



CHRIS SAINES RETURNED TO BRISBANE AFTER NEARLY TWO DECADES AS DIRECTOR OF THE AUCKLAND ART GALLERY TO STEER THE QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY/GALLERY OF MODERN ART, BRISBANE, INTO THE FUTURE. HERE HE TALKS ABOUT HIS PLANS.

CURATING THE FUTURE: CHRIS SAINES

ANNA WALDMANN

Chris Saines CNZM, Director of the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Brisbane, was born in the Victorian town of Myrtleford, and his first major job in the art world was at McClelland Gallery & Sculpture Park, Langwarrin, as curator, then acting director. Saines worked in education and collection management roles at QAG over 1984–95, returning to Brisbane in early 2013 after directing the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki in New Zealand for seventeen years.¹

Anna Waldmann: After almost twenty years away you have ‘skipped’ a generation of Australian artists, curators and collectors. What brought you back and what changes have you noticed?

Chris Saines: It was the attraction of leading one of Australia’s most confident and ambitious institutions and working on a much larger scale, across two great buildings. Despite their differences, Auckland and Brisbane share a commitment to contemporary New Zealand and Pacific art. I didn’t really lose touch with the art world here so the changes I’ve been most struck by are the changes in Brisbane and its confidence in itself. If anything, living in New Zealand enabled me to see Australian art through an independent lens. What I first noticed was how little had changed for Indigenous Australians – something profoundly delineated in the first exhibition that opened on my watch, curator Bruce McLean’s ‘My Country, I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia’ (2013–14).²

AW: Established in 1895, the gallery has grown in ambition, scale and the pace at which it operates. How do you see it evolving in the next decade?

CS: I want to enlarge our focus on Australian contemporary art while consolidating the work we are best known for – the art of Asia and the Pacific. I am determined to play forward the elements on which the gallery has built its current reputation, principal among them the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT), building off that to become even more widely recognised as a leader in curatorial, learning and online programs. It’s time to shift the production and distribution model, putting major exhibitions that we conceive and curate into wider circulation.

AW: You have guided the Auckland Art Gallery through a \$125 million renovation and expansion. In Brisbane you have two campuses. Are there any plans for a third?

CS: I have no plans for another venue but I have opened up a conversation about the QAG building, which I think has one of the best modernist interiors of any art museum anywhere, or at least it did. The back-of-house space has continued to creep into what was formerly public area and I want to reclaim these ‘lost’ spaces with an interactive and learning-based centre for visitors of all ages.

AW: QAG’s inaugural collection comprised thirty-eight paintings, one marble bust and seventy engravings. What are your plans to develop the collection and what will your emphasis be?

CS: I want the gallery to be the leading art museum for the contemporary art of Australia, Asia and the Pacific. While we don’t currently have all those bases equally well covered, that’s the strategy. Further, we are currently building a contemporary African collection, while simultaneously committing to some of our most significant ever Asian (Cai Guo-Qiang) and Australian (Robert MacPherson) acquisitions. Equally, we will work to grow the modern and historical Australian and international art collections in more targeted ways. For example, the foundation recently conducted a hugely successful appeal to complete our suite of Albrecht Dürer’s ‘The Apocalypse’ series (1511).

AW: How can QAGOMA engage in the international contest for exhibitions of quality and relevance?

CS: We no longer have the special exhibition funding we once had, so we are never going to win a bidding war. We need to address the relevance and quality of our program by increasing our involvement in the ‘primary market’, producing major exhibitions curated out of Brisbane for audiences both here and beyond. I want us to use our own considerable expertise, relationships and capacity to generate exhibitions, and then to tour them nationally and internationally. We are already committing to a series of internally researched and curated exhibitions of acclaimed living masters, including the American photographer Cindy Sherman (in 2016) and the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Chris Saines
Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane
Photograph Mark Sherwood

Albrecht Dürer, *The beast with two horns like a lamb*, c. 1496–97
From the series 'The Apocalypse' (1511)
Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, collection

An My Lê, *Patient admission, US naval hospital ship mercy, Vietnam*, 2010
From the series 'Events Ashore' (2010)
Archival inkjet pigment print on 380gsm, Harman Professional Inkjet paper mounted on sintra, edition of 5, 101.6 x 143.5 cm
Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, collection

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Shirana Shabbazi and Sirous Shaghghi, *Coconut and other things*, 2009
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 596 x 494.6 cm
Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, collection

German painter Gerhard Richter (in 2018). To mark GOMA's tenth anniversary we are developing a major project based on the interplay of light, sound, architectural space and the senses (2016–17), commissioning works by the American master of light, James Turrell, and by Jenny Holzer.

AW: Many art museums still favour blockbusters as a way of keeping their institution alive and interesting. What is your opinion?

