibald's reputation will be ruined.

By contrast with the AGNSW, the Museum of Contemporary Art had a very good year. It began with a [slightly daffy survey by the seriously daffy Yoko Ono](#), and ended with an [excellent show by Chuck Close](#) (until March 15). Along the way, there have been strong exhibitions by Japanese animator [Tabaimo](#), and [French artist Annette Messager](#).

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Without doubt the disappointment of the year was the [Sydney Biennale](#); by almost universal agreement, a dull, complacent selection that only generated a little heat when [Luca Belgiorno-Nettis of Transfield was forced off the board by grandstanding artists](#). The entire affair should be a black mark on the record of director Juliana Engberg, but I expect it will be written up as a triumph on her CV.

The unsung success of 2014 was the photographic festival [Head On](#), which featured more than 100 exhibitions in Sydney from May to June. This event has been a sleeping monster that is growing every year.



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The Shiva statue on display at the National Gallery of Australia last year, before it was returned to India. Photo: Jay Cronan

One entity that never disappoints is White Rabbit, the Neilson family's privately owned museum of Chinese contemporary art, which hosted two exhibitions: *Reformation*, and *Commune* (until February 1). All the WR shows are drawn from the gallery's permanent holdings but that collection is expanding so rapidly there is always something new and startling to be seen. It should be an obligatory stop for visitors to Sydney.

The best survey of contemporary Australian art wasn't held in Sydney, but in Adelaide. Art Gallery of South Australia director Nick Mitzevich took over the curatorial duties for *Dark Heart: the 2014 Adelaide Biennial*. The display was so well designed it flattered every participant, with a particular highlight being a room featuring a large, multi-panelled painting of an island by Ben Quilty, and a set of marble life jackets by Alex Seton.



Archibald Prize winner Fiona Lowry with her subject, Penelope Seidler, at the Art Gallery of NSW in July. Photo: Janie Barrett

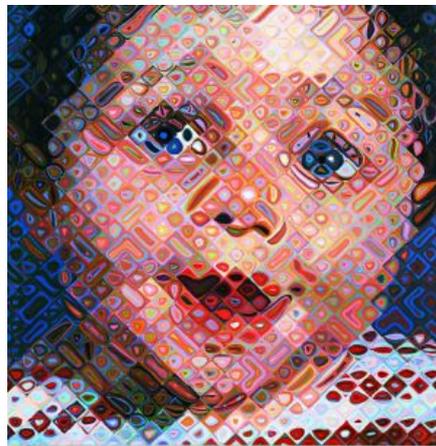
For international exhibitions, a special mention goes to the Bendigo Art Gallery, which hosted two unique shows: *Genius and Ambition: The Royal Academy of Arts*, and *The Body Beautiful in Ancient Greece*. Either of these would have been a blockbuster at the AGNSW. Instead, they showed what may be achieved by a regional gallery with a little initiative and a supportive council.

Bendigo has roughly a quarter of the population of Newcastle, which should be a flagship for all regional galleries. It was fulfilling this role nicely under the capable directorship of Ron Ramsey, until lord mayor Jeff McCloy decided the gallery didn't need an extension or a director. As Mr McCloy has resigned from office, after a memorable appearance before the ICAC, one hopes that Newcastle can get back on track.

The other art institution that needs to be reinvented is the National



Gallery of Australia, whose director, Ron Radford, has retired. His final year was marred by the ongoing scandal about the gallery's dealings with discredited Indian art dealer Subhash Kapoor, that resulted in the very public return of a multimillion-dollar sculpture of the dancing Shiva. Incoming director Gerard Vaughan should be a stabilising influence.



Chuck Close, "Emma", 2000. Photo: Supplied

In 2014, Australia farewelled many important artists, including Richard Larter, Robert Jacks, Robert Hunter, and very recently, Philip Martin. Now begins the important work of organising retrospectives. In the case of Jacks, the National Gallery of Victoria has achieved this feat (until February 15), although it is scandalous that the show will not be travelling to NSW, where Jacks spent a significant part of his career. This lack of co-operation between public galleries is an ongoing blight that never seems to get any better, even as directors and trustees keep changing.

Finally, as the commercial gallery scene struggles through another difficult year, Sydney's oldest continuing dealership, [Watters Gallery, has celebrated its 50th anniversary](#), with co-founders Frank Watters and Geoffrey and Alex Legge still at the helm. In an art scene that has been undergoing seismic shifts, partly caused by unsympathetic policies of successive governments, Watters has been a monument of stability.



Martin Sharp, "Jimi Hendrix", 1971, a highlight of the Art Gallery of NSW's Pop to Popism exhibition. Photo: Supplied

Snapshot of 2014:

Art and politics

Artists who protested about Transfield's involvement in managing refugee detention centres and threatened to withdraw from the Sydney Biennale took a stand "on principle" that sent a clear message to potential sponsors: "If we don't like what you do, we reserve the right to humiliate you." To be consistent, the artists should have demanded the refusal of Australia Council funds, as this provides the biennale's direct link with the federal government. When the philanthropic dollar is so hard to secure, the protest was a cavalier gesture.

My way

Going it alone seems to be an increasingly popular model for wealthy art collectors, with David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, and Judith Neilson's White Rabbit leading the way. Then there is the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, the Besen family's TarraWarra Museum of Art, and various smaller

establishments. Is the rise of the private museum an implicit indictment of the public institutions?

Middle of the journey

Mid-career is a make or break time for artists, so it was pleasing that regional galleries are devoting space to artists who are no longer "emerging", but not yet iconic. Mosman Art Gallery led the way with a brilliant survey of Lucy Culliton's work, while Manly Art Gallery and Museum did the honours for Joshua Yeldham. Older artists to get surveys included Bill Brown and George Gittoes.

Fair trade

For better or worse, art fairs are changing the global landscape of the art market. Commercial galleries report declining attendances as collectors save their money for a trip to Basel, or Miami or Hong Kong, where they can take a holiday and buy art from anywhere in the world. The Melbourne Art Fair is a more modest enterprise but reported encouraging results in its new, rebranded state.

Fashion Shows

At the end of 2014, three of the nation's major public galleries are holding fashion shows: *Fashion Icons* at the Art Gallery of South Australia, *Future Beauty* at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, and *Jean Paul Gaultier* at the National Gallery of Victoria. Is it a passing trend, or is fashion here to stay as a vital component of gallery programming? Attendances may decide.

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