

THE AUSTRALIAN

Bank of America Merrill Lynch art collection: Culliton, Quilty Frazer and more

MICHAELA BOLAND THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM August 19, 2016

They are not commercial art shows, nor are they museum-type exhibitions.

Bank of America Merrill Lynch has pioneered a new style of art exhibition designed to foster understanding between the bank's clients and living Australian artists.

Artworks by landscape and still-life painter Lucy Culliton, Archibald-winning portraitist Ben Quilty, landscape painter Neil Frazer and pet obsessive Joanna Braithwaite have been hung in the bank's headquarters at Governor Phillip Tower in Sydney.

[MORE: Read a comprehensive assessment of the US economy in the August edition of The Deal magazine.](#)

This month the honour falls to Ken Whisson, the Victorian-born abstract oil painter who lives in Italy, from where he has returned to participate in events staged around the exhibition.



Detail of Horses and Automobiles, by Ken Whisson.
Picture: Merrill Lynch

The series began in 2013 and was the idea of curator and former BAML banker Max Germanos who started modestly, hanging a collection of McLean Edwards portraits, some owned by him, others by BAML Australia CEO Kevin Skelton.

The experiment tapped into a personal interest of Skelton, but also chimed with BAML's international support for the arts.

"I was keen to do this as an experiment," Skelton says. "It's a unique way for us to connect with clients."

In addition to hanging a couple of dozen works by the chosen artist throughout the boardroom, reception and company offices, the bank hosts a formal opening for each exhibition, client dinners and a Q & A with the exhibiting artist. Guests are invited to bring their partners to the parties, where talk about mergers and acquisitions takes a back seat to discussions about the art.

Skelton says the first show was simple to organise because the pair simply loaned their own works. Now his three exhibitions a year are drawn from private collections, commercial galleries and artist collections.

Sometimes artworks can be acquired, others are not for sale — immediate commercial activity is not the primary aim. Each exhibition is built around a theme and intended to highlight an aspect of an artist's work.

Skelton is convinced that rotating fine art exhibitions through the workplace has boosted productivity at BAML.

"Our employees love it," he says. "McLean was quite challenging. People would talk about which paintings they liked. It's given staff a real appreciation of the art. It's really stimulated staff as a place for them to work. It's improved productivity and reduced attrition. You can see it in morale."

Germanos says the exhibitions have also helped clients become collectors by removing barriers to entry.

"There's a lot of uncertainty and lack of transparency in the art world," he says. "It can be intimidating and people don't want to make mistakes. This is about prioritising the art."