

ART FINDS A NEW AUDIENCE

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PHOTOGRAPHY SCOTT EHLER



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A new partnership is bringing art out of the galleries and into the sleek foyers and corridors of the corporate world. For emerging artists, innovations such as the Clayton Utz Art Partnership could be the career break they are hoping for.

IN AN ERA WHERE THE ONCE-NARROW WHITE CUBE walls of art exhibiting are expanding into a multi-levelled edifice – from digital galleries to commercial spaces and ‘pop-ups’ – art is finding new audiences in fresh places. One such setting is inside the glass-clad façade of one of Australia’s leading law firms, Clayton Utz, where an initiative with 3:33 Art Projects is changing the face of corporate art displays.

The concept of ‘corporate art’ is not a new one, and some of the world’s best art collections belong to businesses such as Deutsche Bank, UBS and Bank of America Merrill Lynch. But Clayton Utz is doing things differently. The firm is hosting regular six-monthly exhibitions, partnering each time with two or more artists at different stages in their careers, and also establishing an artist-in-residence program at its Sydney premises.

Conceived by collector, curator and founder of 3:33 Art Projects, Max Germanos, a banker and former lawyer, The Clayton Utz Art Partnership represents an innovative step in the diversification of art exhibiting.

‘This is not your usual corporate art collection; it’s active and dynamic, with an immediate impact,’ says Germanos. The project is symptomatic of an era where time is a commodity and leisure a luxury. At its heart is the aim of exposing the time-poor corporate sector to contemporary Australian art, whereby Sydney’s perennial gallery-goers are supplanted by an audience far removed from the bubble that is the ‘art world’.

The partnership is a platform to not only view art, but to spend time with it in a familiar, comfortable setting – a delicacy in our exponentially fast-paced lives. ‘Art is critical in corporate spaces,’ says Germanos. ‘People spend hours, weekends, working in these places. I want people to live with the art, not to see it for a millisecond in a gallery. And a lot of people don’t have time to go to galleries, so this is an opportunity for the art to come to people. It’s a platform for new audiences; it’s an introduction.’

Bruce Cooper, Clayton Utz Deputy Chief Executive Partner, has embraced this opportunity to make contemporary art more accessible

to staff and clients, taking the initiative to remove Clayton Utz's existing collection to facilitate the project. 'If you walked past a gallery and felt scared to go in, because you didn't know what to say, we can bring the gallery to you,' he remarks.

The project is a unique way of sharing art beyond the walls of public and commercial galleries. In this sense, the works are humanised – inhabiting an everyday work environment rather than being enthroned in a tightly curated white cube. 'There's a level of confidence in seeing a work around a lounge, or around a cabinet, which you don't get in galleries,' remarks Germanos, 'but this project is not about competition to the gallery; it's a collaboration. It supports what they're doing by offering a new context and audience.'

Yet Clayton Utz's Bligh Street premises aren't a typical 'everyday work environment'. Designed by German firm Ingenhoven Architects and Australia's Architectus, the high-rise building – of which Clayton Utz occupies most of the first fifteen floors – is renowned for its contemporary design and inventive emphasis on ambient light, with a sleek fit-out by Bates Smart. 'It's one of the most spectacular settings you'd see anywhere in the country,' notes Germanos. Timber details soften the space, such as in the reception where an undulating ceiling of wooden panels evokes a sky of rolling hills, while curving walls ebb and flow like a tidal thoroughfare and glass offices ensure an outpouring of natural light and views across the harbour. It is, indeed, easy for art to shine in this setting.

Cooper reflects, 'When Max said to me "stand here for a moment and I'll tell you the potential for how this space can lend itself to a different treatment of art," it was an eye opener. Suddenly, we realised that we had an asset here that we were under-utilising, and this asset was our space and our light.'

For each iteration, Germanos stages the work of two artists at different points in their career as individual shows across the varying levels of Clayton Utz. The exhibitions are opened with a launch event, creating a welcoming experience for the arts and law communities to connect, and the firm also hosts artist talks and dinners with staff and their families, alumni and clients. The generosity expressed from all involved in the Art Partnership is a special experience.

