# Little yen for Australian artworks

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**Unless approved by London or New York, Australian artworks have received a poor showing in Japan, until now. By Deborah Cameron and Zilia Papp in Tokyo.**

Destiny Deacon's *Trustee* (2001), in *Walk and don't look Blak*, on display at Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography.

A solitary painting that has been in storage since it was donated in 1989 is the only Australian work in the 9300-piece collection of the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo.

By one of the greats, Arthur Boyd, it is a lonely talisman for Australian art in Japan's public museums and galleries. Never seen by anyone other than the curator who put it away, the *Australian Scapegoat* (1987), is, for all practical purposes, lost from view.

It is a typical example. Leading public galleries in Japan have almost no Australian art in their permanent collections, a random survey by *The Age* has found. What exists is rarely shown and there have been no important acquisitions of Australian art by museums and galleries for more than 20 years.

But a big exhibition planned by Tokyo's Bridgestone Museum of Contemporary Art, an outstanding trend maker and opinion shaper in the Japanese art scene, could alter all of that.

The exhibition, *Prism: Contemporary Art in Australia*, will include at least 34 artists, among them painters Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula and Rover Thomas, photographers Rosemary Laing and Tracey Moffat and sculptors Patricia Piccinini and Ah Xian.

The two-month show, which opens in October, is being regarded optimistically as a giant step forward for Australian art and an antidote to Japan's long-held fascination with European and American artists. The Bridgestone Museum belongs to the Ishibashi family, who own the tyre company.

Along with an exhibition by Destiny Deacon, the Melbourne urban art photographer, now on at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, and earlier exhibitions by Deacon's contemporary, Tracey Moffat, and countless others, Australia has spent decades trying to get Japan to lift its eyes from the coal and iron-ore statistics and focus on Australian culture, with mixed success.

With a government-backed official year of exchange in full swing, the exhibition line-up addresses a glaring imbalance in the artistic interests of the two countries.

Compared with Japan's neglect, Australia has a strong natural attraction to Japanese art and design. Among other examples, the Art Gallery of NSW has almost 1300 Japanese artworks in its permanent inventory and next month will exhibit *Zen Mind, Zen Brush*, a touring collection of Japanese

calligraphy. By comparison the last big public exhibition of Australian art in Japan was in 1992.

Big exhibitions such as the one planned for Tokyo's Bridgestone Museum help to build international knowledge and interest in Australian art, said Dr Gene Sherman, whose Sherman Galleries in Sydney has a 20-year history of selling art to Asian collectors.

She says that the absence of Australian works from Japan's public collections and the caution of curators dealing with unfamiliar artists was "one of my great frustrations".

While mainly focused on Europe and America, public galleries stuck to the safety of established names and then copied each other. If one bought a particular artist, they all bought, Sherman says.

"And when you came with an Australian artist who wasn't stamped by the art centres of the Western world, they weren't adventurous."

Although the Australian blank spot in public museums and galleries was a concern, private collectors have always been more interested in Australian art, Sherman says.

In the 1980s and 1990s, when Japanese bidders blazed into the headlines controversially, acquiring tracts of the Gold Coast, they took a lesser-known detour into galleries, soaking up details about Australian art and buying it.

"We had wonderful, wonderful sales to private clients who really were dedicated to developing serious collections of contemporary art that incorporated Australia," says Sherman, who has visited Japan 40 times since 1987, often staging private exhibitions. "One year I went five times."

Sherman has sold art to individual and corporate buyers in Japan and says the scene went quiet when the Japanese economy went into recession, but is now coming to life again.

"One thing that has always attracted me is that the Japanese never have to be persuaded about the importance of art and culture," she says.

"A less mature society does not see art and culture as an intrinsic, absolutely essential element of how a country perceives itself, how it is perceived, and how it defines itself as it moves forward. I think in Japan none of that needs to be explained."

It is too early to tell whether resumed Japanese interest in international art will be a replay of the 1980s and '90s when, with stratospheric bids, they lined up for every Van Gogh and Monet that came up.

Japan still hankers for European art. Interviews with curators at a succession of museums suggest that Europe is an almost exclusive interest for some. Recent public-sector budget cutbacks have reduced acquisition funds.

Of those public museums that collect Asian art, some said they did not define Australia as part of Asia so it did not interest them.

A visiting professor at the Minpaku National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Djon Mundine, says there are pockets of interest in Aboriginal art and culture at Japanese museums, but they are not widespread.

"We don't know what's here, what is being collected or what people are looking for," he says.

"Are they looking for a romantic spiritual place in their art or something else?"

Ken Done, whose decorative Sydney Harbour paintings also appear as T-shirt and tablemat graphic design, says that Japanese art buyers have strong instincts and know what they like.

"I have always felt that it was the young Japanese who first appreciated my work," he says.

But the Australian author, playwright and professor at Tokyo Institute of Technology, Roger Pulvers, describes a market that needed to have a "seal of approval" before it bought anything and that got confused about the Australian identity at the same time.

"Nicole Kidman is often described in the *Asahi Shimbun* (daily newspaper) as 'American actress Nicole Kidman'," he says.

"The Japanese have only responded to Australian culture that has had the good housekeeping seal of approval by New York or London. Our icons - the beach, the outback, the light, Ned Kelly - are unfamiliar. We don't get a look-in because they don't recognise our natural and figurative landscape as a subject of art.

"It's sad, because Fred Williams' work, for instance, has just that kind of brilliance in decorativeness and a degree of abstraction that the Japanese generally love."

*Prism: Contemporary Art in Australia*, Bridgestone Museum of Art, Tokyo, October 7 to December 3; Destiny Deacon: *Walk and don't look Blak*, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, April 29 to June 11.

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