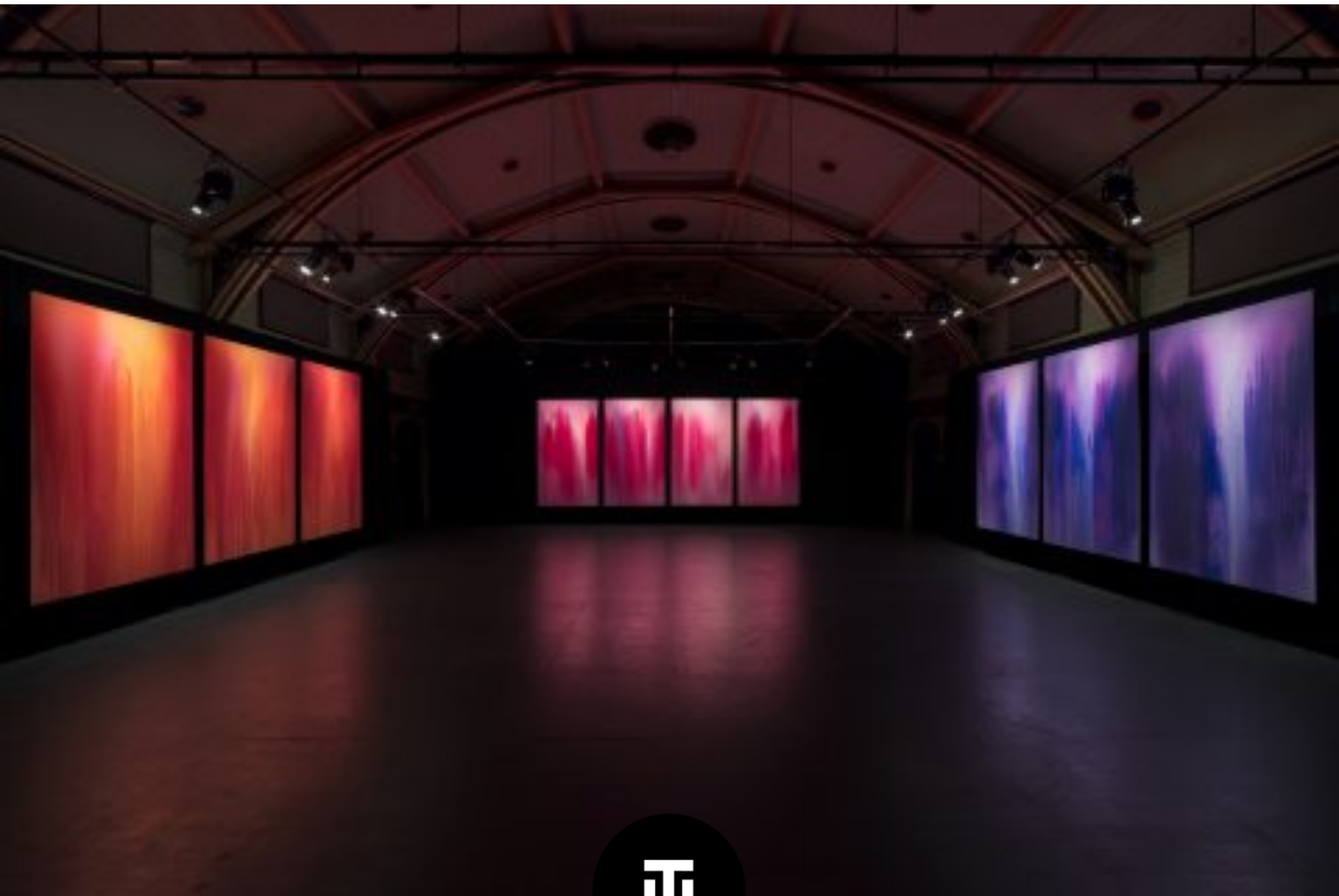


SYDNEY CONTEMPORARY: BARRY KELDOULIS' EXPERT GUIDE TO BUYING ART

Words by Lisa Omagari



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Barry Keldoulis has held some of the most prestigious positions in the art world over the course of his three decade career. This year he returns as director of Australasia's international art fair Sydney Contemporary.

Barry Keldoulis is a rare breed of gallerist slash collector. With more than three decades experience in contemporary art, he has remained true to his mission of closing the gap between artist-run initiatives and larger commercial galleries that often dominate international criticism.

An accolade-clad CV is testament to Keldoulis' long-standing commitment to the boundary-pushing art he supports in both local and global markets. He has worked in the US, Europe and Australia and held some of the most prestigious positions at the Office of the Mayor in New York City, Sherman Galleries, Australia Museum and National Gallery of Australia among others. This year he returns as director of Australasia's international art fair Sydney Contemporary.



Barry Keldoulis. Photo: supplied

Keldoulis is the real deal. For a man of such distinction his career trajectory has been far from linear – some may even describe it as a little puzzling. He never studied art and his formative years were spent in NYC after he “lucked” into working as the Chief of Staff to Pop Art tsar

Henry Geldzahler. After emerging from the haze that was NYC in the '60s, Keldoulis spent the better part of two decades working in US and Europe.