The inaugural show in September 2017 featured a vibrant spectrum of paintings; thirty-seven by Wendy Sharpe and thirty by emerging artist Clara Adolphs. In the office reception, audiences were greeted with Sharpe's painting *The Witches*, an allegorical allusion to the enchantresses from *Macbeth* that garnered attention in 2015 after it was deemed 'inappropriate' by Liberal MP Craig Kelly because of its prominent female buttocks.

Even at Clayton Utz there was a 'gentle complaint', yet Cooper welcomed this provocative tenor. 'My view was, "thanks for the feedback, but we're not going to take it down. Don't look at it if you don't like it, but lots of people do like it, as do I." What I like is the different conversations people will have.' Although the bare bottom was included there was nonetheless 'a little bit of censoring,' remarks Cooper. 'I don't think we're ready for frontals – but I think as we mature, that sense of 'are we being too naughty' will fall away, and we'll get bolder.'

The presentation of Sharpe's work surveyed the artist's career, filling Clayton Utz with a colourful tapestry of subjects. Sharpe recalls, 'The paintings in the exhibition were mostly from my own collection. There was a range of works – from a huge triptych at Reception of Circus Oz performers to a large painting of women in a Sydney brothel and a self-portrait in the Antarctic.' For her, the partnership represents a crossroads of exhibition strategies, for it is 'neither a commercial gallery nor a public art space,' and yet it functions as both. For Sharpe's gallerist Randi Linnegar, the presentation 'proved that beautiful works of art are at home in many situations'.

Sharpe's sensual and boisterous compositions were like the extroverted older sister to Adolphs' subdued, semi-abstracted figures, which adorned the walls of Level 14. Created specifically for the show,

Adolphs' muted portraits of nostalgic figures formed a sharp contrast to Clayton Utz's crisp, focused interiors.

Some works fittingly featured the trope of men in suits. 'I did play with ideas of men a little more in this body of work,' reflects Adolphs, who also took part in a residency in the office. She continues, 'It's great to show work in another context outside the gallery walls, especially in times of such change within the art industry. My work is exposed to a new audiences that may not otherwise come across it.'

Adolphs' gallerist, Megan Dick of MiCK Fine Art, sees the project as a unique opportunity for emerging artists: 'As Clara is a young artist who has only been exhibiting for five years, it's an opportunity to present her paintings to a large number of people who are as yet unaware of her work and are not likely to walk into a gallery to view it.'

The second instalment of the Art Partnership pairs the works of Sydney-based artists Jason Benjamin and Nick Collerson. After a four-year absence from exhibiting at a commercial gallery in Sydney, Benjamin commends the project's promotion of increased visibility and exposure along the narrow road of art exhibiting. 'Let's face it, art needs all the help it can get. It just makes sense to have another platform for people who perhaps ordinarily wouldn't go into a commercial gallery to see your work. I've always wanted my work seen by the broadest possible spectrum,' he says.

When Cooper and Germanos introduced Benjamin to the space he immediately responded to it with a vision for his exhibition. He set about creating new paintings, although there was no requirement to do so, producing a suite of delicately refined still lifes and landscapes. The works have been enlivened by the enigmatic new light and space of the building, and likewise the office has been transformed. 'I get excited with each new rotation,' says Germanos, 'it's fascinating how changing the art also changes the feel or the mood of a space.'

The embodied experience of viewing art is more pronounced in the Clayton Utz office as audiences must physically walk through the expansive offices to consume the show. For Collerson, this hatches a fertile space for contemplation. 'Usually in galleries it's easy to see many of the works from a single spot, but with this show, because the paintings are hung throughout the floors and in different rooms, you have to walk to see all of the paintings. This is great for my works because I consider the imagination of the viewer to be a vital ingredient in the paintings.' In the space, Collerson's paintings are difficult to resist. His familiar subject of the everyday rendered with painterly sensitivity reminds us of the poetry of the mundane – that even a workplace can be a rich fount of inspiration and beauty if we recalibrate our vision.

Of course, this kind of project needs to be sustainable. For Clayton Utz, filling its offices with a changing roster of contemporary art sets it apart and helps to engage clients on a more human level, cutting through the linearity of 'business' conversation.

