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## Blank canvas to take on established art fairs

**Dylan Rainforth  
and Gina McColl**

CALL it a case of “if you can't beat 'em join 'em”.

“When you look at all the art fairs that are emerging around the world – and particularly in the Asia-Pacific – they are dynamic, they are growing, they are competitive and, whether we like it or not, they are taking our ground,” the chairman of the Melbourne Art Foundation, Ken Fehily, says.

Enter Tim Etchells. Fehily and his board are teaming up with Etchells in a bid to give the Melbourne Art Fair, which opens in two weeks, the international profile it has struggled to achieve.

From next year, Australia will have art fairs alternating annually between Sydney and Melbourne. Etchells, the man behind the new Sydney Contemporary, will also manage and operate the Melbourne Art Fair from 2014 to 2032.

Etchells has serious international reach: his British company Single Market Events is the founder of the Hong Kong International Art Fair (ART HK). Etchells recently sold the majority stake of ART HK to Art Basel, the world's most prestigious fair; it now forms a global brand comprising its Switzerland, Hong Kong and Miami Beach events.

In February, Etchells and ART HK's co-founder, Sandy Angus, will launch Art13 London, a direct competitor to the Frieze Art Fair.

But not everything Etchells touches has turned to gold: Single Market Events also owns Art Melbourne (the Affordable Art Fair), a

bazaar struggling to find the right mix between credibility and marketability; its Sydney equivalent, Art Sydney, was nixed this year.

But the key players hope the Sydney-Melbourne relationship will pay dividends. “It gives it a more cohesive strategy for the high-end art fairs in Australia, with Sydney and Melbourne alternating,” Etchells says. “We envisage both being slightly different as Melbourne has 26 years of tradition and heritage – and we'd like to make sure that's maintained and help build that – and Sydney is a brand new fair.”

At a business level, they believe there are efficiencies and opportunities to be exploited. “We can utilise the overheads in the year the team aren't running the Melbourne fair [to] run the Sydney fair,” Etchells says. “We can also offer the opportunity to sponsor both fairs and get Melbourne and Sydney exposure. And [there are] synergies with ART HK: we've got global VIP databases and Asian collector databases we can promote to come down to Australia.”

Globally, art fairs have become a significant part of the business of selling art. But they do not come cheaply. Stands at the Melbourne Art Fair range from \$16,000 to \$22,000, Fehily says. The prices match those of their international counterparts. In March, the international art news website Artinfo spoke to a small, anonymous sample of galleries attending fairs during Armory Week in New York: stand prices ranged from \$14,000 to \$30,000. Factor in production costs (there

is an expectation for new work by a star artist from each gallery), travel, freight and staffing and total costs can top \$50,000. International galleries are at multiple fairs each year.

Of course, as Etchells points out, “some of those prices are relative to the prices for art – the prices achieved can be higher at some fairs”. The most recent 2010 Melbourne Art Fair achieved sales of \$11 million. According to Etchells, ART HK was “in the region of \$100 million to \$200 million”.

Australian galleries selling the work of living artists are unlikely to be selling works with the astronomical prices of the international fairs. While the top echelon of the international art market has been seemingly impervious to the global financial crisis, this is not true of the middle tier that characterises the bulk of contemporary Australian work. At the 2010 Melbourne fair, most works sold were in the sub-\$10,000 category.

“What we found was that there were more transactions for the same turnover,” Fehily says.

With overheads – but not potential returns – approaching their overseas equivalents, can Australian galleries afford an annual fair alternating between Sydney and Melbourne?

“Are art fairs expensive? Absolutely, it does cost a lot of money, however so does running a gallery,” Fehily says. “And to be quite honest I think it's part of the obligation ... you've got to find ways to establish public presence, to establish gravitas.”

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Global reach ... Tim Etchells at ART HK this year.