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Sydney art fair stuffed with surprises

Monica Crouch

The inaugural Sydney Contemporary art fair was a traffic stopper. As the art world converged on Carriageworks in Eveleigh for last Thursday's opening night, traffic was at a standstill two suburbs away in Pyrmont, and there were reports of guests paying more than \$100 for a taxi from as nearby as Paddington.

Then there was the near-gridlock inside as more than 10,000 people took in the 83 local and international galleries presenting the work of more than 300 artists, including international names such as **Damien Hirst**, **Anish Kapoor**, Gilbert and George and **Annie Leibovitz**, as well as local favourites **Fred Williams**, **John Olsen**, **Cressida Campbell** and **Rosemary Laing** – and everyone in between.

About 28,000 people filed through the vast converted railway workshops for the fair, held from Thursday night through to Sunday, far exceeding expectations. "It was an astonishing success," said a pleasantly surprised **Tim Etchells**, founder of Art Fairs Australia, which owns the fair.

Some gallery owners felt the high number of complimentary tickets handed out for opening night created a party atmosphere that was not conducive to business, one remarking that "it was a victim of its own success". Etchells agreed that a "relaxed attitude" was taken to ticketing in the fair's first year; only 5000 to 6000 visitors paid the \$25 entrance fee.

Firm sales figures are never available for art fairs but Etchells estimated the fair generated about \$10 million in sales, indicating that there is "a substantial market of occasional art buyers in Australia".

The fair made an overall loss of about \$500,000, he said, in line with expectations that it and the Melbourne Art Fair,

which he also manages, will turn a profit within three to four years.

Most gallery owners were happy. Beverly Knight of Melbourne's Alcaston Gallery showed works by indigenous artist **Sally Gabori** and newcomer **Greg Semu**. Knight said she sold enough work on opening night to cover costs and was happy to see a new kind of buyer – "40-somethings with kids in school".

Despite the upbeat mood, there were criticisms, ranging from too few parking spots and taxis to not enough food or coffee, long bar queues and a lack of attention paid to VIP collectors in favour of a mass audience. One overseas gallery owner said the talks program was too "Australia-centric". Etchells said he would work to iron out these issues for the 2015 edition.

Anna Schwartz, of Anna Schwartz Gallery, who presented *Working Class Hero* (a portrait of John Lennon), a striking 25-channel video installation by **Candice Breitz**, described opening night as overwhelming. "I'm impressed with the organisation, the huge number of people, and the diversity in terms of where they're from." Anything she didn't like? "These shoes!" she declared, pointing to the sleek black heels she had stood in all evening.

Melbourne's Tolarno Galleries unveiled *The Paper*, a new series by photo-based artist **Rosemary Laing**, all of which sold, the larger works for \$22,500. This result delighted the artist, who said it freed her to go on a "great recce" for her next project. Painter **Jasper Knight**, with Australian Galleries, was not so strong on sales but said he was thrilled by the "incredible exposure".

Melbourne gallerist **Sophie Gannon**, who teamed up with Brisbane's **Jan Murphy**, reported sales of \$250,000, with indigenous artist **Danie Mellor** selling out

on first night, one for \$44,000; another by **Michael Zavros** made \$55,000. Tim Olsen, of Sydney's Olsen Irwin Gallery, was also happy, reporting sales of close to \$250,000. A work by **Andrew Taylor**, husband of actor Rachel Griffiths, sold for \$16,000, and a painting of submerged swimmers by **Martine Emdur** was acquired by a new collector for \$55,000 – to hang in their pool room. There was also interest in **Fred Williams's** *Upwey Landscape*, 1965, on the market for the first time with a price tag of \$375,000.

Overseas galleries were also happy. Sundaram Tagore of Tagore Galleries from Hong Kong, Singapore and New York said sales were brisk. "We sold works by Sohan Qadri, running at \$71,000, several by Kim Joon at \$17,000 to \$37,000. We are finalising details on works by Lee Waisler and Hiroshi Senju." Lydia Grossmann of Hong Kong's de Sarthe Gallery said Zhou Wendou's popular neon *Basketball Hoops* sold for \$20,000.

Cohju Contemporary Art of Japan, and Cesar Villalon of Manila's The Drawing Room felt the fair was worthwhile in terms of exploring a new market and establishing a local presence. Both said they would return in 2015.

Australia's institutions were well represented, with sightings of curator **Deborah Hart** from the National Gallery of Australia, **Michael Brand** and **Wayne Tunnicliffe** from the Art Gallery of NSW, Art Gallery of South Australia director **Nick Mitzevich** and Biennale of Sydney artistic director **Juliana Engberg**.

Artbank acquired work by artists including Greg Semu, Caleb Shea and Kate Mitchell, and two pieces by Paul Yore. Director Tony Stephens said the fair presented "a good balance of commercial and curatorial concerns".



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Key points

About 28,000 people visited Sydney Contemporary – above expectations.

An estimated \$10 million worth of art was sold at the fair, which made a loss of about \$500,000 in this, its first year of operation.

The fair presented a good balance of commercial and curatorial concerns

Tony Stephens, Artbank director



Julia deVille's taxidermy calf, *It's a Wonderful Life*, intrigues visitors at Sydney Contemporary's opening night. PHOTO: SASHA WOOLLEY