



## ART FAIR

## Collectors' alert

With 60 exhibitors and a focus on new works, the Melbourne Art Fair is back, writes **Dan F. Stapleton**.

**Organisers of the 2024 Melbourne Art Fair** are coyly using the terms "boutique" and "compact" to describe the latest edition of the long-running event.

But sales figures from the previous instalment in 2022 – which was billed as a total reboot of the 35-year-old fair – suggest this iteration has serious muscle.

Two years ago, the fair generated \$10.5 million in artwork sales across 53 exhibiting galleries, according to its operator, the Melbourne Art Foundation.

Compare that with the most recent edition of competitor fair Sydney Contemporary in September 2023, which generated \$21 million in sales across 96 exhibiting galleries, organisers reported.

In terms of revenue per booth, the two events were basically equivalent. And the Melbourne fair was held in the long shadow of lockdown, just weeks after Victoria lifted bans on mass gatherings.

The 2022 result was a quiet triumph for the foundation, which cancelled its 2016 edition due to waning interest from exhibitors (many of whom chose to show solely at Sydney Contemporary that year) then endured a period of existential uncertainty.

"I think it's fair to say that it has become, again, Australia's premier art fair," says director and Melbourne Art Foundation chief executive Maree Di Pasquale.

"We say 'boutique' because we are in a phase of growing again, and we are growing slowly so as not to compromise on the quality of the work and to maintain our position as a fair for serious collectors."

This year's event comprises 60 exhibitors.

In the years after its inaugural edition in 1988, the fair established itself as a must-attend event for heavyweight galleries and collectors in Australia and the region.

When the not-for-profit Melbourne Art Foundation – governed by a board of voluntary directors, most of them local galleries – assumed control in 2003, the city's visual-art sector was jubilant.

But subsequent editions underperformed, and the launch of Sydney Contemporary in 2013 made attracting interstate buyers even more difficult.

The four-year pandemic-induced gap between fairs gave Di Pasquale an opportunity to rethink the format. When it returned in 2022, exhibiting galleries were asked to present significant bodies of work by individual artists, rather than the

mixed booths typical of fairs.

"We do not encourage stockroom shows," Di Pasquale says. "This is newly commissioned work, or newly offered work from the estates of very prominent artists, curated specifically for the fair."

Examples this year include Kalli Rolfe Contemporary's exhibition of paintings, sculptures and works on paper from the estate of airbrush master Howard Arkley, and Sutton Gallery's presentation of unseen work from the estate of politically incisive painter and draftsman Gordon Bennett.

Encouraged by what Di Pasquale calls the rebooted fair's "very strong curatorial vision", Australia's long-established commercial galleries have returned en masse in 2024.

Anna Schwartz Gallery, Roslyn Oxley9, Olsen Gallery, Niagara Galleries, William Mora Galleries and Sullivan + Strumpf are in attendance this year.

"Socially, it's a great gathering of the tribe," says exhibitor Amanda Rowell, who founded her Sydney gallery The Commercial in 2012 after a decade working for Roslyn Oxley. "Sydney Contemporary is similar, but Melbourne just has that history."

The Commercial is bending the rules slightly and showing newly commissioned work by two of its artists: established painter Diena Georgetti and emerging sculptor Augusta Vinall Richardson.

"It's about putting them into a context with each other: two Melbourne artists, 25 years apart, and both with a huge amount of momentum behind them presently," says Rowell.

Meanwhile, the Melbourne Art Foundation is spending money to bring works to the fair that might not otherwise appear.

"We have fully funded the participation of four Indigenous-owned art centres independently selected by our First Nations curatorial panel," says Di Pasquale.

That funding gives the centres – Moa Arts, Munupi Arts & Crafts, Papunya Tjupi Arts, and Wik & Kugu Arts Centre – the means to interact directly with collectors in a blue-chip environment, rather than working through big-city galleries, as is the norm.

Then there's the \$100,000 Melbourne Art Foundation 2024 Commission, awarded this year to Julie Rrap, represented by Roslyn Oxley9, for the creation of the life-size bronze sculpture *SOMOS*, or *Standing On My Own Shoulders* – literally a depiction of the artist doing just that. **L&L**



Above: Melbourne Art Foundation chief executive Maree Di Pasquale. Left: *Box Sculpture* by Augusta Vinall Richardson, represented by The Commercial. PHOTO: NICOLE REED



## Need to know

Melbourne Art Fair runs from February 22-25 at Melbourne Convention & Exhibition Centre.