

Calm, cool and collected, Barry Keldoulis is not content simply being at the forefront of the local contemporary art scene. Pursuing new markets for his stable of emerging artists, including a growing base of international curators and collectors, is par-for-the-course. He shares his views with Jane Raffan about the state of the scene here and abroad — from Art Month to art fairs, galleries on the ground and in the cloud — and what lies ahead for gbk.

BARRY KELDOULIS

DIRECTOR **GBK** SYDNEY

JR: *It's been stated elsewhere that you "fell into" contemporary art in the 1980s working for Henry Geldzahler, who was at the time Commissioner for Cultural Affairs for New York City. If art wasn't a natural fit, tell us something of your personal background and your education and training.*

BK: Well I did fall into it, but it was also a natural fit. I had studied philosophy, and as contemporary art is a marriage of ideas and aesthetics, it was an almost logical extension. But I had become involved in the arts before leaving Australia, going to galleries and museums, hanging out with artists and thespians.

JR: *Did you think of your time in New York as an apprenticeship of sorts, or were you simply living the life?*

BK: Hmm, an apprenticeship of sorts I guess. Henry was certainly a master in his field, an art historical genius. He could pick references at fifty paces, often where none was perhaps intended. So hanging out with Henry for 8 hours a day was certainly an education by osmosis. Also, of course, my friends were the graffiti artists, the neo conceptualists and the new gallerists downtown, all part of the heady explosion of creativity in the visual arts in NY at that time. We did live the life, but art was very much a part of most aspects of life there! For example, Henry was the curator for the mega nightclub The Palladium on 14th St, with works (whole rooms, installations) by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Francesco Clemente, Kenny Scharf, etc.

Galleries - from pod to cloud

JR: *You've operated your own gallery in Australia now for nearly 10 years, spending several years at Danks Street Depot. Does the 'pod' theory work in practice for galleries?*

BK: Just about right on 9 years, gbk opened in May 2003. The 'pod' thing can work, and it probably depends on the type of city and type of gallery. Danks Street worked for me at that time. It was pretty much the epicentre of the birth of a new living city precinct (as distinct from an industrial area) and was fresh, like the artists I was showing. The particular circumstances of the complex at that time also meant I was able to expand within the complex, but ultimately that wasn't possible again and I moved to the current space in which I have not only good-sized main and project spaces, but also ample client viewing areas and storage.

JR: *How important was the foot traffic? Was this a consideration in your relocation nearby?*

BK: Foot traffic was perhaps the reason I moved from my original little shopfront in Chippendale to Danks Street and it was great for the young artists to be seen by that many people for their imagery to enter the collective unconscious (yes Jung rather than Freud), but ultimately the foot traffic was a killer. As at gbk we like to engage with people in the gallery, when there are too many people you can't get anything done till after 6pm! But also, as Danks St became a very popular destination for reasons beyond contemporary art, so the traffic changed.



Left: Barry Keldoulis at Hong Kong Art Fair 2010 with a work by Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, *PPPPPPP* (perfect planning and prior preparation prevents piss poor performance), 2009.

'One would hope that the internet does not come to dominate so entirely that only works that look good and can be fully appreciated on the computer screen are the works that get made and seen'.

Ultimately, I could probably count on two hands the works I've sold to people who have just wandered into the gallery. Let's face it, for very contemporary art, if I can put it like that, you build a client base. So yes, on top of the need for more space, a more art-targeted foot traffic was the plan, but still in the 'hood.

JR: *Sydney's annual Art Month in March saw a number of art walks and precinct parties designed to draw people out and into the galleries. Do galleries now need to host events outside their regular openings to draw people in?*

BK: Need is a strong word, but yes those 'outside events' do work. They relieve the ho-hum and routine ordinariness that the cycle of openings and closings can become. But they are also an opportunity for a sometimes broader, sometimes deeper discussion about contemporary art. Art Month has been successful in bringing new people into the galleries, broadening the base of appreciation for contemporary art and these added events, I think, are a bonus for the newcomers and old stalwarts alike.

JR: *And from pods to the cloud – how do you think galleries might better promote their value-add to the art-buying experience in competition with an ever increasing online consumer presence? In your view what's the chief value of white walled spaces over virtual ones?*

BK: Hmm this is a tricky, because one doesn't want to sound like a technophobic old fuddy-duddy and the internet is providing enormous possibilities for the expansion of the appreciation of an artist's work, indeed potentially to the whole world! However, our current show is a good example of the many cases of the need for the work to be seen 'in the flesh'. Grant Stevens has a number of lenticular works in the show which just don't translate to a still or moving image on a computer screen. Jess MacNeil is another case in point; her paintings usually include large areas of blank canvas that when encountered in the flesh diminish in importance, but which on the small screen impact very differently. (BTW Grant has painted my walls pale pink, purple and blue! So much for the white cube!)