“I fell into it and have never wanted to get out. For me, contemporary art is a marriage of ideas and aesthetics,” says Keldoulis. “I went to New York at the ripe old age of twenty one and lucked into a job with a chap who was the then Cultural Commissioner for the City of New York. He was an art historical genius and it was education by osmosis. The thing about the art world is that it’s always interesting and generally quite a bit of fun as well so I’ve never wanted to leave it.

“Geldzahler was the first curator of 20th Century art [at the MET]. In that capacity in the early sixties he went around the studios as a young curator and introduced Andy Warhol to Roy Lichtenstein to Robert Rauschenberg. He was the first champion and defender of Pop Art as a movement.”

The biggest lesson? That art appreciation comes down to our personal reaction to a work, not a level of education. For Keldoulis, the most powerful contemporary art is work that presents something new and innovative – work that evokes something from the heart and mind. “That’s one of the things that I love most about art – everyone’s opinion is valid,” he says.

Showcasing the plight of young and emerging artists

Keldoulis has always been passionate about supporting young and emerging artists and believes that the artist-run initiative scene is integral to the evolution of our culture. In 2003 Keldoulis opened his eponymous gallery, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, at a time when not many established commercial galleries were willing to take a punt on younger artists. This ultimately helped establish Keldoulis as one of the most forward-thinking dealers in Sydney.



Gallery Barry Keldoulis was one of the first to show conceptual artists Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro who went on to be exhibited at the, MCA and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Photo: Deceased Estate, 2004, found detritus from the artists' studio.

“I felt that the generation of artists coming through in the late nineties and early two thousands that their work was really capable of standing on the world stage,” he says. “I showed mainly young emerging artists and some mid-career artists and it took off like a rocket because the work was accepted internationally. I was very proud of the fact that most of my artists even though some were still at art school or fresh out of art school were capable of supporting themselves with the artistic practice.”

Sydney Contemporary and the changing nature of international art fairs

The Global Financial Crisis sent shockwaves through the international art market, but in Keldoulis' opinion the GFC was merely a traditional correction in a point of the cycle of boom and bust. What ensued in the years following was a flight-to-quality from dealers and collectors looking to sell works of higher risk.

Since then, things have settled down, and some galleries have even reported having their best six months ever. “In some ways it’s patchy, it’s healthy and it’s more considered,” says Keldoulis. Need proof? The last Sydney Contemporary in 2015 generated over \$14 million across five days, record sales for an Australian art fair. In addition to this, the fair has been promoted from a two-year roster to an annual event.

It’s clear that art fairs aren’t what they used to be. “Art fairs have changed over the years. Today, they often offer solo presentations of a new bodies of work and museum quality presentations,” says Keldoulis. “It’s not general stock shows as art fairs started out as a couple of decades ago.”



The ability of art fairs to shape contemporary art discourse comes down to being able to enhance dialogues between dealers, artists, collectors and the broader audience at scale. Sydney Contemporary not only puts Sydney and Australia on the global stage, but also demonstrates the local market’s thirst for two-way conversations.

“One of the reasons I’m particularly keen for Sydney Contemporary to be an international fair is because of that dialogue and that exchange. It’s the two-way street nature of it – the international galleries that have come here have done very well and it’s the beginning of creating that web, that interlocking system of exchange between different culture,” says Keldoulis.

“Ultimately it’s about supporting artists. Art fairs are a phenomenon so it’s really about making sure Australia is part of that now very international network and putting us up there on that stage in that premium category where we now have international collectors coming to the fair.”

Program highlights

Sydney Contemporary's 2017 line-up is its strongest to date. Over 80 leading local and international exhibitors will converge under one roof at Carriageworks to showcase works from the Pacific Rim and beyond. Artists to watch include multi-disciplinary Abdul Abdullah who explores experiences of 'other', inter-disciplinary artist Reko Rennie who focuses on his Aboriginal identity, post-minimal painter Jonny Niesche whose work sits at the intersection of painting and sculpture, and artist and researcher Rochelle Haley who investigates movement, experimental drawing and painting.

Installation and Video Contemporary programs will play host to a number of experimental bodies of work. MCA chief curator Rachel Kent and curator Megan Robson have selected 15 artists who'll lead the charge with large-scale works across Carriageworks. Established and senior artists Betty Kuntiwa Pumani, Nike Savvas and Maio Motoko among others will be represented.

"Installation Contemporary is very interesting because the curators have done a great job at selecting works that give the galleries that have limited space a real opportunity to showcase their artists on a scale that's not possible elsewhere," says Keldoulis.

Video Contemporary is curated by Serena Bentley, assistant curator at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, and will invite audiences to engage with works digging into a number of themes from pop culture fantasies and dystopia. Artists include Eddie Clemens, Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser, Hossein Ghaemi, Liam O'Brien and Kate Mitchell among a slew of others.

