

Silver Artrage 25

Curators:
Marcus Canning & Andrew Gaynor
Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts
18 October – 23 November 2008





SILVER: ARTRAGE 25 is a spectacle long overdue – a sweeping survey of the last twenty-five years of contemporary arts practice in Perth.¹ For curators Marcus Canning and Andrew Gaynor, the exhibition reflects an unashamedly personal selection, distinctly carnivalesque in its approach.

This notion of carnivalesque is apt given the cultural terrain and history covered by the Artrage Festival from 1983 to 2008; inevitably, the personal intersects with the pragmatic when attempting to accurately reflect the personalities, threads, moments, careers and trajectories across that quarter century. It is a very deep well from which to draw.

What has evolved in *SILVER: ARTRAGE 25* is a broad exploration of visual practice in Perth over time, evoking the spirit and atmosphere of different periods, highlighting seminal works, artists, contributors, exhibitions, and artist-run initiatives linked to Artrage programs.² Upon entering, the viewer is first struck by the bulk and sheer diversity of practice and intent. Sculpture, painting, performance, photography, installation, film, video, street art and all the mash-ups in between inhabit a space that is dynamic in its designated disorder.

Upon closer inspection, themes and strands start to emerge, linkages previously unrecognised become glaringly obvious. This too is apt, for the act of creating art within a community at some geographical distance from recognised 'centres' creates a more collegial atmosphere than many care to acknowledge. Collegial not in a blindly warm, fuzzy, non-critical sense; rather, it is evident that it is perhaps easier for artists to remain actively *aware* of the work of their peers whilst practicing in Perth, and doing so provides constant dialogue, stimulation, comparison, celebration and/or blatant rejection of particular aesthetic approaches or theoretic constructs.

It is also evident that many of the artists included have deployed their skills in multiple roles as curators, producers and instigators of collective enterprise in parallel with their practice – an important component of their contribution to the local scene. Throughout its history Artrage has been a support mechanism for this kind of direct communal production, and most of the 560 exhibitions listed in the 1983 – 2008 *SILVER* timeline have been instigated in this manner.³ In many instances (such as Belinda Cobby, Corine Van Hall and Ross Turner's *City Bleats*) this has involved key Artrage staff also acting as artists and producers.

As a further extension of this collegial thread, it has been a recurring practice for some local artists to become the educators of the next generations through tertiary positions, lecturing contracts, residencies and the like. If we consider sculpture, for instance, much of this ethos becomes evident through *SILVER*. In the 1980s, Perth had two main sites for study – Curtin University and Claremont School of Art. The latter placed a great emphasis on learning traditional skills (bronze casting, welding, carving and the like) but also reflected a certain DIY ethos with a heavy nod towards funk/junk art as pioneered by such artists as Ed Keinholtz in Los Angeles (another West Coast scene isolated from its Eastern counter-parts), and the Annandale Imitation Realists in Sydney.

Claremont sculpture teacher Tony Jones exhibited in the first 1983 Fringe Festival as part of the *Lecturers at the Claremont School of Art* whilst his then-student Stuart Elliott (later a Claremont lecturer himself) participated in *Praxis Inc* that same year. Their respective practices distinctly characterise the School's concurrent streams, with Jones' meticulously considered, formed and cast objects set against Elliott's more expressive works redolent with the marks of their maker. Their influence, in turn, carries on through the work of such artists as Cecile Williams, who is represented in *SILVER* by an early Claremont sculpture, some mid-career cardboard assemblages, and the more recent *Neighbourhoods* installation.

Though not from the same background, something of the same junk/funk/lo-fi pop ethos exists at the heart of the practice of Rose Skinner, a recent graduate from Central TAFE where she too studied under Tony Jones. Rose's strangely ordered environments are subverted by the sheer whackiness of their component parts – toy soldiers, disassembled toys, jelly beans, liquorice all-sorts – arranged in exuberant passages of hot pinks, greens and yellow.