We do sell works over the internet, and I think this is broadly true, but it is generally artists who have an already established presence and record of quality, and of whom a rabid collector might just want A work, any work. So, in summary, depending on the work, an encounter with the work may be essential, and this is certainly more true for emerging rather than established artists. One would hope that the internet does not come to dominate so entirely that only works that look good and can be fully appreciated on the computer screen are the works that get made and seen. But in a world where we are more used to constant change, perhaps there is room for spaces other than the traditional sedentary 'white cube' (I'm thinking of some successful 'pop-ups' I've been to recently).

JR: Art fairs, too, are moving online, with VIP Online being the most recent high profile case in point. Is this something you'd be interested in? Do gallerists see them as just another traffic funnelling portal, such as the New Zealand based Ocula, where gbk has a presence, or do they offer something more than directing traffic?

BK: At this stage I must admit these don't particularly interest me, partly for the reasons stated above, and that they seem to work best for very established artists. The potential plus, as with all art fairs, is greater exposure and brand recognition.

The international divide

JR: It has been written elsewhere that you have an interest in cultivating the international component of your business. Does this mean you have an interest in opening a gallery overseas, or just ramping up your international presence via art fairs, real and or virtual?

BK: My interest is in always doing the best thing for my artists, and I am only interested in artists whose work is capable of standing on the international stage. So, one tries to work out the best way to garner not just momentary international exposure, but to develop a presence. So art fairs are one component and operate alongside exhibiting in sometimes humble artist-run spaces, interesting commercial galleries and all the way up to prestigious museums. It is, of course, a two-way street and Australians are often focused on getting our art over there, but I have always maintained an international presence in gbk's exhibiting schedule to create an ongoing dialogue between our art scene and the rest of the world. When I first moved to Danks Street, I ran my Chippendale space as a project space for a number of months, and it was a nightmare! So much of Star Trek has come true, but unfortunately one still cannot be in two places at once! So I am not really interested in opening a gallery as such overseas. But note above my interest in 'pop-ups'.



Above:
Fiona Lowry
you can't stop what's coming 2008
acrylic on canvas
214 x 153cm

Opposite top:
Jess MacNeill
In between something I have, something I've lost, and something I've never had (cold midday at Trafalgar Square in November) 2011
Installation view
oil on acrylic sheet
180 x 200 x 35cm

Opposite bottom:
Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy
Behemoth 2012
165 x 255 x 60 cm
(variable), dinosaur fossil replica, hard suitcases, foam
Private Collection, India
courtesy the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



JR: With an ever-growing number of art fairs there is added pressure on galleries to find enough fresh, good work from their stable for competing audiences and back-to-back seasons. Is there enough work being produced by artists in general to support dealers in two countries and a raft of fairs?

