

Loose Canon review – reflecting the taste of the public, not art insiders

Artbank, Sydney

Artbank has expanded beyond art rentals and begun publicly exhibiting its works - thus providing an insight into popular art

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Frank Gohier's sculpture *The Phillip* (2006). Photograph: Artbank

Overlooking the windswept vacant blocks of Waterloo in inner-city Sydney is Artbank's new headquarters. It's a grand old building, a 19th century warehouse given a handsome makeover by Aileen Sage Architects, a part of a continuing effort to turn the area - a zone of wide streets, high-rise apartments and luxury car dealerships - into a "creative precinct".

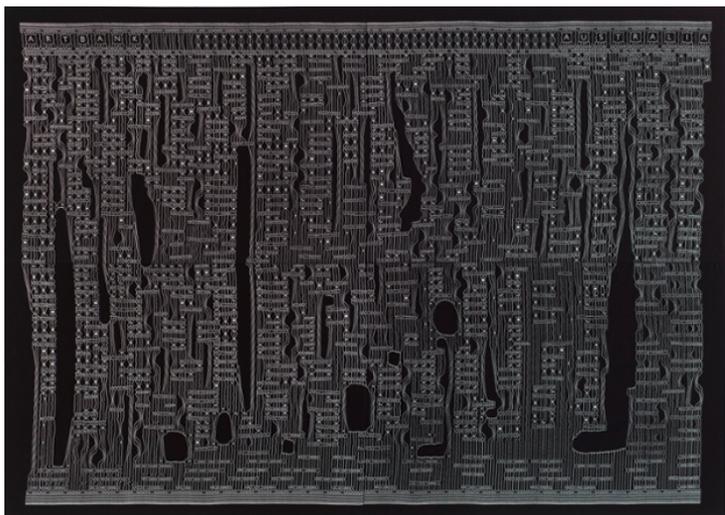
Just up the road is Danks Street, a nest of galleries, cafes and restaurants, but next door is Hillsong Church: it may have a way to go yet but the area has, as a real estate agent might put it, tons of potential.

Artbank was established in 1980 and is a unique and somewhat eccentric holdover from the era of Fraser government cultural policy. Artbank buys artworks by living Australian artists and rents them out. Just about anyone can hire works by a huge list of contemporary artists and, by paying an annual fee, hang on to them indefinitely.

Operating entirely from the money it makes from rentals, Artbank has become a major player in the ecosystem of the Australian art market. Buying as many as 350 individual artworks a year, the collection now stands at approximately 10,000 pieces, ranging from paintings and sculptures to drawings and photographs to new media works, including an extensive collection of recent video art.

With three offices nationally and a roving band of curators who buy works for the

collection, Artbank has often been the first to buy the work of early career artists, as well as putting down hard money for pieces by established names.



Justin Trendall's One Is Art (2014). Photograph: Artbank

The big difference at Artbank's new space is that it also has a gallery, and for its launch it is staging Loose Canon, an exhibition of work drawn from the collection to present an alternative version of the history of recent Australian art.

Curated by Daniel Mudie Cunningham, Artbank's senior curator, the show is impossibly ambitious in scope, but given Artbank's longstanding purchasing policy of buying works that it can rent out - and thus reflecting the taste of the public rather than, say, a curator or board of directors at a museum or public gallery - the show presents a fascinating insight into the sorts of themes and ideas that have resonance with a wide audience.



Gordon Bennett's Notes to Basquiat (Primal) (2002). Photograph: Artbank

In a trio of works, Cunningham's curatorial idea takes up the complex sequence of

crossover influences that have formed Australian art. The late Gordon Bennett's *Notes to Basquiat (Primal)* (2002) mixes quotations of the work of American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat with the palette of Aboriginal painting and images of 9/11. It hangs next to Fergus Binns's *Untitled (Smoke & Mirrors)* (2013), a conflation of pictorial traditions with an Albert Namatjira landscape seen through a Roy Lichtenstein pop art window.



Fergus Binns's *Untitled (Smoke & Mirrors)* (2013). Photograph: Artbank

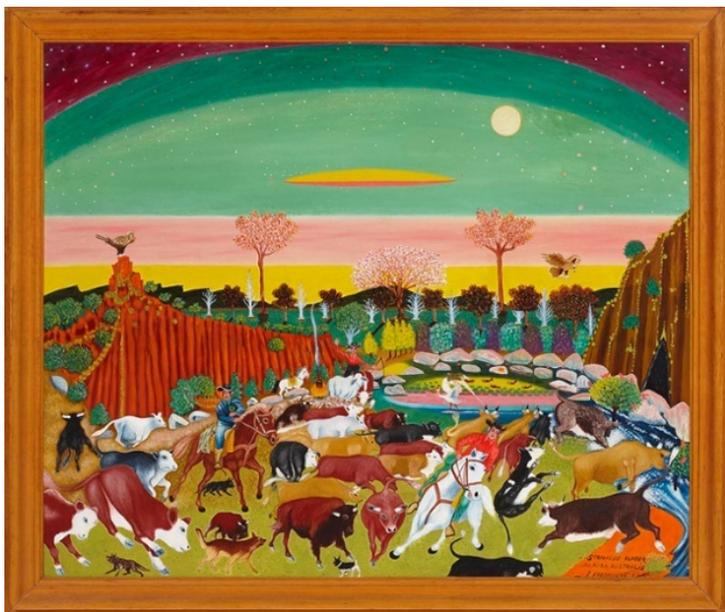
The work of Namatjira's grandson Vincent Namatjira is represented by the painting *Captain Cook* (2013), a simple rendering of one of the key historical figures in the imperial conquest of the country that would eventually become Australia. That these works are in Artbank's collection attests to two things - one, the lasting importance of tackling these kinds of ideas in art; and secondly, the readiness of the public to accept them.



Vincent Namatjira's *Captain Cook* (2013). Photograph: Artbank

Elsewhere in the show the art ranges from the idiosyncratically personal to the conceptual. In that first group would be works such as Frank Gohier's sculpture *The Phillip* (2006), a figure that looks remarkably like comic strip icon the Phantom, but is in fact a rendering of a neighbourhood eccentric in Darwin.

Works by naive artists such as James Fardoulis's *Stampede Under Aurora Australis* (1971) and Marjorie Wane's *A Tribute to the First Fleet* (c. 1988) do double-duty as representatives of art that exists beyond the official art world, but also as examples of how issues of the land and history play out in all kinds of art.



James Fardouly's *Stampede Under Aurora Australis* (1971). Photograph: Artbank

Of the more conceptual art in Loose Canon, Justin Trendall's *One Is Art* (2014) is a fantastic example of the artist's silk-screened mind maps of relationships between artists, history and the world. Kathy Cavaliere's *Untitled Home* (2012) reminds the viewer that beauty can be found in almost any form: a haunting image of plastic bags lit from behind take on an extra poignancy when you learn they were filled with the now-deceased artist's breath.



Kathy Cavaliere's *Untitled Home* (2012). Photograph: Artbank

In a similar way, Derek Kreckler's *Untitled (Moment)* (2003) – twin images of native flowers which are a response to the passing of the artist's father – are suitable images to welcome and farewell the visitor to Artbank's gallery. The story ends but the story goes on.

· Loose Canon is showing until 15 November at Artbank