



Private passions become public

IN A SMALL BUT GROWING TREND, PASSIONATE ART COLLECTORS WITH CONSIDERABLE GENEROSITY – AND OFTEN VERY DEEP POCKETS – ARE SHARING THEIR ART WITH THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC.

BY MARGARET BARCA

EUROPEANS AND AMERICANS have a long tradition of cultural philanthropy, with dedicated collectors making their art accessible to the public since at least the Medici family during the Renaissance. In London, Sir John Soane first opened his house with its casts and models to the public in the early 1800s. More recently, Charles Saatchi's spectacular eponymous gallery of modern art in Chelsea opened in palatial new premises in 2008 (with 600,000 visitors a year, his previous private gallery had outgrown its space). For three decades from 1951, Peggy Guggenheim opened her palazzo on Venice's Grand Canal every summer to share her breathtaking collection of modern art and J. Paul Getty opened his museum in a villa in Los Angeles in the 1970s. Rather than donate or bequeath works to major institutions, such collectors share their personal and sometimes idiosyncratic tastes in venues of their own choosing.

In Australia, a handful of art connoisseurs have shown considerable altruism and dedication to establish purpose-built museums or open their own houses and invite the public to view their collections.

One of the first to open its doors, thanks in part to the Federal Government's initiative in 1999 to encourage arts philanthropy, is the now publicly owned but privately funded TarraWarra Museum of Art. Surrounded by sweeping hills, swathes of lush grass and flourishing vineyards in Victoria's idyllic Yarra Valley, the museum is testimony to Marc and Eva Besen's commitment to Australian art and their willingness to share it – they have gifted the collection to the nation. After 50 years of collecting, focusing on Australian art from the 1950s to today, the couple commissioned architect Allan Powell to

design a gallery for their collection of John Brack, Jeffrey Smart, John Olsen and other iconic artists, and opened the gallery in 2003. Powell's award-winning building is the perfect foil for the work – restrained, even stark, it offers a fine venue for contemplative viewing of some outstanding works. Under the first Director, Maudie Palmer, the gallery established its curatorial credentials, with permanent and temporary exhibitions, and this continues under the current director, Jane Scott. The not-for-profit museum charges an entry fee, though some exhibitions and events are free.

A more recent addition to the private museum scene is White Rabbit in Sydney's up-and-coming, inner-city suburb of Chippendale. Though the quirky name may sound lightweight, the gallery is anything but. Funding is via the \$30 million foundation established by billionaire couple, financier Kerr Neilson and wife Judith. Judith is the founder and inspiration behind this four-storey former knitting warehouse, with 2000 square metres of floor space and access to at least part of what is said to be one of the world's largest and most significant collections of contemporary Chinese art. In just 10 years, Judith and daughter Paris, the collection manager, have acquired over 450 works by more than 135 artists that capture the explosion of creativity that has driven Chinese art in the past decade or so. Virtually all works have been produced since 2000. Inspired by Beijing-based Chinese artist Wang Zhiyuan, who continues to be involved, Judith began the collection and travels regularly to Beijing and Shanghai to add to it.

Admission is free and, like a major public gallery, White Rabbit offers the full gamut of art-related activities – an

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Above Top:
Dr Gene Sherman, 2005
photograph by Mark Morffew
(wearing Carlier Makigawa bracelet and ring by Larsen & Lewers)

Above:
David Walsh MONA

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Private museums and galleries can provide an insight into private aesthetics.

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education program, library, lectures, films. It's philanthropy on a grand and generous scale. It's also a salutary reminder of what an important contribution the well-to-do can make to cultural life. No other venue in this country, public or private, offers such an insight into the extraordinary powerhouse that is contemporary Asian art.

As well as showcasing private collections, some art aficionados also look to extend the range of opportunities for people to engage in discussions about contemporary art or to curate exhibitions by artists who might not otherwise be shown.