In contrast to the 'Claremont School', Curtin University has a substantial history of a more direct and critical engagement with international contemporary art. Scottish-born David Watt arrived there in the late 1980s via Adelaide and Tasmania. A noted performance artist, Watt was possessed of a mordant, dry wit: a teacher who encouraged his students to explore widely within the media. His co-lecturer at Curtin was David Jones, himself known for elemental works that were often created in the landscape with direct site-specificity. Watt's sprawling installation *Knowledge...* neatly encapsulates many of his interests and skills.

In 1991, three of their students – James Angus, Tim Maslen and Mike Singe – united to present an extraordinary exhibition for Artrage entitled *3 Artists: 3 Dimensions*. Occupying a vacant warehouse in Northbridge, this landmark show succinctly demonstrated the educational strength of the Curtin course, with Maslen's natural timber forms bracketed off against the whimsical yet dark intent of Mike Singe's combines, and the coolly considered Angus pieces based on physics, mathematics and astronomical phenomena. James Angus has gone on to a major international career, collected in depth by Kerry Stokes and all major galleries in Australia, and was recently the subject of a touring survey⁴ hosted by the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Tim Maslen is now based in London and with his wife, the artist Jennifer Mehra, exhibits extensively throughout Europe, whilst Mike Singe has chosen to remain in Perth where his meticulous sculptures inspire many passionate local champions.

SILVER also includes works from across the careers of other Curtin graduates who have dynamic, critically acclaimed practices both locally and internationally such as Rodney Glick, Richard Giblett, Kate McMillan, Steven Holland, Mark Cypher, Richie Kuhaupt and Matthew Hunt.⁵ In particular, Glick (a multiple Artrage participant) is represented through two meticulously crafted miniatures from 1994, his signature *Lap-pool* photo exhibited at Breadbox gallery in 2006, and arguably the most powerful of his stunning *Everyone* series from this year.⁶

The work of other more recent Curtin graduates in *SILVER* includes signature examples of Josh Webb's dystopic narrative assemblages, Aidan Broderick's dyslexic amalgams, Bennett Miller's kooky vignettes and Simon Pericich's complex psychographics, Stuart Clipston's, Tom Müller's and Christian De Vietri's meticulous 're-castings' of the everyday and its systems of exchange; and in a far drier, new-wave kind of way, the work of Jamie Macchiusi.

As a counterpoint to the sculptural lineages evident across the history of Curtin practice, the very notion of object making itself came under forensic scrutiny from alternate directions in the Perth art community of the 1980s and 1990s. Media Space was an alliance of artists formed in the early 1980s which explored sound, performance, text and video. Deeply theoretical, critical and cynical, they (and their associates at Praxis) turned their laser stare on many of the (as they saw it) lazy assumptions and decisions slumbering within the heart of local arts practice.

Whilst none are individually represented in *SILVER*, certain of the Media Space members (particularly Paul Thomas) went on to create a dynamic course of study at Perth Technical College (now WA School of Art and Design at Central TAFE) which introduced their ideas to a new generation of students.⁷ The co-existence of these Curtin and Perth Tech strategies meant that those years saw an incredible resurgence in, and rich diversity of, performance art as many artists recognised that incorporating such a multi-disciplinary approach within their art making was indeed a fruitful conversation. Aadjie Bruce, Steven Holland, Richard Giblett, Rodney Glick⁸ and Andrew Gaynor all explored these realms during their various Artrage appearances, images of which may be found on the *SILVER* timeline within the exhibition.

Continuing with this thread, the University of Western Australia came on board in the early 1990s in a course where Dr David Bromfield reconceived how art could be taught. Performance was, again, a significant area of study, underpinned by a rigorous analysis of history and bed-rocked by critical theory. Partnered with Peter Mudie's 'Avant-Garde & Experimental Film' units, the UWA course resulted in a surprising period of distinctly alternate experimental activity in the underground of the Perth visual art scene.

SILVER artists Martin Heine, Mick Hender (aka Mickie Quick), Bec Dean, Lucas Ihlein, Marcus Canning, Felena Alach, Arlene Texta Queen, Emma Langridge and Andrew Gaynor were graduates of this course, and all were involved in varying degrees with the Jacksue Gallery and pad studios in the late 1990s, where some of the *SILVER* works were originally created and shown. This includes the resurrected *Climbing Ladders* by Paul Caporn and Tim Courtney, now reconfigured as the monumental centrepiece for *SILVER*.