CS: While I will continue to look for more classically conceived and imported pay-for-view blockbusters, I won't be overreaching to do them as often as in the past. Since I left in 1995 it seems that most major cultural institutions have developed a magnificent obsession with 'exclusivity', largely driven by state tourism development imperatives. In the process, I think we might have forgotten what inter-institutional collaboration can actually do for us, both artistically and in growing our state's cultural economy.

AW: In your welcome speech you said 'we need to work creatively, and take care not to confuse risk management with being risk averse. No-one will thank us for lowering our ambitions and our horizons to meet a common denominator'.³ How will you accomplish that?

CS: To paraphrase the great New Zealand-born British physicist Ernest Rutherford, we need to make up for what we lack in resources by thinking harder. The current financial climate might impose constraints but these things are cyclical and inevitable – they're not an excuse to do less because you have less to do it with. Moreover, they are a spur to take new kinds of risks and pilot initiatives, seek out new partners and be more adaptive in how you work with current ones, because there are always individuals and organisations for whom the right time is now. I want us to work even harder with our Cultural Precinct partners, with the three Brisbane universities, and even more creatively with our support base of artists, collectors and benefactors. I want to expand and redirect the enthusiasm of our philanthropic community towards programs such as research, travel, exhibitions, learning and conservation.

AW: Museum directors need to be fundraisers, scholars and public-relations experts – what is your forte and what are your challenges?

CS: I am passionate about the work I do and I think that's what makes me an effective relationship builder, good at engaging support for an institution. I think I also bring a deep knowledge and love of art to the role, although would never describe myself as a scholar. The biggest challenge at the moment is that the gallery has considerably less funding to invest in major exhibitions programs and, while that clearly has an effect on the future, I am determined to make it a positive one.

AW: You were at QAG in 1993 for the first APT, a significant event in the region and the first to focus on contemporary art in Asia and the Pacific. How will the APT evolve to maintain its uniqueness?

CS: The APT was founded with the far-reaching vision to re-position Australia and Queensland as part of the broader region it inhabits in the world. That goal has been fundamentally achieved and it's time to further refresh and shift focus. I want to enhance the scope and ambition of APT8 (2015) to more actively privilege a younger generation of artists and to expand our commissions program. Through the agency of a universities consortium, I also plan to reinstate the APT symposium and reinvigorate dialogue between artists, curators and writers around the project. I also want to see a stronger representation of performance, remembering just how extraordinary its effect was on the first two APTs.

AW: In Auckland you established the Auckland Triennial in 2001 and the Walters Prize in 2002. What Australian exhibitions are you planning for the future?

CS: We are presenting a new body of video work by Tracey Moffatt in 2014, curated by Kathryn Weir, and a major and long-overdue Robert MacPherson exhibition in 2015, curated by Ingrid Periz. I would like us to tour both. We are also developing a new signature series that will focus on the art and artists of Queensland, in which I plan to play a hands-on role.

AW: In November 2013 GOMA partnered with the Brisbane International Film Festival to co-curate film presentations. What other national and international partnerships are you working on?

CS: I want us to continue to partner with a range of local festivals, regional galleries and Brisbane-based performing arts companies, and I have been working to reconnect with dealer gallerists, artists, other state gallery directors, benefactors and international colleagues in order to refocus our range of partnerships. We are currently working with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo to co-curate a contemporary Asian project that will end its regional tour in Brisbane, and on similar fronts with the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney and Power Station of Art in Shanghai.

AW: Your forthcoming exhibition 'Harvest' (2014) examines the symbolism of food. Tell us more about the show.

CS: Through our collection, an Australian Cinémathèque program and a publication, 'Harvest' surveys the enduring role of food in art and film, tracing its historical and modern-day production, distribution and consumption as a subject of artistic enquiry. Considering food in every cultural tradition, it runs the gamut from seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings to politically charged ripostes, from the ubiquity of the global food brand to an exciting new commission by Los Angeles-based duo Fallen Fruit (David Burns and Austin Young) and a major new acquisition by Tomás Saraceno from Argentina.

AW: Which museum directors have influenced and inspired you?

CS: The Tate's Nicholas Serota, as he so clearly and unshakably believes in the power of art to influence and change lives. Glenn Lowry, for his intellectual grace and his strategic deftness in building and rebuilding the Museum of Modern Art, New York. James Mollison, for his far-sightedness and single-mindedness in establishing the National Gallery of Australia from the ground up. And Professor Peter Tomory, who taught me at La Trobe University (and who long-preceded me at Auckland), whose considered injunctions that I make a career in the arts set the course of my life. He is the single most inspiring person with whom I have ever worked.

My Country, I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 28 March – 20 July 2014; **Harvest**, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 28 June – 21 September 2014.

¹ This interview took place in Sydney on 12 December 2013.
² Originally on display at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1 June – 7 October 2013.
³ See Chris Saines, 'A new direction', QAGOMA Blog, 1 May 2013, at <http://blog.qag.qld.gov.au/a-new-direction/>.