

Dark Heart Takes Australia's Pulse

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The opening weekend of the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art (February 28) promises to launch an exhibition that will do its own small part to capture the zeitgeist of Australian contemporary art today. By Julia Champtaloup.

It will also be “an exhibition that connects with the viewer and provides a moving experience, one that is emotional and immersive.” says Nick Mitzevich, curator of the 2014 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art and Director of the Gallery of South Australia.



eX de Medici, *The Law*, 2013, watercolour and white gouache on paper, 114.0 x 700.0 cm, © eX de Medici. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

Dark Heart is also admittedly populist; setting out to “probe the personal, the political and the psychological elements of the stories of Australian culture today.” Mitzevich says he also wants *Dark Heart* to be about storytelling and the history of those stories, sourced directly from the time and culture they have been created; now. Like *Melbourne Now*, currently at the NGV in Melbourne, which attempts to sum up the current zeitgeist of Melbourne’s contemporary art culture, The 2014 Adelaide Biennial will attempt the same, in more concise and focussed manner with just 28 artists.

In line with the biennial theme of probing and difficult conversations, Mitzevich has chosen the outspoken and often controversial academic and writer, Germaine Greer, to write the lead essay in the *Dark Heart* catalogue. “I wanted someone who is polarising, who has an opinion and something to say. We’re interested in people with big ideas – ideas that aren’t necessarily limited by convention.”



eX de Medici, The Law 2013 (detail), watercolour and white gouache on paper, 114 x 532 cm

“Contemporary art at the moment is very much about a return to the narrative, about a return to figurative art and about a return to aesthetics, that’s the point I’m making with this group of artists”, says Mitzevich. One artist’s work at this Biennial, that is both figurative and narrative but also a bit disorienting is that of **Brendan Huntley**. Huntley’s ceramic figures have personalities of their own, yet are naive and unidentifiable. The works are seemingly by a newly discovered outsider artist but Huntley has been known for his primitive and curious ceramic sculptures in the past, and recently sold many of his works to international collectors at Art Basel Hong Kong, 2013.



The installation, 108, by Sydney-based Aboriginal artist **Tony Albert** is part of the *108 Project*, an international art project where artists were invited to make 108 works of art. **Tony Albert’s** practice focusses on the contemporary legacies of colonial oppression from an Indigenous Australian perspective, and here again he has combined collected mementos, especially ‘Aboriginalia’, souvenir matchboxes and ‘Dreamtime’ picture books, with text, drawing, painting and 3-D pieces to convey his message. Albert continues to explore how Aboriginal culture has been appropriated and the legacy of racial stereotyping. Surely, this work goes to the darkened heart of Australia.

Tony Albert, 108, 2011 - 13 (detail), 99 mixed media collages and 9 houses of cards, various dimensions

The sculpture *Clouds*, by New-York-based Australian artist **Ian Burns**, comprised of aluminum ladders, fans, keyboards, televisions, umbrellas and magnifying glasses, fills an entire gallery space. All of these are recycled objects, co-opted by Burns to perform an unexpected function. Burns sculptural pieces are often complex and confusing, while at the same time employing simple mechanics that sometimes defy logic.

An installation capturing a unique, cross-cultural exchange is the result of a collaboration between the Sydney-based artist **Lynette Wallworth**, Martu artists from the Pilbara region and musician Antony from Antony and the Johnsons. Invited by artists of Martu to respond to the traditional lands, they worked along side community members to create a work that conveys an understanding of the Martu and their strong connection to their lands. The work is an immersive installation comprising sound, painting and video.

Julia deVille's Adelaide Biennial installation, *Phantasmagoria*, evokes a child's bedroom from the Victorian age, in a menagerie featuring her signature taxidermy of ethically-sourced animals, including kittens, fawns, piglets and bunnies. Ms. deVille brings an obsessive yet beautiful aesthetic to her work, influenced by the Victorian custom of adorning death. Her work is very much about mortality, creating a somber tone of self-reflection for all of us.

Alex Seton's work commissioned for the 2014 Adelaide Biennial continues the artist's fascination with marble. Seton's detailed carvings in marble typically transform the material into something of the everyday and familiar.



Alex Seton, Someone died trying to have a life like mine, 2013, Wombeyan marble, nylon webbing, dimensions variable © Alex Seton. Courtesy the artist, Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane, and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney

Someone died trying to have a life like mine, consists of 28 carved marble lifejackets, laying tossed about on the floor, as if they have just washed up from an abandon boat. In fact the work references lifejackets found washed up on Cocos Island, Western Australia in May 2013.

Seton was moved by the mystery of these life jackets that may have come from an asylum seeker boat. Now they are symbols, or perhaps, an enduring memorial for what he describes as, "simply 28 souls likely lost at sea". In light of current news events that cast a shadow over Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, this work exposes a blackened bit of Australia's moral heart.

Among the 28 exhibiting artists who will also be at Adelaide are: artist Fiona Hall, who will be presenting Australia at the 2015 Venice Biennale; Bill Henson; 2011 Archibald Prize winner Ben Quilty; film-maker and artist Warwick Thornton (*Samson and Delilah*); South Australian photographer Trent Parke; tattooist turned watercolor artist eX de Medici and Tony Garifalakis presenting a "contemplative and menacing series", looking at political leaders.