Jacksue was a relatively late arrival and flash-in-the-pan of the local history of Artist-Run-Initiatives (ARI's) which in Perth stretches back to (at least) the 1940s.⁹ Various of these collectives operated as key artistic incubators and host venues for a huge variety of exhibitions and performances in Artrage Festivals, with participants from Gotham Studios, Giotto, Spiral, Praxis, Kurb, the Lab, Verge and numerous others all having significant input over the 80s and 90s. That is, before the recession receded at the turn of the century, and a new wave of gentrification and city redevelopment heralded the closure of most of these independent spaces.

This led to key collectives and partnerships applying their entrepreneurial acumen to more transient and event-based concepts, such as Muller and Clipston's *Supermart* series held at The Bakery Artrage Complex over 2003 – 2005, and Ben Riding & Christian De Vietri's monstrous *Hotel 6151* for the 2002 Artrage Festival. This event featured ephemeral, installation and performance works by over 50 artists spread throughout a derelict hotel.



Of the key performance practitioners exhibited in *SILVER*, Martin Heine is one artist identified by the curators as particularly significant within the 25-year trajectory. For the exhibition he has recreated one of the powerful 'car bonnet' paintings from his 1989 Artrage exhibition¹⁰ which is bracketed by painting from 2007, and foregrounded by the sprawled remains of a performance especially created for the show a mere four days before the opening. Currently involved with the Kurb Gallery in Northbridge, Heine continues to be an important figure within the Perth arts community whose painting, performance and life constantly inform and critique each other.

Similarly, Peter Stafford's practice is indivisible from his reality. Fascinated with the writing and thinking of Joseph Beuys and Rudolph Steiner, his work is meditative, brooding, analytical, confrontational and ritualistic – and continues to divide audiences. Stafford's rambling exhibit for *SILVER* comprises the remains of his opening night performance which incorporated elemental fragments from each of his seven Artrage shows, the first of which occurred in 1991.

Other, more instantly gratifying opening-night performances included Rebecca Baumann's *Confetti International* which saw clouds of multi-coloured flutter-fetti falling from the PICA clock-tower onto the Silent Disco crowd in the Cultural Centre below. Inside, a performance choreographed by Pilar Mata Dupont and Tarryn Gill, referenced rather than traced their photographic tableaux of sequined bathing clad beauties. This image has its genesis in both a 2005 spectacle performance commissioned by Artrage as well as Gill and Dupont's 'window-box' performance at The Bakery Artrage Complex in 2003.

Performativity is also evident in the works of James Doohan and Pete Carlino, and is heavily featured in the *SILVER* video program which includes excerpts of performance works from Felena Alach's *Wischmaschine*, Marcus Canning and Bec Dean's *Funktbear & Petty Beige* and multiple works from Tanya Visosevic. Other video excerpts also explore similar notions as well as identity, including the work of Minaxi May, and in some instances, Tim Burns. One of WA's truly great maverick artists, Burns is represented in the program by *KARAOKE*, a body of films he made in New York in the 1980s. Seen together, they offer a fascinating counterpoint and window into the cultural milieu of an international centre at the time of Artrage's inception.

Another celebrated maverick featured in *SILVER* is the perniciously prodigious Patrick Doherty. His vast mural *Taking a Gun to a Knife Fight* – measuring some 5.5m high by 15m long – is painted ready, rough and raw onto a huge army tarpaulin which dominates PICA's central space, where it provides an all-consuming back-drop visual plane to the other works in the exhibition. Since his first participation with Artrage in 2002 Doherty has become a nationally acclaimed artist. He has also co-curated and taken part in numerous significant exhibitions and large street-art shows in derelict and vacant buildings produced as components within a number of festivals.

