Background information for media

Australia at the Venice Biennale

The Venice Biennale

The Venice Biennale is the oldest established international biennale and is widely considered to be the most important and prestigious event on the international contemporary arts calendar.

Established in 1895, a year before the first modern Olympic Games, it has been dubbed by many as the Olympics of the art world.

Every second year, around half a million art lovers from across the globe descend on the Venice’s historic Giardini della Biennale where, in the nineteenth-century tradition of ‘world fairs’, countries from across the globe present their best artists and art to the world.

The Venice Biennale is unique in that it also comprises a curated show as well as exhibitions of ‘national participation’, making it an essential forum for countries to affirm their nation’s artistic and cultural identity and status.

Venice also offers unrivalled opportunities for artists. More than 30,000 of the world’s most influential directors, curators, artists, critics, arts writers and arts professionals attend the three-day Vernissage period in this international taste-making, career-defining event.

The 2015 Venice Biennale will be held from 9 May to 22 November, 2015.

Australia’s presentations at Venice

Australia has had a long and rich history at Venice, beginning in 1954 with a group exhibition by prominent artists Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and William Dobell. While Australia’s presence continued for three biennales in the 1950s, it was interrupted by a twenty-year hiatus, a decision which is thought to reflect the Government’s official preference at the time for landscape traditions rather than non-figurative art.

Australia resumed its participation in 1978, following the establishment of the Australia Council for the Arts, firming up a permanent and confident place at Venice with the 1988 opening of the temporary pavilion.

Being selected to represent your country at the Venice Biennale is considered an extremely prestigious invitation. Participating in the Biennale is an unrivalled opportunity for an Australian artist to have their work seen in a global art context and can lead to further invitations to exhibit internationally.

The Australian Pavilion

Although Australia was one of the last countries to be granted a pavilion, it will be the first nation to redevelop and build a twenty-first-century pavilion in the Giardini.

The Giardini della Biennale is one of the main venues for the Venice Biennale. Located in the Castello district of Venice, the origins of the Giardini date to Napoleonic times when three churches and part of the old residential fabric were demolished to make way for public gardens. These gardens were then chosen for the first Venice Biennale in 1895.

In 1907 individual countries began to construct their own dedicated ‘national pavilions’ in the Giardini, each with their own distinctive characteristics created by renowned international architects. The first was built by Belgium, and a boom in the construction of pavilions occurred between the two world wars.

Today, there are only 29 national pavilions within the Giardini, representing 34 countries, and no further can be built, which means countries lacking a pavilion exhibit within the extensive buildings of the nearby Arsenale, or in sites across the city.

After much lobbying, Australia received permission to build on the second-last available location in 1988, receiving precedence over 16 other countries. A temporary pavilion designed by architect Philip Cox was built that same year, fabricated by Australian workers and shipped to Venice ahead of a June opening with an exhibition of work by Arthur Boyd.

Owned and managed by the Australia Council for the Arts, the pavilion has played an extraordinary role in the careers of many Australian artists. In time, however, the original two-level footprint and ongoing maintenance issues made the pavilion increasingly difficult to manage.

The Australia Council announced its intention to redevelop the Australian Pavilion at the opening of the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. Venice authorities granted permission to Australia to develop its pavilion because the existing building was always intended to be temporary. All other pavilions in the Giardini, with the exception of the Korean pavilion, are heritage-listed.

Prominent Australian architectural practice Denton Corker Marshall won the competition to design the new Australian Pavilion, and its designs were subsequently warmly received by Venice authorities, who noted the new building will improve accessibility and be a project of "great architectural interest".
• Funding the new Pavilion

Funds for the $7.5 million project have been sourced primarily through donations from private benefactors, in addition to a contribution of $1 million from the Australian Government, through the Australia Council.

The private fundraising efforts have been led by Australia Council Chair Rupert Myer AM together with Australian Commissioner for the 2013 and 2015 Venice Biennales, Simon Mordant AM, who has himself pledged a family donation of $2 million towards the project.

Significant contributions have also been pledged by the Belgiorno-Nettis family, Alan Myers AO QC and Maria Myers AO, Andrew Cameron AM and Cathy Cameron, the Nelson Meers Foundation and others.

The project has also attracted support from celebrated Australian artistic achievers including Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton and Rachel Griffiths and her artist husband Andrew Taylor. A full list of supporters follows at the end of this document.

• Denton Corker Marshall’s design

Denton Corker Marshall, one of Australia’s most highly regarded architectural practices, has designed a contemporary building that will be a powerful and confident addition to the Giardini.

The new Australian Pavilion has been designed for the display of all forms of creative endeavour. Incorporating sustainable features such as solar panels, its opening heralds an ambitious new chapter for the representation of Australian art and architecture internationally.

