

Arts & Entertainment

What's mine is yours, say wealthy collectors

Art lovers are sharing their passion through private galleries, writes Louise Schwartzkoff.

Some people collect stamps or china dolls. Judith Neilson's objects of choice are photographs of menstruating women, oversized hair brushes covered in phallus-like tentacles and stainless-steel eggs filled with dancing babies.

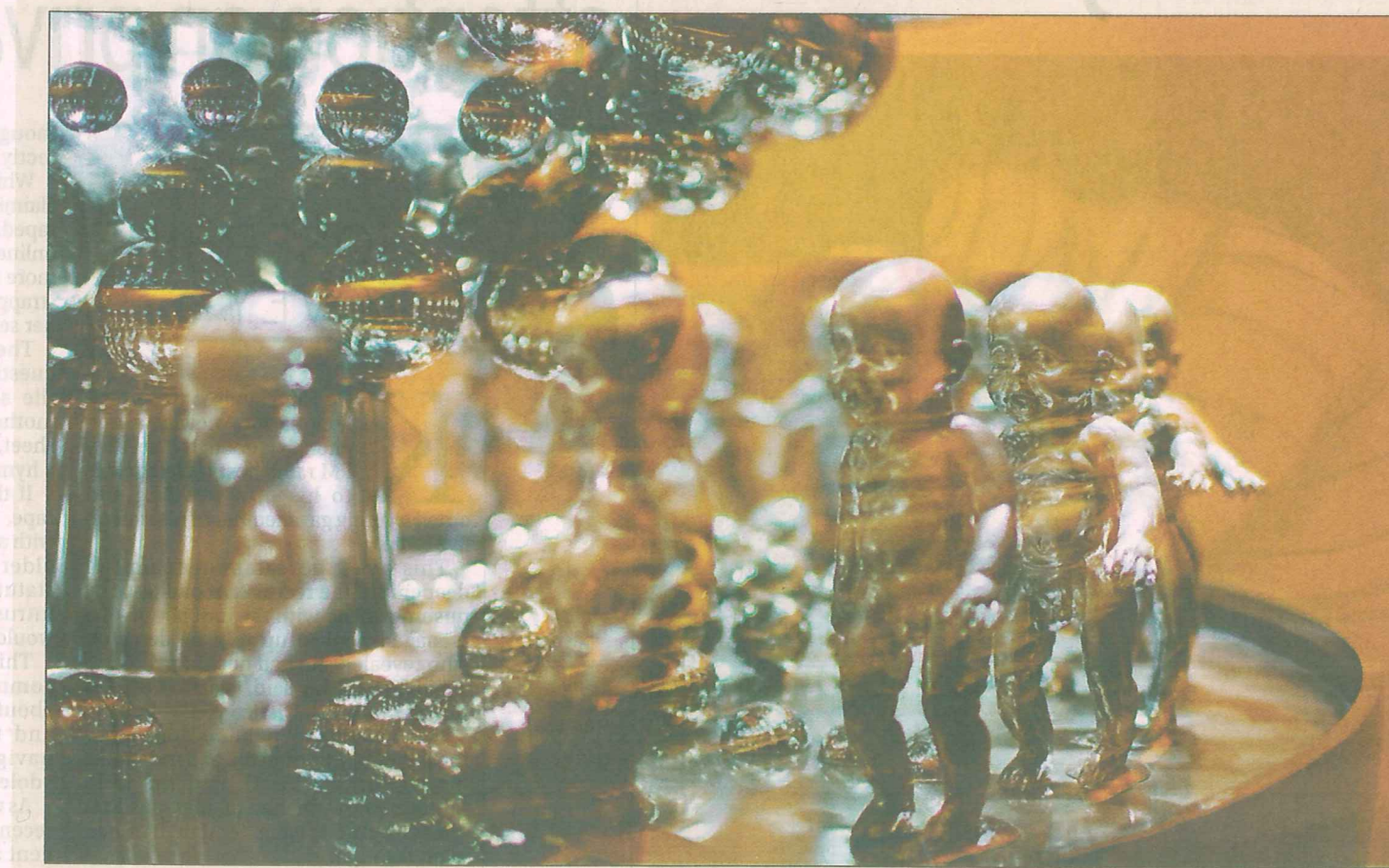
Over 10 years, Neilson, the wife of the Platinum Asset Management co-founder Kerr Neilson has built a collection of more than 450 works by contemporary Chinese artists.