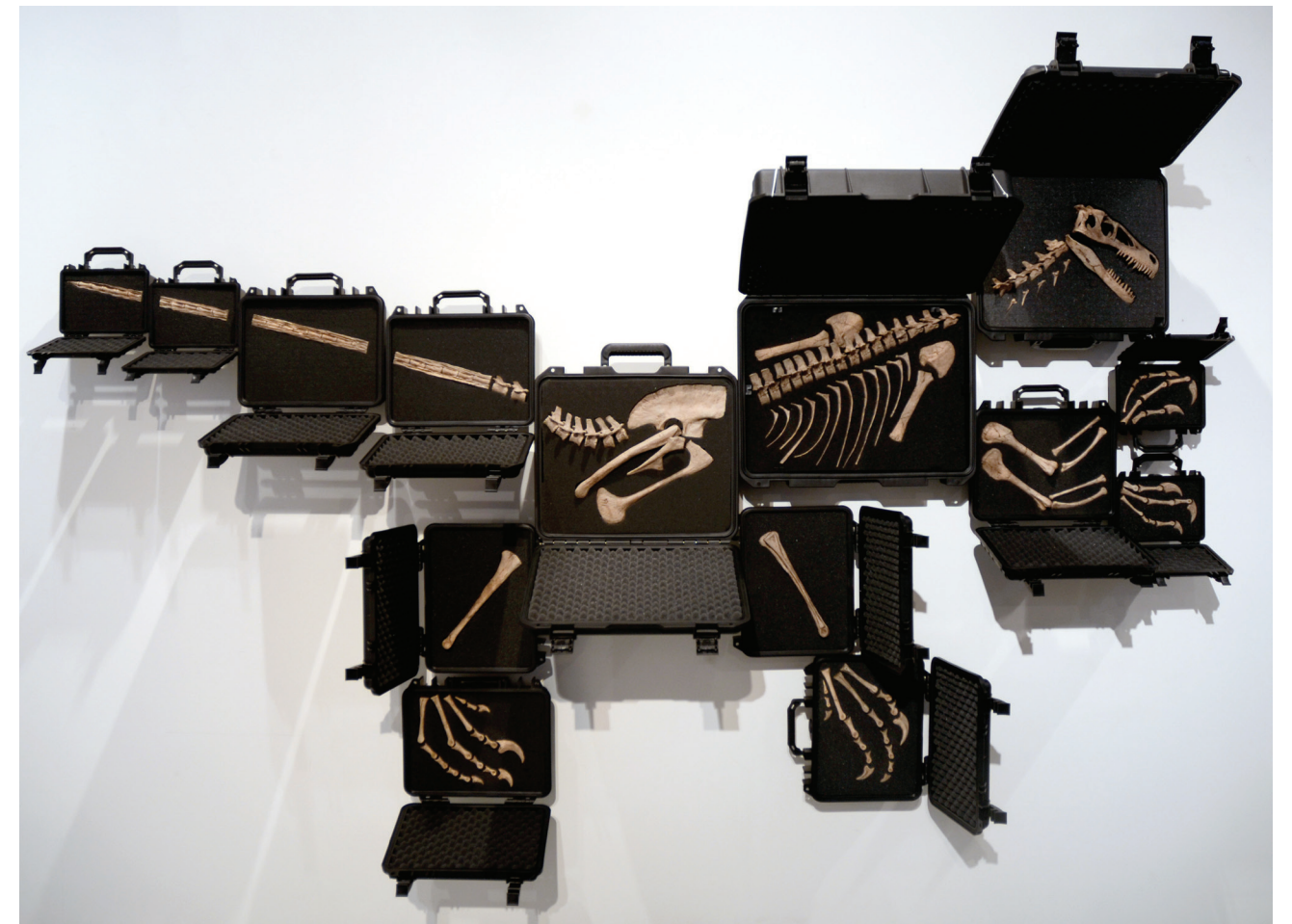
BK: Difficult to generalise, as it is different for each artist (or art couple/group) and also at different times in their lives. You never know when someone might get pregnant or just need a fallow period in their creative cycle, so keep contingency plans in place!

JR: How does the Australian market compare to New York, for example. What are the major differences? Would you show different artists?

BK: Well, there are many art markets, even within Sydney. I believe simply there is good art and not good art. And part of what makes the good stuff good is that these days it will stand up to international scrutiny, but without losing its 'local flavour', its grounding in place and lived experience. So I probably wouldn't show different artists, but differing national characteristics might influence the way one facilitates interaction between art and viewer.

JR: Several of your artists have practices that encompass video. Have you seen appreciation of this media growing? More so on an international level?

BK: Interestingly Australia leads the world in terms of the penetration of video art into the domestic (home/private collector) market. About a third of our sales would be video works and the market is growing,



particularly to the corporate sector, and we now sell video works into both the Asian and American markets.

JR: *Some dealers are uncomfortable about exhibiting their artists overseas, stating concerns over potential poaching from international dealers with deeper pockets. You're obviously not intimidated, or are you?*

BK: Not at all, again it depends on what's best for the artist, and I approach all these matters with a collegiate attitude which has generally been reciprocated. It's not the depth of their pockets that would be the worry, but rather one seeks an appropriate fit for one's artists into other stables, and that they and their work are respected.

Art Fairs - here, there and everywhere

JR: *You have recently returned from Art HK. Which artists did you show and how were they received? How has the fair evolved in its 5th year?*

At ART HK 12 we exhibited Sean Cordeiro & Claire Healy, Fiona Lowry, Jess MacNeil, Hitesh Natalwala, Cameron Robbins and Grant Stevens.

We sold works by every one of the artists we exhibited, so obviously the work was very well received and there continues to be follow-up interest in the artists shown but also in the wider gallery stable, as people explore further through the internet.

The relationship between the different sections of the fair – Main Galleries, Asia One and Art Futures – was resolved and worked much better than the previous arrangement at last year's fair, where the Main Galleries section was on a different floor.

The fair maintains its quality and continues to evolve in terms of collector attendance.

JR: *You were one of three Australian galleries accepted into the main galleries section of the Hong Kong Art Fair the other two being Anna Schwartz and Roslyn Oxley. That's quite an achievement. Why do you think your gallery was chosen?*

BK: I have been participating ART HK since its inception, confident that it would be the Asian Art Fair and am gratified to see that quite possibly the world fair (the last couple of years we've had the phenomenon of collectors from Paris coming to meet friends from LA in Hong Kong). I was selected for the main galleries section based on the strength of my artists' work.

JR: *Anna Schwartz and Roslyn Oxley are known to have deep pockets, which has allowed them to exhibit overseas regardless of the cost. With upfront costs and no guarantee of sales, representation at these fairs is a large financial risk. Do you have a financial backer, or receive any government grants?*

BK: I don't have a backer but recently have received some support from the government (the Australia Council has awarded some art fair specific funding, and DFAT is more broadly supportive under the Export Markets Development Grant scheme).

