

The Commercial Dealer as Patron

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Publication details:

Artlink: Australian contemporary art quarterly
0727-1239 (ISSN)

Publication Date:

2002

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The Commercial Dealer as Patron

Roslyn Oxley⁹ and Sherman Galleries are currently the two most influential contemporary art galleries in Sydney. This does not mean that in crude financial terms they are the most profitable. The real money comes from acting as a local agent for British-based artists, dealerships, or in reselling works by the old and/or the dead.

Both act as agents for their artists and extend their responsibilities way beyond the exhibitions. They nurture careers, take their artists' works to international art fairs, and actively encourage critics and curators to see their better qualities. Both offer far more than the standard use of gallery space and artists have every reason to feel privileged once either accepts them into their relatively small stables. In addition both galleries make a significant contribution to the education of future curators and arts administrators. Bright young gallery assistants are, more often than not, working their way through university, and some time after graduation reappear in major public institutions. Both Oxley and Sherman see their responsibilities as extending far beyond the immediate small circle of the world of art, and see themselves as participating in the great conversation of what kind of place Australia should become. Art is an essential part of this conversation and this is what they use.

There are intriguing differences between them based however on style, rather than substance. If I wished to be simplistic it would be easy to note that Sherman represents big name bad boy of body art, Mike Parr; while Oxley supports the more intimate work of Parr's sister, Julie Rrap. But that separation is more a case of two art stars in one family needing the space provided by different dealers.

'An agent for change' is how Roslyn Oxley describes herself, both in her relationship to artists and to the position of art in the wider society. She likes to watch the artists she supports grow, to see work once regarded as raw and radical enter the realms of the cultural establishment. Twenty years after the gallery opened this objective is achieved regularly. Success is not always overnight. 'Sometimes [you] wait and suddenly the artist blossoms,' she says.

Many of Oxley's exhibits can only be described as non-commercial. Video art, still a mainstay of the exhibition program, has never been a paying proposition. Photography was there from the start, but only in relatively recent years has it entered the mainstream as 'high art'. Oxley's strength has been the persistence with which she has pursued broader definitions of art, and her sense that the ultimate purpose of this gallery is to reposition both artists and the country as part of a creative endeavour. The international profile achieved by many of the Oxley artists also has a broader cultural benefit.

'Both the film industry and the arts industry show that we are a creative country,' she says. In an international context the creative arts act as an effective counter to less attractive cultural stereotypes.

Oxley names the most important quality in working with artists as 'empathy not pushing against each other, but pulling together'. There are no formal contracts as Oxley believes that if the trust fails then the relationship has failed