Denton Corker Marshall’s design for the pavilion is simple. As stated in their submission, their intention is “to make a form of the utmost simplicity: a white box contained within a black box. The pavilion is envisaged as an object rather than a building; a presence that is simultaneously powerful and discreet within the heavily wooded gardens.”

Significantly, the design re-orientates the pavilion entrance so it is now facing the Rio del Giardini canal, providing visibility from a number of vantage points.

“Setting the pavilion to now address the canal, bridge and the park across the canal, the idea of an unusual Australian object looking out from the edge of the trees, seems to symbolically sit with Australia coming all the way back to Europe to stand not on one of the main streets of the gardens, but enigmatically to the back and on one side in the trees. Perhaps closing a cultural circle,” says architect John Denton.

The Pavilion will be a two-level concrete and steel structure. The exterior, a black granite envelope, features large operable panels on three faces with one panel serving as the building’s formal entrance. The public spaces will be on the first floor, encompassing an entrance foyer and exhibition gallery. Art is the focus of the exhibition gallery – a white, rectilinear space of almost square proportions.
Denton Corker Marshall is an international architecture practice established in Melbourne in 1972 by architects John Denton, Bill Corker, and Barrie Marshall. While Melbourne remains the design base, the firm has additional practices in London, Manchester and Jakarta.

In Australia, Denton Corker Marshall is best known for landmark buildings such as the Melbourne Museum, the Melbourne Exhibition Centre and the Melbourne Gateway and Bolte Bridge, both part of the CityLink project.

Other projects by the practice include the multi-award-winning Manchester Civil Justice Centre, a new visitor centre at Stonehenge, Sydney's Governor Phillip Tower, the Museum of Sydney, extensions to the Australian War Memorial and Australian embassies in Tokyo and Beijing.

▪ The Australia Council

For the past three decades Australia's presentations at the Venice Biennale has been supported and managed by the Australia Council for the Arts, the Australian Government’s arts funding and advisory body.

The Council plays a vital role in the development of and management of all aspects of Australia’s presentations in Venice, and maintains ongoing relationships with the Biennale authorities, and the municipal and regional governments in Venice. It owns and is also responsible for the maintenance of and management of the Australian Pavilion.

The Australia Council provides a base budget towards each Biennale, and more than $1 million is raised for each Venice Biennale from sponsors, philanthropic foundations and private individuals.

Over $1 million has been raised for Australia’s presentation at the 2015 Venice Biennale.

▪ Australia at the Venice Biennale 2015
  The Commissioner, the Artist, the Curator

Simon Mordant AM is the Australia Council–appointed Commissioner for the Australian representation at the Venice Biennale 2015, and works closely with the Australia Council to provide advice and guidance on the planning and development of Australia’s official exhibition and other program elements. Importantly, he will also undertake high-level advocacy with key national and international contacts, representing Australia in formal communications with Venice officials.

Fiona Hall AO is the Australian artist invited to exhibit in the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015. She was selected by a seven-member panel of peers, who recognised her position as one of Australia’s foremost contemporary artists.

Fiona has invited contemporary art curator Linda Michael to work with her on the Venice exhibition.

Full biographical details on Simon Mordant, Fiona Hall and Linda Michael follow below.
- **Fiona Hall AO**

Fiona Hall AO is one of Australia's leading contemporary artists. She lives and works in Adelaide.

Fiona Hall first came to prominence as a photographer in the 1970s and during the 1980s she extended her creative practice to embrace a diverse range of art forms including sculpture, installation, garden design, and film. Transforming everyday materials and objects, Hall creates artworks which often address the relationship between nature and culture. Her practice includes major public commissions and projects that have increasingly engaged with themes of ecology, history and the effects of globalisation.

Recent solo exhibitions include Fiona Hall: Big Game Hunting at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, (2013), a major survey exhibition, Fiona Hall: Force Field, held by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2008) in partnership with City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand which toured to Christchurch Art Gallery, New Zealand and Newcastle Art Gallery, Newcastle, Australia, and the retrospective exhibition, The Art of Fiona Hall at Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane which toured to the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (both 2005).

Fiona Hall has been included in many important group exhibitions and biennales over the past two decades, including dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, Germany (2012); the Third Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2009); the Biennale of Sydney (2000 and 2010); Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968–2002 at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2002); Perspecta at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (1997); Prism: Contemporary Australian Art at the Bridgestone Museum, Tokyo (2006); DeOverkant/Downunder, Den Haag Sculpture 2007, Netherlands (2007).

Hall was the recipient of the prestigious Contempora5 Art Prize in 1997 and in 1999 won the Clemenger Art Award at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Hall’s work has been collected by all the major Australian public art museums, including the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; and the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. She has also completed a number of important public commissions, for example: *Folly for Mrs Macquarie*, 2000, Sydney Sculpture Walk, Royal Botanic Gardens; *Fern Garden*, 1998, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; and *Occupied Territory*, 1995, commissioned for the opening of the Museum of Sydney.