"Video is a medium that provides an interesting way for artist to engage with their audience over time. These time-based works have a very different way of impacting on a person as opposed to a static painting," says Keldoulis. "This is a tight program, a personal curation of works that look at the future as both utopia and dystopia. A lot of people love Video Contemporary as a way of taking a break from the fair to take a moment to sit quietly."

Keldoulis' golden rules for buying contemporary art

So where do rookie or mid-level collectors start? "A good place to start is Future Contemporary," say Keldoulis. "We've got international galleries and galleries from around Australia. They're not necessarily young dealers showing young emerging artists; it gives you a clear indication of the up-and-coming."

There's no set formula when it comes to buying art, but Keldoulis says it's a good idea to follow your heart. If the work still sticks in your mind, go back and revisit it. If you really love it, you'll be intrigued the second, third, fourth time you look at the work.

“The things that you might go ‘oh my god that’s so beautiful, that’s pretty’ may not actually hold your interest over time. It’s the works that combine ideas and aesthetics that really capture your imagination and push the way that you see things,” he says.



Thom Robert, Sugar Fairies, 2012, gouache and posca on paper, 42cm x 32cm. Robert's work will be represented by Studio A in Sydney Contemporary's Future program.



Chris Hopewell, Orbit, 2015, Acrylic epoxy on wood panel, 60cm x 60 cm. Hopewell's work will be represented by Art Collective WA in Sydney Contemporary's Future program.



Philjame, Mighty Atomo, 201, press-molded JingDeZhen Porcelain, 17cm x 21cm x 50cm. Philjame's work will be represented by Galerie pompom in Sydney Contemporary's Future program.



Honey Long, Blown Bodies, 2016, glass stone sculptures, sizes variable. Long's work will be represented by Interlude Gallery in this year's Sydney Contemporary Future program.

When buying for his personal collection, Keldoulis favours work that pushes the boundaries. “For me, art needs to be pushing the boundaries of the way we think – the way we’re representing something or engaging with our visually engaging with the world,” he says.

It’s also important to know what you’re buying. “I recommend people talk to the gallerist and look at the artist’s CV. Where are they showing, have they been entered into institutional collections and where and if they’ve studied art,” says Keldoulis. “If they’re firing on all those points then there’s a good chance that they’re the real McCoy and that they’re not going to go away.”

Keldoulis also warns you don't want buying art to be an unpleasant experience; in other words, don't stretch yourself too far when it comes to finances. "If you go with a young emerging artist either someone who's still at art school or who's just left art school, these works will be inexpensive and ultimately of great value."

Painting



Toby Raine, Caleb Followill with Beard (2016), oil on canvas, 60cm x 55cm, image courtesy of Page Blackie Gallery.

For a number of years some critics have tried to say painting is dead, but it keeps coming back. Keldoulis agrees. “One of the things I find most interesting about it [painting] is that in today’s world when we have so many moving images, flashing lights, we’re surrounded by colour and movement, bombarded by imagery, it’s that stillness that is a painting,” he says. “And yet it’s that stillness that has the capacity to capture our attention and hold that interest.”

Keldoulis recommends considering artists who don’t feel the need to fill every corner of the canvas, and artists who engage the heart as well as stimulating us intellectually.

“I always think you should engage your brain as well as your heart, your intellect as well as your appreciation of beauty. For me that’s what’s really interesting in a painting and one that you can go back to over time and still find engaging,” he says.

Drawing

According to Keldoulis, people are still fascinated with photorealistic drawing but it’s drawing that elicits an emotional reaction that’ll stand the test of time. “Drawing is such a basic human creative urge. For me it’s about looking at artists who’ve taken this very basic medium and made it into something arresting,” he says. “I’d be looking for something that wasn’t the expected.

Photography



Rosemary Laing, untitled, 2017, 100cm x 152.55cm. Image courtesy: Tolarno Galleries.

How many times have you looked at photographic work and thought ‘I could do that!’? The fact is, you didn’t. Keldoulis cautions us to not overlook the simple work. “It can be a very straightforward photograph that’s not been retouched and not photoshopped that creates the most arresting image.

“Tolarno Galleries is premiering Rosemary Laing’s new body of work and Rosemary uses no post-image manipulation and creates really powerful images. Then there are photographers who’re playing with the medium and creating painterly works and abstract works.

“These days you really have to leave behind the focus on medium because most artists are using all sorts of different mediums [...] so what a painter might bring to the medium of photography or video is in itself quite interesting.”

Video



Hossein Ghaemi, Angry Flower, 2015 (still) high definition digital video, duration 3:25 minutes. Image courtesy The Commercial Gallery, Sydney.

Keldoulis' advice is simple: don't let a fascination with the technology outweigh the work's actual content. "One of the reasons why we have curators is because they can see through the fascination with the new technology and see that the artists are doing something interesting in the medium," he says. "There's such a huge variety in installation and video – it's very hard to be able to dictate to people what they like. Again, go with your heart and mind."

Sydney Contemporary is taking place at Carriageworks from 7-10 September. Learn more [here](#).

(Lead image: Ash Keating, Gravity System Response installation view at Meat Marketing, North Melbourne, 2017. Image: Marc Morel, courtesy of the artist and blackartprojects Melbourne.)

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