

FEATURING WORKS FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF

Hany Armanious
Liv Barrett
Polly Borland
Steve Carr
Lane Cormick
Chantal Faust
Marco Fusinato
Tony Garifalakis
Matthew Griffin
Irene Hanenbergh
Christopher Hanrahan
Hotham Street Ladies
The Kingpins
Paul Knight
Andrew Liversidge
Rob McLeish
Callum Morton
Nat & Ali
Geoff Newton
Martin Parr
Stuart Ringholt
David Rosetzky
Darren Sylvester
Christian Thompson
Lyndal Walker
Caroline Williams

AS WELL AS
Andrea Fraser

CURATED BY
Mark Feary

PROVIDENCE AND THE MARCH OF VISUALITY

As daily action grasping the real is both confronting and confirming for the functional twenty-first century Australian.

Today's relentless trafficking of ethereal ectopia streaming into our permanently aroused visual sensory receptors creates an excess of tantalising ecstatic responses together with a simultaneous visceral filtering mechanism that blocks and fraggles the abundant realising imagery.

Leaving aside recent intimate paparazzi shots of the Ectoproctous IV reality TV project (particularly the surprisingly brutal stills frozen from the moving image), in *Čačak*, Serbia, we can now look to the photograph as the current Top O' The Hill snack stop of heritage technomammery.

While we slide from the Breast to the bipedal so too we lean to photography.

Our domestic images often act as the spatial/referral adornment of the liminal areas between *Somolence* and the non-fulfilment of the exceptionality clause of endeavour when our secret core of spirituality is at work.

At times, when placed at the junction of two internal walls and even when the imagery is construed as playful, the photograph may be viewed as increasingly empowered to the extent that it may seem to emit barely discernable and deceptive subliminal henid waves that while affecting those in the room, may also be classed as transubstantiating the fluxure of our future interpretations.

With these factors in mind the range of images used in these photographs can be impressive in its scale and variety.

—CAROLINE WILLIAMS

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CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY
404 George Street, Fitzroy VIC 3065
P +613 9417 1549 W www.ccp.org.au

Autumn Masterpieces

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

19 MARCH to 16 MAY 2010

...a triumph of both curatorial and marketing skills...

—JAMES ROSENFELD¹

CERTAIN CRITICISMS HAVE BEEN LEVELLED at the proliferation of blockbuster exhibitions, the cultural phoenix that emerged out of the fire of the 1980s. Certainly there are some distinct similarities that *Autumn Masterpieces: Highlights from the Permanent Collection* shares with other blockbusters—the prevalence of gold, the moody lighting, the elegant classical music gently drifting throughout the gallery, even the indispensability of italicised fonts, all of which are totally tasteful common concerns. But in other ways, *Autumn Masterpieces: Highlights from the Permanent Collection* is something quite apart, fundamentally for the reason of having nothing to do with institutional accumulation, and all of the errors and omissions that can entail—the missed opportunities, the flawed decisions, the contractually binding bequests and the institutional envy, oh the envy.

The rhetoric surrounding a blockbuster exhibition inevitably begins with what is proclaimed as a cultural and political coup, with a certain conquest transpiring well before the exhibition has its first ticketed admission. Indeed, this is the very time that the institution begins a long and sustained media and marketing crusade. It is a relentless operation that leaves few media and tourism channels unaware as the charge nears. The resultant exhibition like all those that have gone before it is measured empirically, with record breaking as an overwhelming objective so as to cover the almost unfathomable franchising and marketing costs. It is through this process that the brand of the museum is strengthened, ensuring future endeavours that are even more audacious in scale and expense. Voilà, democratising the arts. To this end *Art Deco 1910–1939* is like *Lord of the Rings*, but not as big as *The Impressionists: Masterpieces from the Musée d'Orsay* which is more like *Avatar*. This kind of success is quantifiable and irrefutable. By this criterion, numbers don't lie, so smaller numbers obviously indicate less successful exhibitions. To court such enormously expansive audiences, it is not necessary for something to be particularly innovative or intelligent, but just to be 'unmissable'—an event to capture the current zeitgeist as if one were still living within an all together different historical zeitgeist, say within the Renaissance for instance.

