

A brilliant source of education

The Michael Buxton Collection of contemporary Australian art

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March 2018 saw the official opening of Buxton Contemporary, the gallery on the Southbank campus housing the Michael Buxton Collection of contemporary Australian art.¹ This gift of 354 works by 59 significant artists is remarkably generous in itself, but property developer Michael Buxton and his wife Janet Buxton have also provided funds towards the construction and endowment of Buxton Contemporary and its

operation for the next 20 years. Together, the gift represents one of the largest donations ever made to the University of Melbourne.

As a young man, Michael Buxton was fortunate to see some exceptional private art collections. He was enthralled, his instincts guiding him towards important works that would stand the test of time. He discovered he had a deep curiosity about the visual arts, its processes and its

makers—a true yearning for it all. ‘It is something that is inside you. You love it.’² He began collecting art in the 1970s, and his family’s collection continues to expand.

The collection donated to the university has been underway since 1995, and subjected to rigorous guidelines to ensure work is investigated and critically assessed before being purchased. The aim has been to collect significant artists in



Previous page: One gallery of *The shape of things to come*, the inaugural exhibition at Buxton Contemporary, 9 March – 24 June 2018. Francis Upritchard, *Echo cabinet*, 2011 (foreground); Emily Floyd, *The temple of the female eunuch*, 2007–08 (middle ground); Juan Davila, *Art IS Homosexual*, 1983 (back wall); David Noonan *Visitors, Kew and Leicester Square*, all from *Images* series, 2005 (right wall). Photograph by Christian Capurro.

depth and over time, and one of the results has been to show the evolution of each artist's oeuvre. Another result has been to illustrate broader connections—thematic or stylistic, for example—between the collection's various artists, spanning three or more generations since the 1980s.

The weave of this collection is thus intricate and rich, in no small way a consequence of the enterprise being steered by a board, with advice from a high-calibre curatorial panel. The collection's origins are cemented in a fundamental and admirable ambition to share, communicate and stimulate. For more than two decades, the objective of establishing a permanent public home for the collection was a goal somewhere in the distance. Now, it is a reality. Michael Buxton has described Buxton Contemporary as something he has always dreamed of—but better.

Avidly and consistently surveying contemporary art in Australia, and more recently New Zealand, the Buxtons have striven to go beyond personal taste when acquiring work for the Michael Buxton Collection. When they started collecting with a public museum in mind, Michael wanted to ensure that the collection would remain historically important into the future. The acquisition rules specified that work would be by

living artists only. The curators would identify 12 artists to be considered over a three-year period, with a focus on six artists per annum. The works acquired would be of demonstrable excellence and of significance to the development of contemporary Australian (and more recently New Zealand) art, with an emphasis on the 1980s to the present day, and representing innovations in practice across all media. The works would be bought from galleries representing the artists, or from the artists themselves, eschewing the secondary market.

Being moved, intrigued and stimulated by art for most of his adult life has been the fuel for Michael's unflagging commitment to the project. Those exposures have not only influenced his psyche but also affected the way he moves through the world: visiting galleries, speaking with gallerists, forming friendships with artists, visiting artists' studios and seeking counsel from curatorial teams. His extensive experience of contemporary art has taken him into a sphere of younger artists, whose creative energy has encompassed him. This invigorates his imagination in his work and relationships, and enhances his travel experiences to such places as the Venice Biennale, the Art Basel and Art Basel Hong Kong art fairs, and the Sydney

Biennale, as well as his adventures in Sicily, where the Buxtons live for several months each year. They have developed many great friendships in many parts of the art world.

Michael Buxton's professional life began in 1963 with property management and sales in the family business, J.R. Buxton and Co., whose Melbourne roots in real estate extend back to the 1860s. Michael had wanted to study architecture, but began at the J.R. Buxton office in South Melbourne and loved it, while simultaneously studying real estate at RMIT. He went on in the business until 1976, when, with Max Beck, he formed the property development company Becton, which was immensely successful. In 1994, he sold his interest in Becton, and in 1995 established MAB Corporation with his younger brother Andrew, where both men remain, as executive director and managing director respectively. During those work-focused decades, he collected art 'in an eclectic way', with names such as Jeffrey Smart, Arthur Boyd and John Perceval on the list.³ As he travelled the world more frequently, he began to concentrate on visiting contemporary museums and contemporary art shows. Ideas were beginning to form. Seeing the Loti and Victor Smorgon Collection



of Contemporary Australian Art was significant for him; he decided he wanted to continue on from where that collection had finished. The Smorgons had acquired work by emerging artists from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. Its criteria for acquisition had been focused, according to the collection's curator, John Buckley, on 'undeniable quality' and on representing artists 'truly and well'.⁴

In 1991 Buxton began studying fine arts at the Melbourne School of Art—a four-year course he didn't complete but which gave him further inspiration. He did not want to 'just collect' painting and sculpture, and was not looking for investment opportunities; he was deliberately building a museum collection. Gallery owner Anna Schwartz sees Michael Buxton's encompassing views as having partly come from

managing very successful large-scale real estate, with big figures and ambitions, and superimposing the scale of his thinking on collecting art.⁵ All enterprises pursuing success and longevity require strong structures and well-designed engines as their foundation; passion on its own rarely functions as a sustainable fuel. As Michael Buxton began to consider how to make his ambition for a museum-quality collection concrete,

he realised he needed professional assistance to create a sound framework around his enthusiasm. He sought counsel from some of the best people in the art world, including the highly esteemed Schwartz, who had been at the helm of her eponymous gallery in Flinders Lane, Melbourne, since 1986, as well as John Buckley, inaugural director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. In the first instance, Schwartz, Buckley and four advisors were asked to each provide a list of the best contemporary artists in the country. Two foolscap pages were filled. From this, further lists were developed, refined and cross-referenced until just six names remained: Howard Arkley, Mike Parr, Peter Booth, Peter Tyndall, Bill Henson and Tony Clark. Works by them were initially acquired in 1996–97.

