



Culture taking shape: Michael Brand in conversation with Anna Waldmann

IN MID-2012, Dr Michael Brand succeeded Edmund Capon, who retired as director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) after leading the gallery for thirty-three years. Previously Brand was consulting director to the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (2005–10) and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond (2000–05), assistant director of Brisbane’s Queensland Art Gallery (1996–2000), and head of Asian art at Canberra’s National Gallery of Australia (NGA) from 1988. Here Brand talks about his vision for the 140-year-old AGNSW.

Anna Waldmann: What major challenges have you encountered in your first year in the job?

Michael Brand: One was the personal challenge of coming back to Australia after working in North America for the past twelve years. I have been in close touch, visiting twice a year, but you still wonder whether you have romanticised the place. I had to reacquaint myself with Australia professionally, and try to get to know Sydney as a city. Most difficult is trying to get out and meet as many people as possible.

The second challenge was getting to know the institution. I came with an open mind. Even before I stepped through the door there were big changes afoot – the gallery had lost a long-serving director and a couple of curatorial heads and before I could present my new vision I had to implement budget cuts. Despite this, it has been a very happy arrival and I feel inspired by the gallery’s potential.

AW: What are the changes you have noticed in art museums since the 1980s?

MB: Probably the biggest change is the awareness at art museums that there is modern and contemporary art outside the western world. When I started at the NGA in 1988, no-one asked me what I was going to do about contemporary Asian art. Now it’s a dominating issue. The new openness to Asian contemporary art has the added benefit of giving us another avenue into premodern Asian art. While Indian and even Japanese art of the twentieth century had been comparatively better known, in China there were

artists who were challenging communism and their government, and dealing with the after-effects of the Cultural Revolution. These dissident artists were starting a new chapter, and this has had a major impact on the world’s art museums. Fortunately this new awareness has not been limited to Asia.

AW: Your President, Steven Lowy, has said ‘We seek to have the gallery be best-in-class, not just in Australia but also regionally and on the international stage.’¹ Do you see the AGNSW as a local, national or global institution?

MB: It has to be all three. The key for me is the relationship between the city and the museum. Does the city live up to the museum by providing it with appropriate levels of support, and does the museum live up to the city in terms of ambition and breadth? Public collections reflect the history of their city, and the way they collect now has to reflect the ambitions of the citizens for their future.

I would argue that the AGNSW is probably the most-loved museum in Australia. But this doesn’t necessarily mean that we are delivering all the goods. You have to understand your institution’s history – each institution makes choices, some enlightened, some disastrous, some you think could have been more adventurous.

AW: Museums were once talked of as places that reinforced cultural hegemonies, but now are seen as democratising access to art. Are you exploring new ways in public programs to increase the number of visitors and the quality of their experience?

MB: There is much more that can be done. We are somewhat constrained by our lack of dedicated educational spaces at the AGNSW, but you don’t really want to shunt off all your education programs into classrooms. We also need introductory spaces that make students feel welcome. We are looking at all the ways we might engage with different audiences rather than just tweaking the current schedule of public programs. That means interacting online and through social media, and analysing the way visitors enter and move through the space. It’s a broader question of overall

public engagement rather than simply the content of individual programs. We need to be sophisticated because our audience is changing. Although, like almost all art museums, we lack funding for detailed audience research and thus don’t really know the full ethnic breakdown of our audiences, I am really impressed by how many Asian visitors we have. We are much further along than many art museums in attracting a more diverse audience. We are a city fortunate to draw people from around the world and we must make sure these visitors have some important experiences in our gallery.

AW: The AGNSW has a good collection, but a meagre acquisitions budget compared with the Getty Museum or Aga Khan Museum. How do you see the collection developing further?

MB: We will have to be very selective. In the end it’s clearly the quality of the works of art we acquire that is the most important issue.

My biggest challenge is ensuring we have adequate art-acquisition funds, because we have to keep collecting; we can’t stop, we are a living institution. For the past 140 years the AGNSW has primarily collected the art of living artists. Aboriginal art is one of Australian art’s most dramatic points of difference, although not the only one, and we must make sure that we continue to give international visitors a way of placing it in context. It is a core element of Australian art, but I find quite a lot of international colleagues find it hard to contextualise. Our goal is to find the most interesting way to display our collection in the most appropriate and stimulating context. In the broadest terms, I see our collecting beyond the field of Australian art as totally international in scope.

AW: During your first years at the Getty Museum, you settled Italian and Greek antiquities restitution claims. How will you ensure the AGNSW is protected from such claims?