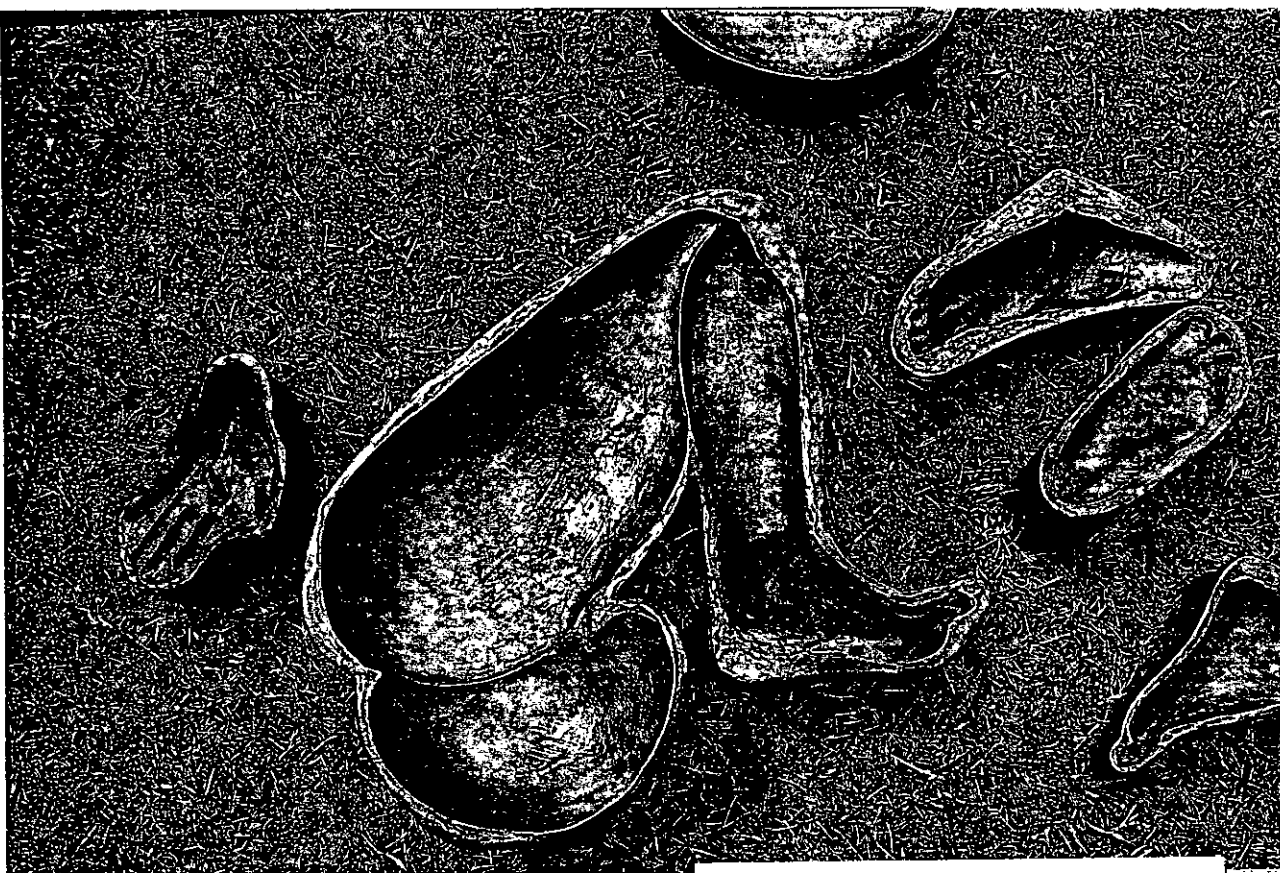


Sherman Galleries Goodhope in Paddington with new extensions to gallery in foreground, photo Paul Green

and no paper could keep it together. This de facto approach obviously works as many artists who first exhibited in the 1980s continue their close connection. In 1987 Oxley began exhibiting the late Robert Campbell Jnr, at a time when work by Aboriginal artists tended to be confined to a narrow range of specialist galleries. Other indigenous artists also exhibited include Fiona Foley, Destiny Deacon and Tracey Moffatt. The treatment of indigenous artists 'promoting individual talent while accepting different concerns and directions' is a fair description of the way Roslyn Oxley⁹ conducts its business. It is low key, persistent, and most effective.

In contrast, Sherman Galleries with Director Gene Sherman and Curatorial Director Bill Wright, is more fully integrated into the many currents of Sydney society. This gallery is a meeting place, where art meets money, scholarship, critics, the market and education. There are lunches where international visitors are invited to meet artists and collectors, openings that provide a context for financiers to mingle with politicians as well as for artists to meet collectors. But for Gene Sherman the essence of her involvement with art is education. She is a former teacher and retains the need to impart understanding as well as information. When asked to describe her current position, she instantly replies 'I'm still teaching'. For Wright, his years in the public sector led to an understanding for the need to keep extensive files on artists, so that journalists and scholars can easily access information.

'We try as much as possible to operate outside the commercial arena'. This apparently contradictory comment by Wright is a reasonable summary of Sherman's *modus operandi*. This is a commercial dealership which has worked hard to foster its links to the broader world of the avant garde art scene. Wright himself is a former director of the *Biennale of Sydney* and former assistant director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Gene and Brian Sherman sponsor prizes for art students and a scholarship for students of art administration.



As with Oxley, Shermans have a particularly close relationship with their artists. There are twenty-five in the gallery's stable and twelve employees. However unlike Oxley's extended de facto arrangements, Sherman's artists have written contracts spelling out each party's rights and responsibilities. Both formal contracts and unwritten rules are remarkably similar. Both support and promote their artists and protect their interests in Australia and internationally in a way which is transparent and fair. Both go to the big international art fairs. If Oxley has an unstated continuing commitment to contemporary indigenous art, then Sherman's commitment is to Asia. Sherman has been exhibiting Chinese artists in Australia since 1991, and also regularly exhibits Australian artists in China and Japan. The travelling exhibitions *Rose Crossing* and *Systems End* both gave Asian countries a different sense of Australia. The gallery's support of local Chinese immigrant artists has helped in integrating this generation into the local art market.

The operations of both galleries add a new layer to the definition of patronage. In both cases the rewards are there, but they are measured in art, not money. ☺

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ABOVE: Julie Rrap *Declining Nude* (leftovers)
2002, 10 bronze elements, 10 m sq, digital
print on canvas, 80 x 110 cm, courtesy of
Roslyn Oxley Gallery

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In producing the *Code of Practice*, the Visual Arts Industry Guidelines Research Project partners were only too aware of the notorious dealing in the art marketplace elaborated by Joanna Mendelsohn, and the challenges faced by visual and craft artists in trying to negotiate their way in. However, we have a different view and experience of the value and potential potency of such a code.

In an unregulated sector the need for benchmarks becomes paramount. They provide the standard which ethical people working in various roles in the sector have agreed is fair and reasonable and thus a bargaining tool for the disadvantaged. Otherwise it's anyone's guess what is OK and what represents malpractice and exploitation. Since the launch of the Code in August 2000, art schools are using it to teach students about their rights and obligations, artists are referring to it as a checklist in negotiating appropriate agreements, commissioners are being guided by it in calculating what they should be paying artists, public and private galleries have been stimulated to formulate their own complementary codes as the result of ensuing debate and calls for reform from the sector and it is gradually being applied across the full spectrum of artworld dealings. Not bad for one year.

But the Code can't be expected to do everything. There are other parallel measures for which NAVA is lobbying, like the establishment of a small claims jurisdiction in the Federal Magistrates Court to assist artists to resolve disputes without recourse to costly legal proceedings. While there is no space here to elaborate further, we don't have to accept as inevitable that artists have the role of piggy in the middle.

Tamara Winikoff, Executive Director
National Association for the Visual Arts