Upstairs in PICA, an entire side of the Westend Gallery is occupied by a 'street-wall' that was commissioned specifically for *SILVER* as a truly grand and dirty reference to the importance of street and graffiti practice in the contemporary visual culture of Perth. Collectively created by Deathbot, Dlae, Creepy, Fudge, Hagar, Ololo Hurben, Slam, Sleep, Trevor 6050, Yok, Knowles, Daek and Ayre (who also curated the work), it features a range of painters who have literally gone to the wall for their art, with police house-raids and arrests being a regular feature of the state's current hard-line approach in the perceived 'war on graffiti'. A work by Jamie Mills, recently acquired for one of the state's most extensive private collections of WA art, is included not only as a nod to the importance of 'Stormie' as a seminal artist in the development of graffiti culture in Perth, but also to highlight the current madness that sees painters highly sought after by serious collectors on the one hand, and imprisoned on the other.

Other artists featured in *SILVER* (whose painting and drawing practices present little risk of landing them in prison) have a local lineage that again stems back to the double C's. Claremont and Curtin charted their own paths here in the 1980s and Shaun Wake-Mazey, Laurie Smith, Cathy Blanchflower, Trevor Richards, Jo Darbyshire and Peter Stafford were all individual beneficiaries of the two institutions' divergent teaching strategies. Whilst painters like Richards and Blanchflower (and their UWA colleague, Emma Langridge) have stayed within a defined set of bearings which underpin non-objective abstraction, others, like Darbyshire, Michele Elliot, Andrew Nicholls, Ben Riding, Steven Morgana, Daavid Anderson, Thea Costantino, What and Matt Doust have produced works which explore personal narrative, located more in the figurative and, at times, acutely decorative.

Sexuality and gender politics were major formative influences in the early work of Jo Darbyshire, territory she explored to great effect in the 1988 and 1989 Artrage shows *A New A Gender* and *Desire*. Her *SILVER* exhibit, *Wildflowers* (1995), was controversial when first shown, and remains contentious today due to its unashamed celebration of lesbian love, and for its brazen riposte to masculine 'ownership' of the great outdoors. Darbyshire's imagery is deeply autobiographical, and whereas *Wildflowers* marked the exultant start of an affair, the more sombre *Million Tear Chandelier* 2007 references the recent end of a long-term relationship in the artist's life.

Laurie Smith and Shaun Wake-Mazey collaborated on Artrage projects like *Confession* in 1989, which navigated a subconscious layering of personal symbol and influence over sixteen large canvas panels suspended over the Art Gallery pond behind PICA. In the interceding years, Wake-Mazey has continued with his exploration of personal symbolism, whilst Smith has doggedly and unashamedly followed a path first laid down by Cezanne, in exposing the 'nuts and bolts' behind painterly depictions of that hoary old chestnut 'the landscape'.¹¹ Surprisingly, this surfaces as a current interest in the photographic practice of Conor O'Brien. He refers to his work in *SILVER* as his first image knowingly inspired by the fine-art lineage, as well as the literal environment, of Victoria's 'Heidelberg School' artists.

Before moving to Melbourne, O'Brien was a leading character in a sudden wave of Perth artists post-2000 who based their practice on a rigorous engagement with photo-media. The impetus for this interest stemmed from a world-wide trend to fine-art photo-media work as well as, more locally, the move and restructure of the Photography Gallery of WA from Artshouse to PCP (Perth Centre of Photography). This action was instigated by Justin Spiers, and followed through by Yvonne Doherty, the two artists responsible for the extensive *Pet Photo Booth* series featured upstairs in *SILVER*.

Staring back across the PICA void at the regimented line of the 'Pet Photo' subjects is the resplendent, 5m high photo portrait of Cate Blanchett as amputee Madonna (Mother-of-God Madonna, not Pop-God Madonna) printed in deep redolent hues on a commercial billboard skin. It is a typically baroque image from Justin Smith, one Perth's most respected photo-media artists, also considered to be among the pantheon of the world's top fashion photographers.

Smith's lush aesthetic sits entirely at odds with the dry, documentary style seen in the work of many students from Edith Cowan University's photo-media courses who have been influenced by the seasoned eye of Max Pam. One of Pam's prodigies, Mark McPherson, has been notable for his particularly networked bodies of works. His *Hijacked* series of self-published zines and books chart many of the more interesting contemporary cultural emergences and aspects of Perth over the last ten years, and his portrait of Patrick Doherty features not only in *SILVER*, but also in his latest international 'coffee-table' release.

