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## VISUAL ART

MELBOURNE ART FAIR 2014 EXHIBITION BUILDING, MELBOURNE AUGUST 13-17 Successive governments have done the **commercial** galleries no favours, but the Melbourne Art Fair shows they are still determined to succeed.

## TD

Art dealers in Australia have an image problem. Every time a high-profile art fraud comes to court, as in the recent case of a dud Albert Tucker painting, there is a mass of lurid publicity. We hear shocking stories about the prevalence of fakes, shady dealers, unreliable auction practices and double-dipping art consultants. It may be true, but it's a woefully small fragment of the complete picture.

The larger story concerns an industry struggling to keep afloat in a changing **commercial** environment. The federal government may have abandoned the car industry, but it did not go out of its way to actively undermine it, as has occurred with the art business. By effectively destroying an art for superannuation scheme, the former Labor government delivered a kick in the teeth to an industry that was already on the mat. It was a decision motivated by ideology rather than common sense. By forcing collectors to sell off works acquired for their super funds or be taxed, the government created the conditions for a market collapse.

The Abbott government, even more mired in ideology, has shown the most complete indifference to this issue, although it likes to pose as the friend of small business and entrepreneurship. The Coalition has been eager to free financial advisers from legislation that enforced a degree of transparency and protection for clients, but it has allowed the art dealers to bleed to death.

The biennial Melbourne Art Fair (MAF) presents an opportunity to take stock of an industry that has contracted severely over the past two years. In 2012 there were 84 exhibitors, this time the figure is "over 70". These numbers don't take account of the quantity of alternative spaces and special projects that helped flesh out the top floor of the Exhibition Building. Neither does it recognise the absence of previous mainstays such as Australian Galleries and Utopia Art.

Such absences reflect crucial changes the MAF has undergone, as Tim Etchells' **company**, Art Fairs Australia Pty Ltd, which brought us the new Sydney Contemporary of 2013, has taken on management duties in Melbourne. The control exercised by the Australian **Commercial** Galleries Association has vanished, and with it a number of key ACGA galleries.

Many dealers argue that they couldn't justify the expense of a space at the MAF. It's easy to spend \$40,000 on a booth; then there is the cost of freight, airfares, staff wages and accommodation. Considering that most galleries are on a 40 per cent commission, it means sales have to total at least \$100,000 to break even.

The alternative argument was that dealers couldn't afford not to take a booth, even when they were certain to lose money. The **commercial** art scene has grown so quiet in recent years that we appear to be going through a period of structural change. Instead of visiting the local galleries on the weekend,

collectors are now inclined to save their money and travel to an art fair in a city such as Basel, Hong Kong, Miami, New York or London. They stay in a flash hotel, eat at good restaurants, and buy art from anywhere in the world. It's one-stop shopping with a lifestyle supplement. This taste for luxury was gently satirised by Michael Zavros at the Starkwhite booth, who had male models handing out gold coins from the boot of a red Rolls-Royce.

In the new globalised world there is no denying a growing convergence between art and high-end consumerism. It suggests that the days when an avant-garde artist set out to offend the bourgeoisie are long gone. Today's bourgeoisie would love to be offended, but they are completely unshockable.

Art fairs play an increasingly prominent role in this altered vision of the art market. They do not offer guaranteed sales, merely the promise of visibility and a chance to make a new customer or contact.

This is why every art fair begins in a blaze of optimism, as dealers enjoy the experience of talking to more people than they might see in their gallery for an entire year.

The most positive impression was made by the attractive layout of the ground-floor galleries. This was partly because there were fewer dealers competing for floor space, allowing a few extra metres between booths, but the superior design also reflected the new managers' experience of many art fairs.

The centre of this year's MAF featured a face-off between Roslyn Oxley9 and Anna Schwartz, the cutting-edge heavyweights from Sydney and Melbourne, respectively. It was reminiscent of two armies eyeing each other across no-man's land. There was, however, very little basis for comparison beyond the fact that both dealers are in the happy position of not having to depend on sales. Schwartz featured an eye-catching solo show by Austrian Erwin Wurm while Oxley opted for a group exhibition, including a monumental painting by Del Kathryn Barton that had to be hung on the side of the booth.

As if two queens weren't sufficient, the MAF made a huge song and dance about Pearl Lam, who has galleries in Shanghai, Singapore and Hong Kong - not to mention one of the most memorable haircuts in world art. Although Lam has some strong artists, including the amazing Zhu Jinshi, who has been known to paint with a shovel, all the hoop-la had an uncomfortable tinge of sycophancy.

The Oxley-Schwartz nexus was completed by Mikala Dwyer, who shows with both galleries. Upon entering the building one soon encountered Dwyer's MAF commission, *The Weight of Shape*, which resembled an inflated grunge version of an Alexander Calder mobile. At the conclusion of the fair, this work will be donated to the National Gallery of Australia, where they may already be wondering what they're going to do with it.

The sculpture consists of geometrical and informal shapes in various materials, dangling from the ceiling. According to the MAF's press release, the work is "a physical demonstration of thought patterns", although these thoughts may not be especially profound. It doesn't require a neuroscientist to find such claims vague and fanciful. It's enough that a work of art is pleasing or stimulating to the eye. Instead, Dwyer has produced a large, three-dimensional doodle.

Australia has a large number of excellent sculptors but committees of art experts persist in believing that anything that actually looks like a sculpture is old hat.

As usual, the most impressive booths were devoted to solo exhibitions. Liverpool Street Gallery had a marvellous show of abstract paintings by Karl Wiebke, while Bett Gallery opted for a sequence of small, moody landscapes by Philip Wolfhagen. At Olsen-Irwin, Guy Maestri showed a new series of still lifes that deservedly attracted much favourable comment. Peter Cooley was also starring, with a set of ceramic marsupials at Martin Browne Contemporary that sparkled like jewellery.

Among individual works it was impossible to go past an epic pop painting by Richard Larter, who died little more than a week before the MAF opened. Larter spent almost his entire career showing with Watters Gallery in Sydney and Niagara in Melbourne - two pillars of the Australian commercial gallery network who are still supporting the fair.

At the other end of the spectrum was an extraordinary life-sized figure called *Omnipresent Incarnate*, by young Melbourne artist, Selby Ginn, showing with Alcaston Gallery. The piece, covered in thousands of small patches of coloured leather and fabric, looked like it had been plundered from a Polynesian mystery cult. Equally striking were the extravagant wall sculptures of Juz Kitson, showing with Paul Greenaway. Another standout was an entire wall of small, precise pastel drawings by Julian Martin, whom many believe to be the outstanding artist at the Arts Project Australia workshop.

It would be futile to go on citing individual galleries or works of art. Suffice to say there was plenty of quality on display, regardless of whether or not the punters were buying. One image that deserves iconic status, is a still from a video by Sam Smith, showing at the Ryan Renshaw Gallery. It shows a

headless figure sitting comfortably in a chair - a perfect representation of someone contemplating the state of the Australian art market.

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