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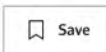
The curators bringing art back into the physical space



Detail of *Doomscroll* (2021), acrylic on canvas by Matthew Harris. @Matthew Harris / Courtesy FUTURES

Dan F. Stapleton

Jan 27, 2022 - 5:00am



Art-world kingmaker [Anna Schwartz](#) is royally fed up with galleries showing artists' work on the internet.

"The physical experience of looking at art is fundamental," she says emphatically. "Anything else – that flicking of images across the screen – just flattens everything."





Anna Schwartz wants to keep art firmly planted in the physical world. [Scott McNaughton / The Age](#)

Schwartz has joined the board of the [Melbourne Art Fair](#) to help push back against idea that, post-pandemic, galleries and collectors might as well embrace JPEGs and rapid-fire, social-media scrolling.

“My involvement has been on the basis of trying to present something of real quality and something very coherent at a time when there’s been so much disengagement,” she says.

Because Schwartz shuns virtual exhibitions, her [eponymous gallery](#) has largely been dormant for the past two years.

The fair, opening on February 17 at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, will serve as something of a welcome-back party for her gallery and many others. In total, 63 galleries are involved.

“I’m hoping that it will be a relaunch of the reality of a proper engagement with art,” she says.

According to Maree Di Pasquale, the fair’s chief executive and director, proceeding with the fair as COVID-19 lingers is a declaration of intent.

“It’s important for the art world to get moving – and keep moving,” she says.



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In the face of omicron. the board has not developed a plan B. be it



rescheduling or moving online. “If the law says we can be open, we’ll be open,” Schwartz says.

For this instalment of the biennial event, participating galleries have been asked to show the work of a single artist instead of the customary group hang.

Schwartz calls the new format “an opportunity to really engage” rather than “the mélange that art fairs often are”.

It is also a rebuff to the piecemeal nature of viewing art online.

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Melbourne Art Fair director Maree Di Pasquale outside the Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne. Luis Enrique Ascuí

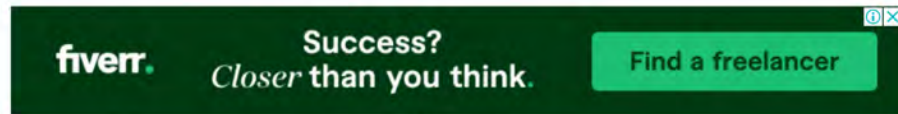
Sculptor and public-art provocateur [Emily Floyd](#) is Schwartz’s artist pick and will be showing a series of wall relief and free-standing sculptures that expand her ongoing interrogation of post-Marxist labour theories.

And other galleries are bringing similarly weighty work. [FUTURES](#), a Collingwood venue that launched mid-pandemic, is showing a single fiery painting by Matthew Harris.

According to FUTURES co-director Zara Sigglekow, the work draws on Hieronymus Bosch and medieval religious tropes to depict Hell. “It’s pretty full on, but it’s funny,” she says.

Her co-director, Steven Stewart, seems undaunted by the prospect of establishing a new commercial gallery this year. "We've seen how starved people are for cultural nutrition and thought it was a personal responsibility, given our backgrounds and our ambitions and our expertise, to give back," he says.

Both Stewart, an American, and Sigglekow, a New Zealander, have gallerist backgrounds: he owned and operated another all-caps gallery, KANSAS, in New York City, and she was associate gallery manager at Neon Parc in Melbourne.

A dark green banner for Fiverr. On the left is the Fiverr logo. In the center, the text reads "Success? Closer than you think." To the right is a green button with the text "Find a freelancer". In the top right corner of the banner, there are small icons for a globe and a close button (X).

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Stephen Stewart and Zara Sigglekow at their Collingwood gallery, FUTURES. *Arsineh Houspian*

Stewart describes their participation in the fair as "infiltrating populism by riding on the coattails of people like Schwartz and other established galleries."

Stewart says he and Sigglekow are "incredibly grateful" to be involved in the event. But the pair seem ambivalent about art fairs in general. In fact, neither of them will be present at the show. Instead, visitors to their booth can use an iPad to learn more about the displayed work and about FUTURES.

"It's about provocation," Stewart explains. "It's about speaking to the absenteeism surrounding social events."

He adds: "It's also about laziness. I mean, we don't want to f***ing hang out in an art fair all day."



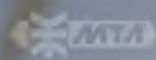
Danielle and Ryan Renshaw of The Renshaws. [Hanna Hervall](#)

By contrast, Brisbane gallerist Danielle Renshaw says the "hanging out" is precisely what makes such events valuable, both for collectors and for exhibitors.

She and her husband Ryan participated in several iterations of Art Basel Hong Kong when they ran Ryan Renshaw Gallery in the early 2000s.

"We were always situated across the aisle from a particular Australian gallery, and we became very close," she says. "That collegiate element of art fairs is so valuable from a professional point of view, because those relationships endure.

"But it's also just great fun. It's joyous. You get to see all your favourite people in the art world, which doesn't happen otherwise."



Cooling, Conditioning, Purifying



The couple is back on the scene after a six-year hiatus, during which they focused on their sideline as filmmakers and on raising their two children.



Dolce and Gabbana (Desiring Machines) by Michael Georgetti, 2019. @Michael Georgetti/courtesy The Renshaws

Their new project, [The Renshaws](#), includes a Brisbane gallery space, an adjacent artists' residence and a "shack" on North Stradbroke Island, where their artist friends can work.

The Renshaws plan to "slowly but surely" build a new roster of Australian and international mid-career artists. First up is abstract painter Michael Georgetti, whose work they will show at the fair.

"His work speaks about our addiction to consumerism and at the same time tells the story of art history," Renshaw says.

"You look at the paintings, and you can't help but fall in love with the aesthetic beauty of them. But the underlying conversation almost makes you laugh at yourself: even though the work is about our addiction to buying things, you also just really

want to own it."

Renshaw reckons Georgetti's work loses impact when reproduced digitally, partly because he welds sculptural brass frames for each piece.

"I think our audience understands the importance of the physical viewing," she adds.

Renshaw is not surprised that the fair's directors are resisting digital transformation, noting that the event has long stood apart from the mainstream.

Founded in 1988, it is owned and operated by the not-for-profit Melbourne Art Foundation and is largely overseen by a consortium of indie gallerists.

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Schwartz is confident that the single-artist format and resolutely physical nature of the event will, at the very least, generate conversation. "I don't think we will have seen an art fair like it in this country, perhaps in the world," she says.

"It will be very interesting to see how people respond. But my experience tells me that they will."

NEED TO KNOW

The Melbourne Art Fair runs from February 17 to 20 at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre. Go to melbourneartfair.com.au for tickets and further information.



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