

Blowing out the candles

One fifth of Australians now have a net worth of \$2.2 million each. But who is buying new art?

They arrived at night and stole everything. With no-one home at the country property, the thieves cut the padlocks, hooked up my trailer and loaded it with everything including the external hot water system and the garden hose. Inside, they took cookware, utensils, alcohol, stereo and CDs. But not a single artwork was touched, the combined value of which exceeded everything else put together. Were the looters short sighted? No doubt they took what they believed they could sell. So what has happened that art is to some, less attractive than a set of cups or a bottle of Johnny Walker?

Right now local art is flourishing in a strong economy: more galleries, more diversity, more arts professionals and more artists. Yet oddly, many artists are selling very little let alone making a modest living. Arguably, selling may not be art's main objective, but established artists need to survive and, idealism aside, they have reputations to uphold which can be linked to a consistent market. Some mid career artists have become so distressed at the lack of significant sales that they have switched galleries, yet several recent instances of this failed to change anything.

Two decades ago the Melbourne contemporary art scene was especially vibrant with many private and corporate collections on the rise. Now, in the midst of an economic boom, with Melbourne rated as the world's most liveable city and among the top twenty Global Innovation Cities, public enthusiasm for all but a few popular names seems to have significantly waned. Many private collectors appear to have lost interest (some are downsizing) and many big corporate collections (Shell, Orica, AXA, Santos, BP Australia, WMC Resources) have simply been sold off.

What's going on? One early indicator may have been the rise of postmodernism which, among other things, debunked notions of individual creativity, universal truth and meaning: the point is there is no point. Some art practice is still influenced by this sense of pointlessness; nothing is implied and clumsiness, incoherence and vacuity are still believed to have artistic currency. Anything can be art – pluralism permits it – and 'standards' are said to be little more than cultural contrivances. PM may have revolutionised the way we think but none of this supports the idea that art can be significant or meaningful.

Additionally, we now have a vast range of visual media to endlessly absorb us in quick visual grabs. Fifty years ago, Andy Warhol recognised the penetrating power of the reproduced image, yet he may not have imagined just how pervasive it would become. Where does prolonged,

contemplative experience fit in? Who has the time or the aesthetic acuity to go deeper; who wants to?

Affluence, e media and commercialisation are the opiates of our capitalist culture. An underlying sense of complacency is now clearly evident, sometimes referred to as the new conservatism or just plain 'dumbing down'. It seems we have gone all mushy inside, illustrated perhaps by our current government's recommendation that children in daycare should not blow out birthday candles because of the health risks.

Today, simulacrum, mimicry and recycling infiltrate everything we do; 'appropriation' is everywhere, not just the arts. Is it any wonder that we now have so many lookalike art styles? How can artists put a new spin on photorealism, minimalism and abstraction, concepts that were thoroughly investigated half a century ago? These movements arose subversively, as reactions to the conservatism of the post war period. Collectors with an eye recognised this genuine artistic intention. Respected collector Dr Colin Laverty who died this month was buying abstract expressionism in the 1970s. Peter Fay, featured in *The Art Collector*, says, "I think you have to be open enough to see something that causes your knees to shake... ..if you are only looking for what society deems important you're playing another game – you're playing the stock market."

Art schools have recognised the shift to consumerism. Now mostly amalgamated with universities, the emphasis is on qualification, and something as base as technical ability is not prioritised. The 'old' process of prolonged study, looking, reading, and sustained skill development are much less relevant. Teacher numbers have been downsized, students are 'clients', subjects are 'learning platforms', Arts Business Practice and 'cross-disciplinary engagements' are emphasised. This has everything to do with the industry and little to do with art.

No doubt the Gillard government's new legislation regarding Self Managed Super Funds has also discouraged the buying of art. The Government initially wanted to make art ineligible and the Lowenstein-led Save Super Art Campaign successfully put a number of important suggestions before it. A pre-election promise stated that Labor would not introduce a system that would deter collectors, yet the new legislation not only ignored this promise but made the acquisition of art by SMSFs simply not viable. It is just one more factor that keeps many artists poor in an otherwise healthy art scene – and in a country with one of the highest living standards in the world. In Australia, 67,000 *more* vehicles were purchased in 2012 than in the previous year. Australians are more than twice as wealthy as they were a decade ago with most now enjoying a higher disposable income and having more savings (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). One fifth of Australians now have a net worth of \$2.2 million each. But who is buying new art?

If complacency is not a default setting, perhaps something can be done about it. Could artists be more accountable? None of us should produce shit and pretend it's art. Just because Martin Creed can win the Turner Prize with lights going on and off in an empty room, it does not mean that everything we do is significant. (Artists should easily recognise shit – that's the responsibility of art schools.) Additionally we should not plagiarise; a reworked style from the 1960s hardly excites anyone, let alone potential buyers (assuming the artist wants to sell and not everyone does). Either way, we should try to say something personal, something that has not already been said well by others – and we should acquire some real skills with which to say it.

Next, the art-going public could reconsider its priorities. If every non-artist who attended an exhibition bought just one piece a year they would not only have something to enrich their lives but they would be contributing positively to the very people who provide them with such a lively cultural environment (in 1983 there were around sixteen galleries for contemporary art in Melbourne, now there are five times as many which present some 1500 new shows annually).

A friend told me that she was so excited to be attending my opening that she had bought a new outfit just for the occasion. Yet somehow she failed to purchase even a small unframed print which would not have cost much more. A work of art can be bought for less than the depreciation on a car as it is driven from the showroom, perhaps even less than a night at a flash restaurant and money spent on art is not lost as it eventually is with clothes, cars, and TVs.

Perhaps art *is* about investment, but not necessarily of the financial kind. Acquiring art is about investing in one's own judgement, opinion and aesthetic ideas and owning art may be a very tangible expression of the buyer's own perceptions. Art appreciation can be more than just looking.

Postscript

The irony is that the commercialisation of art (synonymous with the rise and rise of Andy Warhol – a graphic artist who recognised that the way to be successful was to give people what they want) now makes people more sceptical about buying art, except as investment.

Dan Rule says that one aspect of contemporary art is its “insistent yet ultimately futile desire for the new and singular”. It is the postmodernist sensibility that tells us it is futile – but five centuries of art innovators would have no interest in this popular notion that is promoted by non artists.

Robert Hollingworth