

# ART ON THE ROCKS

## Museum of Contemporary Art

Some people have decided to abbreviate the **Museum of Contemporary Art** to MOCA instead of MCA, which seems to suggest that while it may not be everyone's cup of tea, it has been adopted by café society.

Argument over the Museum's name is just the tip of the iceberg: even before it opened its doors, the Museum of Contemporary Art was caught up in controversy. It is not the works of art in its collection which have caused the debate, but the acrimonious split between the Museum and its parent body, the Power Institute of Fine Arts.

When he died in 1948, John Power bequeathed \$3.5 million for teaching, collecting and exhibiting art. For many years, the Power gallery and its collection (which languished in storage for more than 20 years) were intimately connected with the Power Department of Fine Arts at Sydney University. Senior academics have strongly opposed the collection's relocation to the Maritime Services Board building in its spectacular location at Circular Quay. They fear that the move will minimise

academic input into the collection and turn the gallery into a tourist trap.

Frankly, that is the least of the Museum's worries. The more tourists they attract the better, particularly given that the Museum is intended to become self-supporting and receives only state government funding of \$50,000 for its first three years. In the past few months its Director Leon Paroissien and its Chairman, Geoffrey Cousins have been selling the Museum to the corporate sector in order to avoid, as one commentator put it, 'being stuck between the Rocks and a hard financial place'.

So far, despite the recession, the response has been enthusiastic, with potential sponsors and patrons attracted by the unique quality of the venture. The MCA is promoting the world class quality of its international collection and a dynamic approach to culture. Its mission statement says that its intention is 'to create with energy and innovative thinking a visual arts hot-spot in synergy with its surrounds... to make available to the people of New South Wales, Australia and the world the latest ideas

and theories in visual culture, and in so doing declare that this society is vital, courageous and celebratory of the human adventure'.

Passionate sentiments, expressed perhaps a little more wearily by Paroissien in his stark white office next door to the MCA, still being refurbished by Andrew Andersons.

An almost gaunt, reedy man, Paroissien has been a curator of the Power collection since 1984, together with Bernice Murphy, now senior curator of the MCA. His expertise in the art world extends well beyond the borders of Australia and he is already developing a global network of curators, from Santiago to Berlin, to work with the MCA on future programs.

Paroissien (the name is French and means *parishioner*) is not afraid of controversy, although he would rather it focused on art than on politics. So that when asked which are the icons of the Power collection which will draw the tourists into the MCA, he repites provocatively: 'There are no icons in twentieth century art. Even when it

George Street facade. (Puddle  
Thorp Architects)



comes to Picasso, I would defy anyone to name the greatest of his works. The same is true of Warhol and Pollock:

**Blue Poles** may be considered an icon here, but that is only for peripheral reasons. An expert would not hold it up as the artist's masterpiece. The twentieth century is not like the Renaissance, it's not about the creation of a single work, it's about plurality.'

His personal favourites in the collection are Georg Baselitz's **Der Dichter** (*The Poet*) and Juan Davila's **Fable of Australian Art**.

As for attracting tourists, that is not a priority that Paroissien places any higher than attracting the locals. 'It is now a well recognised fact that the best tourist sites in the world are places that do not attract only tourists. We want residents of Sydney and all Australians to visit the MCA.' Paroissien refuses to disclose how he plans to make its somewhat austere exterior welcoming, but says: 'We will be staging events around and over the building to suggest that we are an integral part of contemporary culture and that the MCA is part of the city.'

Certainly, once inside, the visitor will be impressed by the scale and stature of the art deco building's space: the major gallery areas are huge barrel vaulted areas, separated by fixed walls rather than temporary partitions. 'Palace architecture is highly suited to contemporary art', explains Paroissien, poring over the plans. 'Think of how wonderful works look in the Louvre and the Hermitage. Andrew Andersons has not changed the fabric of the building, but has added wonderful touches like perforating the inner building at corners and other strategic places so that you can look out across the water but not be distracted by the view.'

When it opens, the MCA will display most of the 4,000 works in its collection, including works by Beuys, Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg, Paladino, Vasarely and Tinguely. Thereafter, the public will see only a portion of the collection, supplemented by an ambitious program of up to 20 special exhibitions a year. 'We plan to operate

along the lines of a European 'kunsthalle', so we will be very much project-based', says Paroissien.

One of the earliest exhibitions will be devoted to that great Aussie phenomenon, the caravan. The MCA has commissioned Australian and foreign designers to redesign the Australian caravan and has persuaded manufacturers to make up prototypes which will be displayed on the Circular Quay forecourt. A drawcard, but one that perhaps suggests the Powerhouse more than the Power collection.