Speaking frankly, Cooper reflects, 'When we're trying to sell our services, it's difficult for us to differentiate that we're better than the next person – but what we can differentiate is that we might be more likeable. The ultimate aim of this partnership is to engage with our clients in a way that provokes conversations out of the ordinary. Instead of people coming into a boardroom and talking about the weather or the deal, we can now have new conversations, because everyone has different views about art. I've been amazed at how many people in the business and government communities understand art. For me, art is about having a conversation. It's that ability to engage.'

Benjamin reiterates this from an artist's perspective, 'The paintings hang to be seen and engaged with – it's not a token prize piece in the boardroom.'

01 Wendy Sharpe, installation view, Clayton Utz, 2018

02 Bruce Cooper (left) and Max Germanos



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The partnership is, according to Cooper, a 'two-way street', benefitting the artists and galleries as much as the firm. 'If we're enjoying the art and using it to engage clients, there has to be a sense that we're going to promote those works in conjunction with the galleries. Artists need to make a living.' Each exhibition doesn't conceal its commercialism under the oft-used veil of 'tastefulness'; rather it conspicuously makes known that all works available to purchase (in conjunction with the artists' galleries) in a well-designed catalogue detailing each of the artist's paintings. The decision to include price lists was 'all about making it really accessible, because if people are interested, they're going to ask anyway, so why not be upfront and proud that everything here is for sale.' In turn, Germanos and Cooper hope the partnership will nurture nascent collectors, giving them an entry point into the labyrinth of contemporary Australian art.

Although art and law are ostensibly worlds apart, for Cooper the Art Partnership fuses the two in an unlikely creative union. 'One of the reasons why I was so drawn to the partnership was the connectivity between lawyers, who everybody says don't have a creative side, and artists, who are iconically creative. The greatest lawyers are not the ones who are lineal thinkers, who go straight for the solutions; the greatest lawyers are those who combine creativity with technical skill. I think that's the essence of creativity – the avoidance of linearity. If people create in a straight line then after a while that's not creation anymore, it's repetition. Lawyers must be creative. That's why I see a crossover between artists and lawyers, which a lot of artists would say is madness!'

Ultimately, the Art Partnership forges a fresh new audience for Australian artists, one that may not otherwise view exhibited art. 'Even if you don't like art, what we've created here is an opportunity for people to not ignore art. You can't leave a meeting room without seeing a fascinating Nick Collerson work or walk through the reception without passing five stunning Jason Benjamin paintings. It's all about living with art,' suggests Germanos.

He and Cooper see a firm future for this unconventional project, which they are bringing to the Melbourne Clayton Utz office in June 2018 with exhibitions by Jon Cattapan and Dane Lovett. The next Sydney iteration will feature the works of celebrated artist Euan Macleod and Vanessa Stockard.

Cooper has high hopes for the partnership, 'I want this to be a continuing thing, so that in twenty years' time, an artist would say "I got my break because I exhibited at Clayton". That would be quite an extraordinary concept.' ■



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EXHIBITION

Jason Benjamin and Nick Collerson
April – September 2018
Clayton Utz, Sydney

Jon Cattapan and Dane Lovett
June – December 2018
Clayton Utz, Melbourne

Euan Macleod and Vanessa Stockard
October 2018 – March 2019
Clayton Utz, Sydney

For all enquiries, contact Max Germanos: info@333artprojects.com

Wendy Sharpe is represented by Linton & Kay Galleries, Perth, Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane, King Street Gallery, Sydney and Michael Reid, Berlin; Clara Adolphs is represented by Edwina Corlette Gallery, Brisbane, and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne; Jason Benjamin is represented by Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane, and Scott Livesey Galleries, Melbourne; Nick Collerson is represented by Liverpool St Gallery, Sydney.

03 Nick Collerson, installation view, Clayton Utz, 2018
04 Jason Benjamin, installation view, Clayton Utz, 2018
05 Clara Adolphs, installation view, Clayton Utz, 2018

Courtesy the artists, galleries, Clayton Utz and 3:33 Art Projects