After years in storage, the works have finally taken their place inside the White Rabbit Gallery in Chippendale. The former knitting factory will open next Thursday as a four-storey temple to Neilson's obsession.

It is one of numerous privately funded public museums soon to open in Australia. With free admission and no commercial sales, they exist to exhibit the cherished belongings of wealthy collectors.

There is the Tasmanian gambler David Walsh, who is building a \$70 million museum for his \$100 million collection. There is the Melbourne architect Corbett Lyon, who plans to open his home collection to visitors. In Sydney, the Belgiorno-Nettis family has taken a different approach, buying large-scale installations and sculptures then displaying them in outdoor public spaces.

"In America there have always been private galleries," says Neilson's daughter, Paris, the gallery's collection manager. "In Australia this sort of philanthropy has been less common, but it looks as if it's on the rise."



Baby steps ... *Egg Shape* by Xu Zhongmin is on show in the White Rabbit Gallery set up by Judith Neilson and her daughter, Paris, top right. Lower right: Jimmie Durham's *Still Life with Stone and Car*. Photos: Jon Reid



Why not keep the work under wraps in a private home? Why go to the trouble and expense of establishing a museum? The cynical might point to the tax breaks such endeavours attract, or dismiss them as vanity projects but for Neilson, it is all about the art. No-one could accuse the softly spoken collector of being an attention seeker. Even at White Rabbit's media launch yesterday, she was reluctant to speak to journalists.

"I just felt [the work] should be shared," she says when pressed. "I really don't have any other motive. The public are not see-

ing the real Chinese art and I felt it was worthy of being seen."

Similar ideas inspired Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, when he and his wife, Anita, spent \$440,000 on William Kentridge's multimedia installation *I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*, on free public display on Cockatoo Island. They also own Jimmie Durham's *Still Life with Stone and Car*, which sits on a roundabout at Walsh Bay.

"If you start getting involved with big pieces, you want them to be displayed, not just for you but for everybody," Belgiorno-Nettis says. "They can't exactly sit in our living

room or backyard, but those pieces deserve an audience."

By their nature, private museums express the idiosyncratic tastes of their founders. Walsh makes no secret of the subjective nature of his Museum of Old and New Art, due to open late next year. "It just happens that I have got a lot of shit I want to show off," he says. "I've got a soapbox that I want to stand on. I've got some things to say. I'm the kind of person who would scream obscenities into the wind in Hyde Park if I was English, but I'm not English."

A radical atheist, Walsh has

built his museum as a haven for rationalism, "a temple to the not needing of a temple".

Unlike state institutions, privately funded museums need not concern themselves with public opinion. Walsh's collection is full of risky, provocative works. He has bought Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which shows Mary as a black woman, surrounded by female genitalia and elephant dung. It caused a scandal when it was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999.

He has also commissioned the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye to make a new version of his

famous *Cloaca*, a machine that mimics the digestive system to produce what looks and smells like human faeces.

He does not see his museum as a philanthropic project, but admits it has arisen in part because of his discomfort with personal wealth. "When a few people have a lot of wealth there has to be some guilt along with that. As the distribution of wealth changes, you are going to see a lot more people building galleries to relieve their guilt," he says.

Australia's public institutions have welcomed the private galleries. Speaking at White

Rabbit's launch, Edmund Capon, the director of the Art Gallery of NSW, said it would enrich Sydney's cultural ecology. "We don't have all the cultural resources that a great city should have and here is an extraordinary addition," he says.

The AGNSW's benefaction manager, Jane Wynter, has no fear private galleries will absorb the donations that traditionally go to public institutions. "If they were raising funds from the public it would be different, but it's all their own money," she says. "It's 10 times more useful to open a new gallery than to buy a large yacht."