Fiona Hall is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

- **Linda Michael**

Linda Michael is a leading Australian curator, editor and writer. She lives in Melbourne and is the Deputy Director and Senior Curator at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne. Previous positions include Senior Curator at Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne (2001–2003) and Senior Curator at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art (1989–2001).
Linda Michael has undertaken numerous projects both nationally and internationally and has curated major exhibitions including Future Primitive (2013), Callum Morton: In Memoriam (2011) and Freehand: Recent Australian Drawing (2010), at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne; 21st-Century Modern: The Adelaide Biennial of Contemporary Australian Art (2006) and Patricia Piccinini’s exhibition We Are Family for the Venice Biennale (2003). She curated numerous Australian and international exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, including Mikala Dwyer (2000); word: artists explore the power of a single word (1999), and Real Fictions: Four Canadian Artists (1996), and was Australian Commissioner for Song of the Earth, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, in 2000.

Linda Michael has written extensively on contemporary Australian art and edited numerous art publications for museums and publishers Australia-wide. She has served on the Asialink Visual Art Committee, the Arts Victoria Arts Presentation Committee, and as a peer adviser for Visual Arts at the Australia Council.

Simon Mordant AM

Simon Mordant AM is the Commissioner for the Australian exhibition at the 56th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale 2015.

Simon has been a practising corporate adviser in Australia since 1984. He is one of the founding partners of Luminis Partners, an independent corporate advisory firm providing conflict-free advice to major corporations, private equity firms, institutions and Government bodies on strategy, mergers, takeovers and takeover defence, acquisitions and divestments, restructurings and capital markets activities.

Simon is a committed and passionate supporter of the arts. He has served as Chairman of the Board of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia since 2010, having also served previously as Chairman of the Foundation. He was the Australian Commissioner for the Venice Biennale 2013, and has led the fundraising for redevelopment of the new Australian Pavilion in Venice.

Simon also sits on the Board of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Garvan Research Foundation, the Museum of Modern Art PS1 board, the Leadership Council for the New Museum in New York, and is a member of the Executive Committee of the Tate International Council, a member of the International Council of The Museum of Modern Art in New York, a member of the Wharton Executive Board for Asia, and an Advisory Board member to Venetian Heritage in Italy.

In 2012 Simon was made a Member of the General Division of the Order of Australia for ‘services to the arts and the cultural environment of Australia through philanthropic and executive roles, and to the community.’
Pavilion Supporters

The Australia Council acknowledges the generosity of:

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- Australia at the Venice Biennale – Project Supporters

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### Past Representation

Australia first took part in the Venice Biennale in 1954. Since then a host of distinguished Australian artists have exhibited at the Biennale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exhibition</th>
<th>Curator</th>
<th>Commissioner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Sidney Nolan OM, AC Russell Drysdale AC William Dobell OBE</td>
<td>Sidney Nolan OM, AC Sir Daryl Lindsay</td>
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<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Albert Tucker</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Arthur Streeton Arthur Boyd AC, OBE</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mitti Risi</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Ken Unsworth John Davis Robert Owen</td>
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<td>Daniel Thomas AM</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Mike Parr Tony Coleing Kevin Mortensen</td>
<td>Penny Coleing</td>
<td>Mary Shaw</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Peter Booth Rosalie Gascoigne AM</td>
<td></td>
<td>Katrina Rumley</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>no participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Imants Tillers</td>
<td>Kerry Crowley, Paul Taylor</td>
<td>Kerry Crowley</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Arthur Boyd AC, OBE (Australian Pavilion opens)</td>
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<td>Grazia Gunn</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>Trevor Nickolls Rover Thomas</td>
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<td>Michael A O’Ferrall</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>Jenny Watson</td>
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<td>Judy Annear</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Bill Henson</td>
<td>Isobel Crombie</td>
<td>Ann Lewis AO</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>Howard Arkley</td>
<td>Timothy Morrell</td>
<td>Ron Radford AM</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Lyndal Jones</td>
<td>John Barrett-Lennard</td>
<td>Leon Parroissien AM</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Patricia Piccinini</td>
<td>Linda Michael</td>
<td>Victoria Lynn</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>Ricky Swallow</td>
<td>Charlotte Day</td>
<td>John Kaldor AM</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Callum Morton Susan Norrie Daniel von Sturmer</td>
<td>Senior Curatorial Advisor, AU3: Juliana Engberg</td>
<td>John Kaldor AM</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Shaun Gladwell Vernon Ah Kee Ken Yonetani Claire Healy Sean Cordeiro</td>
<td>Curator for Vernon Ah Kee, Ken Yonetani, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro: Felicity Fenner</td>
<td>Doug Hall AM</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Hany Armanious</td>
<td>Anne Ellegood</td>
<td>Doug Hall AM</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Simryn Gill</td>
<td>Catherine de Zegher</td>
<td>Simon Mordant AM</td>
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</tbody>
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