After years in the commercial gallery business, respected Sydney gallerist Dr

Gene Sherman established the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF) in 2008. The privately funded, not-for-profit organisation aims to 'champion research, education and exhibitions of significant and innovative contemporary art' from Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and Middle East. The foundation commissions artists and also curates regular exhibitions, which are shown in a special exhibition annex at Sherman Gallery in Paddington. An artist-in-residence program, public seminars, publications and collaboration with major museums and galleries are further activities. The privately supported exhibitions present a personal vision, extending the range of innovative – and not necessarily commercially viable – art available to the public otherwise. Exhibitions and programs are free of charge.

One of Australia's most high-profile, perhaps notorious, private collectors, David Walsh, has a grand vision for his \$75 million Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), scheduled to open in Hobart in January 2011. The purpose-built, three-level museum, designed by stellar architectural firm Fender Katsilidis, will be the largest private art museum in Australia. The not-for-profit museum will showcase Walsh's idiosyncratic vision and radical collection – reputedly worth \$100 million – with its themes of sex and death, covering everything from antiquities to work by controversial British artist Damien Hirst. While it is a personal selection, it promises diversity – a full floor devoted to a 47-metre long Sidney Nolan work, paintings by Russell Drysdale, Brett Whitely and Howard Arkley, a rollcall of international names including Kandinsky and Egon Schiele, works from Mesopotamia, Egypt and more. Walsh made his millions by applying his mathematical skills to a successful gambling system and now owns Moorilla Winery, a smart restaurant and high-end properties. But he has also invested seriously in art, apparently relishing the chance to challenge the public in his new museum, engage the spectator in part 'through shock and sublimity'. MONA looks set to be a major drawcard for art lovers in Tasmania, in fact for all Australians.

Continuing a tradition of private settings being opened to the public to display personal collections, as well as the matching of distinctive architecture





Left:
Ai WEI WEI,
Through, 2009
 Commissioned by Sherman
 Contemporary Art Foundation for
 the exhibition "Ai Wei Wei: Under
 Construction"
 Image: Paul Green

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and art collections, is the Lyon House museum in Melbourne's Kew. Architect Corbett Lyon and Yueji Lyon's specifically designed gallery-like house mixes residential and museum spaces. A coherent contemporary collection of paintings, sculpture, video work and large-scale installations is juxtaposed with family living spaces, creating a unique environment for viewing the work. The Lyon Collection, established in 1990, encompasses pieces by high-profile names such as Tim Maguire, Callum Morton, Anne Zahalka and Patricia Piccinini as well as that of lesser-known artists. It will be interesting to see in future how prescient the Lyons and their adviser George Mora have been in their selection of emerging artists. There is a regular program of open days (bookings

are essential), as well as music and other events. A fee is charged for entry and a guided tour.

Without the restrictions of government boards and public accountability, or the pressing need to make a profit, private museums and galleries can provide an insight into private aesthetics, additional outlets for artists and an extra dimension for the art-going public.

Margaret Barca

A freelance writer and editor. She is the editor of the National Gallery of Victoria magazine, *Gallery*, and author of a number of books, including *Explore Historic Australia* (Penguin Books Australia) and *Advice to a Young Lady in the Colonies* (Greenhouse Publications).

CONTACTS: **Private Galleries**

Lyon Housemuseum

219 Cotham Road
 Kew Vic 3101
 03 9817 2300
www.housemuseum.com.au

MONA (Museum of Old and New Art)

PO Box 5
 Moonah Tas 7009
 03 6277 9999
www.mona.net.au
 (Scheduled to open Jan 2011)

Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF)

6–20 Goodhope Street
 Paddington NSW 2021
 02 9331 1112
www.sherman-scaf.org.au

TarraWarra Museum of Art

311 Healesville-Yarra Glen Road
 Healesville Vic 3777
 03 5957 3100
www.twms.com.au

White Rabbit

30 Balfour Street
 Chippendale NSW 2008
 02 8399 2867
www.whiterabbitcollection.org