¹ Rosenfeld, J.R., 'In the Mail: Museum Catalogues', *Direct Marketing*, November 1993, pp. 39–40. It is worth visiting www.jrosenfeld.com if only for Mr Rosenfeld's sleazy photographic portrait.

What is important is to lure in a public with the bait of something they already recognise. So say, as an example, the marketing department of an aspirational art institution, perhaps with the assistance of the curatorial department, wanted to mount an exhibition on Manet, but thought that it lacked sufficient clout, they could broaden its appeal by expanding the opportunity to include Monet. Give it a catchy title like *Manet to Monet*, and boom, we have something dynamic—a must see cultural experience. Market research might indicate that a lot of people may already be aware that one or other of these artists painted ponds of waterlilies, so through this they can be assured that this is what they can expect, which they have possibly already seen, albeit in poster form. It is about converting 50/50 into 100%.

When titling a blockbuster exhibition certain words are more financially successful and even evoking certain seasons can offer traction. Winter used to be so gloomy, but now thanks to the *Winter Masterpieces Series* we have a new event to 'fill a gap in Victoria's cultural calendar and attract national and international visitors to Victoria during what was traditionally the quieter tourism period'. Since the *Winter Masterpieces Series* exploded on the cultural scene Winter is no longer drab but provocatively melancholic, à la Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, which was blockbusted in Melbourne only a couple of years ago. The term masterpiece is also highly advantageous, it sounds so definitive, so proven, like something that has been bestowed rather than merely named. Through the use of such a term people know they are getting the very best, or at least the best available.

Contemporary artists are for the most part too peculiar to be dependable blockbuster material, so they might be best positioned in a different manner, like with an association to an institution that is really famous, like the Guggenheim for example. With such an association, in the event that a visitor might encounter a masterpiece possibly less instantaneously tangible, then it is sufficient to reinforce the Guggenheim angle, and suddenly the visitors are lured back from the precipice and are thinking of iconic modernist architecture again. Almost challenged but nevertheless unscathed. Generally however, dead artists are easier to work with in terms of a blockbuster, fewer surprises and more control. Biennales could be considered as a blockbuster framework for living artists. They are a bit more trendy with the younger generations and have become

² Anon, *Melbourne Winter Masterpieces Series*, www.arts.vic.gov.au, 2010

a reasonable, if not well trodden, civic initiative to encourage the gentrification of underperforming metropolitan centres.

If one were to refer to contemporary artists as cultural producers, which seems reasonable, all the better in the case of the visual arts if what they produce has some sort of tangible form, then what of the fate of the product? In this golden epoch of late capitalism these products are generally filtered through the commercial gallery sector and fiscally exchanged with institutions and wealthy collectors. This may prompt a natural line of enquiry—that if artists invest the most significant part of their lives in the production of things they don't keep, then what is it that they retain?

Nobody likes giving away the things that are most important to them. Artists are by no means different. Through this reading then, what artists present in galleries and museums is the stuff they no longer want. Sure there are some other factors, like reputation, money, intellectual affirmation, blah, blah, blah. But let's put all those other imperatives aside for a moment. Is it possible that our galleries and museums are full of the discarded products of artists? While not necessarily rubbish, it is clearly stuff they no longer want around the house or cluttering up their studios. *Autumn Masterpieces: Highlights from the Permanent Collection* proposes something altogether different in that it focuses on the things, the images and the photos that artists retain, the priceless things that are not up for grabs.

While the masterpieces within this exhibition are notably sourced from the collections of contemporary artists, this endeavour most determinedly errs on the side of a more traditional blockbuster type exhibition. It is art for all, regardless of interest or intellect. *Autumn Masterpieces: Highlights from the Permanent Collection* does not have the imperative of building a broad and only mildly engaged audience or the financial pressures of needing to recoup extraordinary exhibition loan and marketing expenses. *Autumn Masterpieces: Highlights from the Permanent Collection*, within financial terms at least, exists somewhere well below the lo-fi threshold of most blockbusters. And like anything that trumpets 'must see' sloganeering, this exhibition is actually totally missable for so many reasons. But for those fortunate to experience such a significant and deeply thought provoking array of masterworks, *Autumn Masterpieces: Highlights from the Permanent Collection* will be an eternal source of intellectual and creative cultivation. You really are quite special.