MB: We have put in place at the AGNSW a new art-acquisition policy. We have to be very clear about our processes and have stringent guidelines. This makes it much more challenging to collect in some fields, but you have to work around these important issues

as intelligently as possible. Great works that have been in historical collections for a long time can still be found. You have to be selective, and that comes down to the quality of the curators and the ideas and objects they bring to me.

AW: What are your plans for staff structure and development?

MB: There have to be changes because of retirements and the recent budget cuts but I want to do things in the right order. We will first advertise for a Director of Collections, who will be a member of the gallery executive team and who will finetune the curatorial structure and participate in the hiring of a new Head of International Art. The latter needs a very broad knowledge of art history as they will look after a combination of the old international art and Asian art departments. With respect to Asian art, we cannot really have separate curators of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Indian, and South-East Asian art. We are not going to have specialists in every single area, but as we build institutional partnerships, we can perhaps also draw on expertise in other art museums where needed.

Our structure must reflect an understanding of our principal philosophies, such as a belief that Aboriginal art is a core part of Australian art and that we should show the full complexity of Australian contemporary art within the context of international contemporary art. We shouldn’t build walls between them: after all, the radio station Triple J doesn’t have one channel for Australian music and one for international.

AW: You serve on the advisory boards of Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, and the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, and previously on London’s Courtauld Institute of Art. These are exceptional connections. How do you plan to strengthen existing strategic alliances and explore new partnerships?

MB: Partnerships and alliances are going to be an important part of what we do, but ironically I seem to have arrived back in Australia at a time when there is less collaboration between Australian art museums than before. The path of exclusivity

can sometimes be the right choice, and if we collaborate on an exhibition with museums in Shanghai and São Paolo, for example, then it makes sense for Sydney to be the exclusive Australian venue. But if we want to bring exhibitions to Australia all on our own, it can become prohibitively expensive. Working with international partners will also involve sending exhibitions of Australian art overseas, staff exchanges and joint research projects with universities and other art museums. We want to see museum visitors in other countries understand what is special about our culture.

AW: Although Sydney is the gateway to Australia for tourism and business, it lags behind other states as a cultural investor. The gallery has outgrown its existing spaces and you are hoping for a new building.

MB: We are currently half the size of the galleries in Canberra, Melbourne and Brisbane. We've transformed every available space into public exhibition space, so that we probably have the highest percentage of our building open to the public of any similar institution in the country. We arguably have the country's best collection of contemporary Australian art but we can't show enough of it, we have to leave much of our art collection in storage. And we need different spaces for the twenty-first century, such as a cinémathèque that can be used in the evening and a range of spaces for Aboriginal art so we can better show its broadest significance within Australian culture. We need an expanded building where people will think 'this is a place where modern Australian culture is taking shape'.

AW: There is a huge cultural surge around the world towards the experience of art. People access art on their iPads, laptops, mobile phones and the internet. How will the AGNSW embrace new technologies?

MB: We offer free wi-fi throughout our building and we've already started with a visitor app for the iPhone and highly acclaimed Australian art and contemporary art iPad apps. But I

don't think you want to get too obsessed with such technology. In the end, we are a physical space containing works of art and what we want is to give people access to a direct one-on-one experience. We also have wonderful real-life volunteer guides. Personally, I don't want to have to use my iPhone every time I go to an art museum but this doesn't mean we shouldn't have a highly creative online presence. People used to sketch in art galleries and carry catalogues around exhibitions. The visitor experience has now changed and we have to keep on changing with it, and modifying it. We have to work out what people want, what people need. And that's not a lot of unnecessary distractions but, instead, well thought-out guides to help make the visit more significant.

AW: Which Australian or international museum directors have influenced and inspired you?

MB: I have to mention Frank Robinson, who gave me the job of curator of Asian art at Rhode Island School of Design Museum when I was finishing my PhD at Harvard. James Mollison appointed me to my first curatorial position back in Australia and I learned a huge amount from him in the year we overlapped before he moved to Melbourne. Doug Hall gave me broadened leadership responsibilities and a chance to work with contemporary art in an unusually open creative environment.

There are also two Asian art museum directors with whom I have had the good fortune to work, and who deserve much wider international recognition: Ma Chengyuan, the late director of the Shanghai Museum, who protected its collection during the Cultural Revolution and then opened its extraordinary new building in 1996, and Pich Keo, the former director of the National Museum of Cambodia, who rescued and revived that beautiful museum in Phnom Penh in the aftermath of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge.



¹ Ben Eltham, 'The superstar economics of gallery directors', *Crikey*, 17 February 2012, <http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/02/17/the-superstar-economics-of-gallery-directors/>.