

# The Sydney Morning Herald

ENTERTAINMENT ART & DESIGN VISUAL ART

## Sydney shakes market doubt through the art of optimism

By **John McDonald**

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Ask any art dealer and they'll tell you the market has gone flat, as collectors brace themselves for a Trump-led recession. Ordinarily this should put a cloud over an event such as the Sydney Contemporary Art Fair, now in its sixth iteration, but the atmosphere and sentiment is absurdly up-beat.

When I visited Carriageworks last week during the set-up, dealers were not simply optimistic, they were buoyant. By the end of this weekend we'll know whether their faith was justified.



Detail from Tim Storrier's *A Distance Away (Northern Landscape II)*, 2019. COURTESY OF AUSTRALIAN GALLERIES, SYDNEY & MELBOURNE

If the answer is in the affirmative it will be a triumph of sentiment over caution. There is so much money out there it would require another Wall Street crash to make it impossible for the wealthy – and the not-entirely-impoverished – to acquire the odd work of art. Nevertheless, whenever there is a hint of economic malaise, the art market is the first to feel the pain.

There are artists who defy such trends. Lucy Culliton, for instance, recently enjoyed a sell-out exhibition at King Street Gallery on William. The bigger question is whether collectors are stimulated by the art-fair model, which has already brought huge changes to the way art is bought and sold internationally.

It's possible that the buzz and commotion of a fair, the competition for works, and the sheer variety of art on offer makes people feel they can't go home without grabbing something.

This is especially likely in Sydney, which has proven itself to be a place where people love an event and are prone to spend a dollar. Melburnians, despite the pre-eminence of their public art institutions, are much better at resisting temptation – which is why the major Australian art fair migrated north.

This year the fair is boasting "95+ galleries exhibiting new work by 450+ artists from over 34 countries". The fuzziness around numbers shows the sprawling nature of this extravaganza, but that's part of its appeal. The range of art on display is designed to match every taste and every budget.

There may not be the multi-million dollar items found in the Art Basel fairs in Basel, Miami Beach and Hong Kong, but there are plenty of opportunities to drop \$500,000 or more on a single piece.

On the other hand the Paper Contemporary section is a fair-within-a-fair, in which prints, artist books and works on paper are selling for much more accessible prices.

There are also opportunities to buy work by young, up-and-coming artists. Two that caught my eye at a first walk-through were Jess Bradford's tiny pictures, made with a one-hair brush and exhibited on porcelain versions of scholar's rocks at Galerie Pompom. She also has a completely different style of work in a photo and video ensemble called *Haw Par Villa*, which is part of an impressive installations program curated by Mikala Tai of Gallery 4a.

Oliver Wagner's "reconstructed paintings" at the Sarah Cottier Gallery are abstractions made with paint dust, which gives each work a granulated texture. The works may look like simple swipes of the brush, but the process is complex and laborious.





Detail of Tiger Yaltangki's Malpa Wiru (Good Friends), 2019. THE ARTIST, IWANTJA ARTS AND ALCASTON GALLERY, MELBOURNE

Cottier and Fox/Jensen & Fox Jensen McCrory have the most rigorously abstract works at the Fair. Such booths are tests for art novices, because they offer no figurative props. There are plenty of other galleries offering a range of landscapes, portraits, still lifes, photographs and works of applied art.

As usual, the booths that stand out from the crowd are those devoted to a single artist. For the second year in a row, Australian Galleries has gone with a big display of paintings and sculpture by Tim Storrier. Last year saw Titanic Tim duking it out with Tolarno Gallery's display of Ben Quilty; this time he's up against another eye-catching Tolarno display, by Amos Gebhardt, whose photo-installation of horses against inky backdrops has a consummate theatrical power.

Two Melbourne galleries have chosen to concentrate on Sydney-based artists. Niagara Galleries is showing recent works by Ken Whisson, now in his 90s and painting with undiminished vigour. Nicholas Thompson, who is featuring Suzanne Archer, will be launching a new monograph on the artist on Sunday afternoon.

Dealer Justin Miller is having an each-way bet, with a display given over to a single artist – in this case, Sidney Nolan – and another room of blue chip works by Australian and international masters. Others, such as Arterreal and Sullivan + Strumpf, have wrought artful transformations to the shape of their booths. The latter could easily be mistaken for the VIP lounge.



Detail from Ken Whisson's Saturday (2018). NIAGARA GALLERIES

Visitors who make it to the real lounge sponsored by Deutsche Bank will find an impressive display of Indigenous art, curated by Sharni Jones of the Australian Museum. As usual, Indigenous work is extremely well represented at the fair

through specialist galleries such as Cooe Art, APY Gallery, Black Square Arts and Alcaston Gallery. The stand-out is Tiger Yaltangki at Alcaston, whose bizarre, imaginative pictures have stepped up another level.

No contemporary fair would be credible without a strong component of Chinese and Asian work. Vermilion is concentrating on modestly scaled works by big name Chinese artists, while *Artist Profile* magazine (for which I confess I write on a regular basis), is hosting a show of work by Guo Jian, known for being deported from China when he offended the authorities one too many times.

Hong Kong artist Movana Chen, the inaugural artist-in-residence sponsored by Sydney Contemporary and Artspace, has made a range of amazing sculptural works knitted from shredded maps.

For those who require a little added excitement, Ruth Ju-Shih Li has an elaborate clay sculpture at May Space that will be disintegrating from day to day, while Despard Gallery of Hobart has a multi-media installation by Patrick Hall, a prodigiously talented artist who has never been given due recognition on the mainland. This is a wake-up call for the curators.

New Zealanders are best represented among overseas contributors, with eight galleries showing some of the fair's outstanding work. Japan comes next with four galleries alongside exhibitors from South Africa, Hong Kong, London and Paris. Singapore's Yavuz Gallery is back again, this time for keeps, as they are opening a new permanent space in Sydney this week.

This brief overview can hardly do more than scrape the surface of an event that draws tens of thousands of visitors (so don't consider parking!). Those who require a more literal overview have the option of climbing to the top of Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro's *Tower of Power*, a battlement without a castle that offers an aerial perspective on the fair, along with an opportunity to charge your mobile. By Sunday there will be plenty of dealers wishing there was a device by which they could recharge their own batteries.

**Sydney Contemporary is at Carriageworks, 12 - 15 September, 11am - 6pm.**

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