Other plans for the first year of exhibitions include **TV Times**, a show examining 35 years of television in Australia; **Challenge to Colonialism**, an exhibition of work by five contemporary Aboriginal artists, and a show of work by Lyndal Jones, the first in a continuing series to be mounted from the Contemporary Art Archive. Conceived in close collaboration with Jones as an 'archival' presentation of her ten-year project of performance and installation works, **The Prediction Pieces** feature ten pieces each represented in the exhibition by two large archival boxes; one contains original materials (writings, costumes, transparencies, props etc.) while the other contains reproducible items for hand-on research by visitors to the exhibition.

What the exhibitions calendar does not feature are the kind of epic shows seen at institutions like MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) in New York and throughout Europe. Paroissien cites two reasons for this: 'The era of the blockbuster is over, world-wide, and contemporary art is not the subject of blockbusters. We are not aiming at queues out the door', says Paroissien, who is in fact aiming for 400,000 visitors a year - about the same number as visit the Australian National Gallery in Canberra.

'Research has shown that the public increasingly prefers shows which have some kind of solid research and serious concepts and ideas behind them. Blockbusters have declined because the public has become increasingly



discriminating and wants an educational experience. Because the MCA has been created out of a university-based bequest, we are ideally placed to provide that.'

Paroissien's definitions of 'art' and 'contemporary' give him plenty of flexibility. As well as the traditional art forms, the MCA will embrace video, TV, performance, acoustic art and design, 'but with an emphasis on the processes of design rather than on showing paradigm objects - that is the role of the Powerhouse - we are more interested in the ideas behind the object'.

His definition of 'contemporary' is elastic, stretching from 20 years down to five, 'but our name deliberately juxtaposes 'museum', which suggests the past, with 'contemporary', which states the present, so that we can have our cake and eat it. I would have no

**Opposite page: Vivienne Shark Lewitt**

*Shall I bark for you master? Or shall I bite? ha, ha, ha, ha.*  
1987 oil on linen canvas

**Above: John Power**

*(Self portrait) circa 1920s - 1930s oil on canvas*



**Keith Haring** *Untitled*. 1982  
synthetic polymer paint on vinyl  
tarpaulin with aluminium eyelets

objection to including Goya in a show if his work were currently relevant or if there was a new interpretation of his contribution. The contemporary aspect of the MCA will always be shifting, but with the permanent collection as a background'.

But even the permanent collection will change. For the moment, it is heavily orientated towards European and American art, but Paroissien intends to focus increasingly on this side of the world through the MCA's acquisitions.

'We will be stating our position on the doorstep of Asia', he affirms, adding that he has a particular interest in making connections with that other colonial culture of our faraway neighbours in Latin America - hence the dialogue with curators in Santiago. We can, says Paroissien, expect shows devoted to aspects of contemporary Chinese art, and art from New Zealand, including Maori works. Meanwhile the collection has been gradually reorientating itself towards its own culture, with a strengthening of

Aboriginal art, particularly with works from Arnhemland.

This year the MCA will not be purchasing, but Paroissien hopes within three years to have achieved his target of \$5 million as annual spending money. This compares with the Australian National Gallery's acquisitions budget of approximately \$3.6 million, but as Paroissien points out, the philosophy is different. 'For example, in collecting Australian art, we are looking to place Australian artists alongside their foreign counterparts, but we are not trying to be encyclopaedic - that is the role of the state galleries. Nor do we intend to compete with them - that's not our role. There should be room for everyone: in New York, the Metropolitan collects contemporary art but no-one suggests that it is competing with MOMA, the Guggenheim or the Whitney', says Paroissien, diplomatically dismissing the rumours of a frosty relationship with Edmund Capon, the high-profile director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, with a vague assurance that their two institutions may in fact collaborate on some projects.

One particularly distinctive aspect of Paroissien's approach is his desire to actively involve artists in the life of the MCA, in a way that few, if any, other galleries in Australia are equipped to do. 'It will be a common occurrence for artists to work here, in residencies. Eventually, I would like us to have a studio space available, but in the meantime, we will employ artists to register the collection, to work on installations, even as attendants, if they want to', says Paroissien with an elusive, thin smile.

Outside his office, a board counts down the number of weeks till the opening, but Paroissien appears calm, if exhausted. After years of planning, he will soon be able to share his vision with the public. Meanwhile, the opening night bash remains as under wraps as a work by Christo. They probably won't be serving coffee, but whatever cocktail is concocted for the occasion, you can be sure it will be served 'on the rocks'.

**Caroline Baum**