JR: *Bearing in mind the costs, which can range on average across fairs from \$15,000 to \$50,000, what are the major pluses in your view?*

BK: The simplest plus is the exposure to tens of thousands of pairs of eyes (potentially entering the Jungian collective unconscious I referred to earlier!), and at good fairs amongst those thousands will be some curators, writers, and hopefully collectors.

JR: *A recent research paper indicated that an average gallery makes 28% outside its home market by exhibiting at art fairs. Do you know if Australian galleries exhibiting at international fairs share this experience? What were you looking to achieve from Hong Kong, aside from profit?*

BK: I can't really speak for other galleries I'm afraid, but our sales at art fairs comprise a significant proportion of our international sales, and in turn our international sales make up a significant proportion of our overall sales. Aside from direct sales, as I mentioned above, it's the exposure to curators, academics, writers, consultants and the general public, in what I like to term the spider web effect, where a work itself or a catalogue with images ends up in a foreign household, and those people's friends and colleagues spread the web further afield.

JR: *With regards to your role as a board member of the Melbourne Art Fair, how has your participation at ArtHK influenced your thinking going forward?*

BK: The reception of gbk in particular and of Australian contemporary art more generally has encouraged Melbourne to think more expansively.

JR: *Art Fairs Australia has recently announced a major new art fair, Sydney Contemporary to be held in April 2013 and will also manage the Melbourne Art Fair from 2014. What effect will these fairs have on the local contemporary art scene?*

BK: These will be very well organised fairs with a sophisticated international network at the highest level and will be a great asset to the contemporary Australian scene.

The future

JR: *Are you hoping to show at any other art fairs in the near future? Art Basel, the New York Armory, Miami? You have an Indian artist in your stable – what about other Asian art fairs?*

BK: As I still represent mainly emerging artists (though they are fast transitioning from having emerged on the local scene to emerging internationally!) their prices are approaching the point where non-Asian fairs are a possibility. Asia is obviously big enough to support more than one fair; it could be Singapore or perhaps Delhi or Taipei. But at this stage Hong Kong is streets ahead in terms of the ease of doing business.

JR: *What do you envision for the future of gbk?*

BK: I envision a great future for my artists. Me, I live in the moment.

BAROMETER

Each year the Australian Government initiative Artbank purchases approximately 300 works by emerging Australian artists. Its purchases provide collectors with an invaluable barometer of the most exciting work being produced by our young artists. Artbank acquires artworks from the primary market to provide artists with the most direct support. Purchases are made from commercial galleries, contemporary art spaces, artist-run organisations, Indigenous communities and artists' studios throughout Australia. Artbank gives the AMR a peep into its latest shopping basket.



Derek Kreckler *City Gardens, Shanghai PRC (man in distance)* 2011
Ink jet print from film negative, 100 x 100 cm
Derek Kreckler
derekkreckler.com



Matthew de Moiser *Servo (day)*, 2011
Laminex on marine ply
89.5 x 89.5 cm
Flinders Street Gallery, Sydney
www.flindersstreetgallery.com



Samuel Miller *Ngayuku Ngura* 2010
Acrylic on linen, 183 x 153 cm
Ninuku Arts, South Australia
www.ninukuarts.com.au



Mark Booth *STORM. 90-15.5" F+F*, 2011
U-PVC pipe and matt white enamel paint,
44 x 44 x 35 cm
Mark Booth
mark-booth@live.com.au



Anthony Lister *Beginning of the Rainbow*, 2011
Mixed media on wood, 101 x 82 x 15 cm
Gallery A.S., Sydney
www.gallery.as



Thomas Jeppe *Prelude to a Toga*, 2011
Enamel on canvas, 150 x 120 cm
Utopian Slumps, Melbourne
www.utopianslumps.com

Artbank is a federal government initiative established in 1980 to provide direct support to artists and the arts industry through the purchase of works for the national collection. Artbank promotes Australian culture and widens the audience for contemporary art by making the collection of over 10,000 works available for rent to government departments, overseas embassies, corporate and private clients. www.artbank.gov.au



Ron Adams *Phaedra*, 2010
Acrylic and gesso on canvas, 126.5 x 100 cm
MOP Projects, Sydney
www.mop.org.au



John Edwards *You Say I Say*, 2011
Oil on canvas, 30.5 x 25 cm
King Street Gallery, Sydney
www.kingstreetgallery.com.au



Jean Walmborg *Aurukun Bicycle*, 2011
Recycled ghost nets, marine ropes, polyropes, bicycle parts and marine debris, 75 x 115 x 50 cm
Wik and Kugu Arts & Crafts Centre, Queensland
arts@aurukun.qld.gov.au