

Judith Neilson and Penny Clive

Two private art foundations are poised to open in Australia; their collections and ambitions reflect the two very different women who direct them. By Michael Young



Private art foundations are flourishing in Australia at the very moment that the audience for contemporary art is surging. Attendance at the 2008 Biennale of Sydney—435,000 visitors in 12 weeks—was 37 percent higher than in 2006. As contemporary art becomes a significant cultural attraction, privately funded museums are playing an increasingly important role in the public perception of contemporary art.

The proliferation of private museums in Australia—a country with generous government support for the arts—followed a national philanthropic initiative in 1999, which allowed collectors and companies to earn tax breaks if they exhibited their collections to the public. The first to take advantage of these new laws were retail billionaires Marc and Eva Besen, who in 2003 opened the TarraWarra Museum of Art in Victoria to showcase their collection of late 20th-century Australian art. Last year, Gene Sherman, doyenne of the Sydney contemporary art scene, closed the commercial Sherman Galleries and turned her attention to the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF) (SEE ALMANAC 3), a privately funded exhibition space devoted to curated shows.

In the next year, SCAF will be joined by two more privately funded, not-for-profit art spaces. White Rabbit, owned and run by Judith Neilson in Sydney, will exclusively show her own collection of contemporary Chinese art; Detached, Penny Clive's exhibition space in Tasmania's capital, Hobart, will host curated exhibitions drawing on her own collection.

Judith Neilson, wife of billionaire fund manager Kerr Neilson, has never run an art gallery or museum. Her love of Chinese contemporary art began when she bought a sculpture by Wang Zhiyuan, a Chinese artist based in Sydney known for his large, fiberglass sculptures of women's underwear. Neilson clearly sensed then that something unique was

happening with Chinese art. Though she only began the collection in 2001, it now has over 200 pieces by 75 artists, most postdating 2000.

Housed in an imposing three-story warehouse renovated at a cost thought to exceed USD 30 million, White Rabbit will be an eye-popping affair with over 1000 square meters of exhibition space. Set on the corner of a block among run-down inner-city houses and other rezoned industrial buildings in the gentrifying Chippendale neighborhood, the foundation's headquarters were designed by Smart Design Studio, winners of the 2006 Royal Australian Institute of Architects Award for Architecture Conservation and Adaptive Re-use.

White Rabbit—a popular Chinese candy—will become the venue Judith will use to proselytize what is, by some accounts, an eclectic mix of artistic mediums and styles including installations, paintings, photographs and video works. The collection's initial curator came and went. "She was a disaster," Judith lets slip with acid indiscretion. Now she relies upon her ultra-chic daughter Paris and Wang Zhiyuan, who serves as an advisor to the foundation.

This September, Judith and Paris traveled to the ShContemporary Art Fair in Shanghai, and then to Beijing. Judith buys directly from artists and art fairs rather than at auctions. The roll call of artists in the collection is prodigious but it is not a litany of auction superstars. Among her favorites are sculptor Chen Wenling, performance artist Cang Xin and painter Gao Feng. She owns one piece by Ai Weiwei, his *Oil Spills* (2006), black porcelain puddles. Judith buys what she likes, commenting: "I could never sell a piece of art or own something that I didn't share. If I love something, everybody has to see it, whether they want to or not."

The collection as a whole, so far, has been kept under wraps in the



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months leading up to the opening. No consensus has formed about the quality of the collection. As one Sydney gallerist with an interest in Asian art told *AAP*, "We are all waiting to see the art and the depth of the collection before passing judgement." Audiences will get their chance next May when the collection opens to the public.

Several hundred miles south of Sydney in Tasmania's capital, Hobart, another privately funded foundation is about to launch. Penny Clive's foundation *Detached*, in contrast to *White Rabbit*, is a more modest affair with 465 square meters of exhibition space and quieter in concept. None of the white-hot frenzy of Chinese contemporary art drives this development, though Clive's husband Bruce Neill is also a successful fund manager whose net worth is an estimated USD 210 million.

Penny Clive's cool personal aesthetic dictates that art needs to be seen and understood by a broad community rather than exclusive enclaves. The former antiques trader eschews publicity. "The Foundation is not about me," she says, "but about the art." Nor is it about her own personal collection, which Clive has been quietly assembling in the past several years. Her focus, along with a few international pieces including by Chinese performance artist and sculptor Zhang Huan, is contemporary Australian art. Among the 100-odd works are pieces by performance artist Mike Parr, video artist Shaun Gladwell, Australia's representative at the 2009 Venice Biennale (along with four emerging artists) and Australia's 2003 Venice representative, sculptor Patricia Piccinini.

Housed in a heritage-listed church close to Hobart's waterfront, *Detached* opens to the public on November 21 in time to engage the first crop of Hobart's summer tourists. The opening show, "The Tilted Stage," stars Mike Parr, who will show selected sculptural, print and

moving-image works from the last 37 years and is a collaboration with the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and organized by Anthony Bond, senior curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Clive holds some lofty and conceptual aims for *Detached*, including support for artists, curators, critics and scholars, in addition to educational publications and programs. *Detached* also aims to engage the local community in a long-term dialogue about art. "Our aim," Clive explains, "is to foster, facilitate and encourage independent, energetic and creative thinking in the community, particularly the young."

Despite the very different personalities of Neilson and Clive, both *White Rabbit* and *Detached* plan to offer educational components. Both women want to offer the public more opportunity to see contemporary art and to be enriched in the process. "Foundations are like any service organization aiming to deliver positive community outcomes," says Clive. "They can facilitate and encourage a particular outcome not necessarily achievable within any current publicly financed structure."

The two Australian foundations will undoubtedly have a profound effect on the public perception of contemporary art. Privately supported cultural spaces such as *White Rabbit* and *Detached* offer audiences a glimpse into the mind of a collector unconstrained by public accountability. That lack of bureaucratic oversight also means private foundations can reflect their director's character and interests, and take curatorial risks unavailable to national museums.

1. Digital rendering of White Rabbit Gallery, © White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney. 2. *Detached* Gallery, Hobart. 3. Penny Clive. Both courtesy *Detached* Cultural Organisation, Hobart.