Upstairs in the PICA tower is the photo-media driven *In the Blink of the Night* installation, created by a collective of young photographers in a workshop series with professionals, all under the guidance of Poppy van Oorde-Grainger, a multi-media artist/producer who engages with community in the creation of works.¹²

The use of photo-media to describe the particular suburban and urban environments of Perth have been a consistent preoccupation for the thriving Perth photographic scene, particularly resonant in the exhibition that launched Artrage's Breadbox Gallery in 2002, *extracts 3*. The work of Tony Nathan in *SILVER* is from this show, which also featured an extensive body of works from Alin Huma's *splendid isolation* series. Huma was the 2002 Artrage Festival poster artist, and his work in *SILVER* is hung in close proximity to a painting from the inaugural Festival Fringe poster artist, Sam Abercromby, better known as Fremantle's first and most famous muralist.¹³





Huma produced a body of works before his move to Tokyo in 2004 that remain some of the most uncompromising, unflinching explorations into the harsh reality and vacancy of Perth's desolate, parched and strangely blank urban vistas and city environs. Like many artists, he framed Perth clearly as a cultural vacuum and void that offered a realm of unfettered potential and possibility if approached in the right way, and his practice from the time has a certain edge that speaks eloquently of this.

Perth has consistently provided its artists with a provocation to get pro-active or perish. Whether it be out of desperation or inspiration, the need to get-together, get-it-together, and get-it-on is a background static that fills the wide open sky. This ethos is as good as any to illustrate an underlying principle that has defined Artrage's various permutations and manifestations over its 25 years, and it's tangibly evident throughout the works in the exhibition.

SILVER: ARTRAGE 25 is one history containing multiple others. It is not exhaustive but it is inclusive to the best of its ability. The celebrations, discussions, laughter, tears, argument and debate that it will generate are as important as the process of bringing it all together in the first place, which would not have happened without the contributions of the instigators and agitators of Artrage since its inception including Paula Silbert, Barry Strickland, Ian Lilburne, Peter 'Heidi' Grant, and all the staff, board and other members and artists that have surrounded them.

Here's looking forward to ARTRAGE GOLD, 2033.

Marcus Canning & Andrew Gaynor

Artrage Research assistance & Project Management: Luke Milton & Jessica Darlow; Editorial assistance: Melissa Keys.

¹ Originally known as the Festival Fringe of Perth, the name Artrage was adopted in 1988 when the event broke away from association with the Perth International Arts Festival. For the sake of convenience, Artrage will be used in this essay to cover the whole 25 year history.

² Selections have also been made for *SILVER* from the Artshouse and Bakery/Breadbox exhibition programs. Both these galleries were developed and managed by Artrage. Artshouse Gallery was closed in 2006 after 15 years when Artrage was evicted from its home in the Cultural Centre by DCA to make way for the New Performing Arts Complex.

³ The *SILVER* timeline occupies the northern balcony wall of the exhibition. Designed by Marcus Canning and Tom Müller, the timeline carries numeric designations that are repeated on individual artwork labels as linkages throughout the show.

⁴ Organised by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

⁵ Belinda Cobby, Corine Van Hall and Ross Turner also studied at Curtin.

⁶ *Everyone No. 9* is exhibited alongside *I love animals and most of nature* 2008, by Rodney Glick and Lynette Voevedin.

⁷ Including Andrew Gaynor.

⁸ As 'Glick International' with collaborator David Solomon.

⁹ For a more comprehensive history of some of these collectives, see: Alison Archer 'Artist Run Galleries and Studio Spaces in the Inner City', *Situation Vacant*, Verge Incorporated, 1996, pp 20-43; Marcus Canning 'Mind the Gap, West End Character on the West Side', *kerb13*, RMIT Press, 2004, pp 22-27; Helen Carroll 'The City of Dreams', *A View from the Sea - Recent Art from Perth Western Australia*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery Press, UWA, 1998, pp 15 - 20.

¹⁰ His collaborator for the 1989 show was Gunnar Müller.

¹¹ Wake-Mazey also paints landscapes which draw on notions of the Romantic and the sublime.

¹² The six young photographers featured are Hannah Brown, Lucette Combo-Matsiona, Adhya Putri, Tim Green, Ella Moore and Phebe Shields working with van Oorde-Grainger and photographer Michael Ellis, with stereoscope concept and production by Steven Aiton.

¹³ Other Artrage 'poster' artists featured in *SILVER* include Rose Skinner, Yok, Cecile Williams and What.





SILVER: ARTRAGE 25

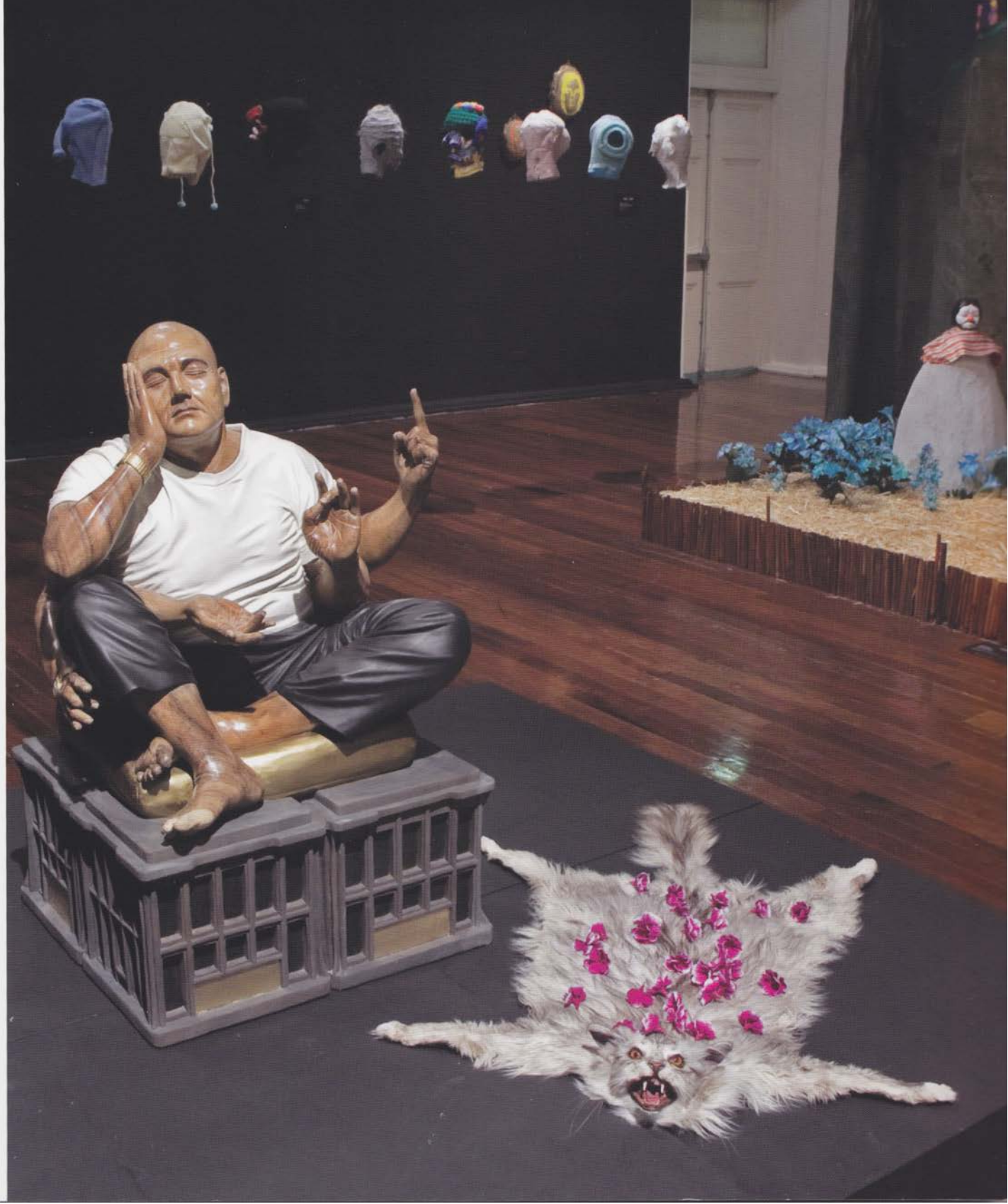
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