Schwartz and Buckley worked together with Buxton on formally developing the collection: a board was established, budget set, and rules of acquisition formulated. Schwartz was immediately impressed by Buxton's eye for talent—even in a very early encounter with an artist's work—and by his homing instinct for significant work. She recalled: 'He chose very well from the exhibitions and put together a fantastically good collection of works from these artists.

I was actually surprised and pleased that Michael really took advice. And he took risks'.

While Buxton was prepared to take guidance from curators, it didn't stop him questioning them vigorously, especially when they presented something he didn't respond to positively at first viewing. Yet he saw having 'the guts to follow the curatorial advice' as one of the greatest benefits of having this team. The curatorial process brought a discipline that allowed them, along with a budget and board, to 'really do this as a museum collection'. Schwartz helped him step back to see the larger view of an artist's oeuvre, rather than focus on individual pieces—to think of it as if they were placing works in the collection for 50 or 100 years in the future. As Janet Buxton observed of this process:

When you do something in the organised, curated way it becomes not just something that you 'like' but it is what is important. It has to connect with you in some way—otherwise you wouldn't want it. But you see its significance in a different way.⁶

Two major public art events confirmed that Michael was on the

right path: a 1996 exhibition of Bill Henson's works in a cavernous disused power station at Spencer Street, as part of the Melbourne Festival; and the 1999 Melbourne International Biennial, *Signs of life*. Michael Buxton made acquisitions at the former event and was heavily involved in the latter. He remembers that both increased his excitement about what he was doing; he found himself in the thick of the Australian art world, seeing exciting new work, but he was someone with a specific and individual ambition.

It was in between those two events, in 1997, that Michael and Janet met and discovered their mutual love of the arts; even if they went to a gallery separately, they would inevitably agree on the same stand-out pieces. It brought a new facet to the collecting process:

Our love of meeting artists and spending some social time with them and listening to their ideas furthered our interest in collecting. We are privileged to have had these interactions with artists and it enables us to keep up with modern discourse.⁷

Curatorship is something Michael Buxton has always respected, and in the early days of the collection he quickly realised that curatorship

Installation view of *The shape of things to come*. Ricky Swallow, *Field recording/Highland Park hydra*, 2003 (foreground); Daniel Boyd, *Untitled*, 2014 (left), and *Untitled (TII)*, 2014 (right). Photograph by Christian Capurro.



inhabits a sort of frontier, where its practitioners act as mediators. On one side are the often private or difficult visual languages and conceptual foundations used by an artist; on the other is the viewer, bringing to the work their individual perspectives, needs and desires. Much of the public interface—placement, context, lighting, relationships to other artworks—falls within the purview of the curator, working with the artist. The curatorial team for the Michael Buxton Collection, originally spearheaded by Anna Schwartz and John Buckley, has changed over the years, but the names will be familiar to anyone involved in the visual arts: Max Delany, Charlotte Day, Samantha Comte, Mark Feary and Luisa Bosci.

Bosci sees the collection as representing Michael Buxton's personality: courage with the pieces he has acquired, also his love of painting and of 'colour, passion, vibrancy'.⁸ She has also observed an intelligence in the way he concertedly seeks professional advice, acknowledges that he can't know everything, is committed to meticulous research, and is always willing and open to learning new things:

When he started the collection, he said: 'Right, who in

Melbourne is at the top of the industry, knows what they are up to, and is going to be helpful to me in achieving what I want?' That is how it started. You look at the curator list and nearly everyone is running a major institution now, which is phenomenal. When they started it was early days for them in their careers and you never know what trajectory anyone is going to go on. He has chosen well.⁹

One of Michael Buxton's most illuminating experiences was when the curatorial team bought a Ricky Swallow sculpture and, due to various circumstances, his first viewing was when it arrived; it came as a shock, compared with previous works of Swallow that he and Janet had seen. It was not until the work was shown at Heide in 2001–02, and he heard the comments of young viewers, that he altered his opinion. The young people thought it was magnificent and explained the significance of the piece, and Michael went on to collect Ricky Swallow in depth: 'This made us realise you must have faith in your curators'.

The board, too, has been high calibre, with members including Doug Hall AM, John Fast, Sam Moshinsky OAM, Ada Moshinsky QC,

Simon Hayman, Charlotte Day and Vernon Wood. It has also included family members: Janet Buxton, Danielle Fergus, Luisa Bosci and Ford Larman. Part of the board's role is to question and put pressure on curators and make sure they are doing a thorough job and finding exemplars for the collection. The Michael Buxton Collection acquisition process is about selecting work that is politically and culturally important for the time and for the artist's career, but also durable—as much the pinnacle of that artist's work as possible. The evidence of that tight and careful strategy is in the collection itself.

It had become evident early in the collecting process that it was not enough to simply acquire work; Michael Buxton was eager to talk with the artists, to hear their thoughts and learn about their processes. Peter Tyndall had an interview-style video recorded very early in the collection's history. When Nicholas Mangan was filmed at Sutton Gallery in 2006, discussing *The mutant message*, the board agreed that in future all artists would be filmed discussing their artworks purchased for the collection.

Meeting artists has been a big thing for the Buxtons, and an important part of their education:

Exterior view of Buxton Contemporary, designed by architects Fender Katsalidis: main entrance, at the corner of Dodds Street and Southbank Boulevard. On the external screen is Kate Mitchell, *In time*, 2015 (video work). Photograph by James Geer.

When we first started the collection, with the six artists we had, we had a Christmas party and invited all the artists. We had a fantastic night: it was our first introduction to these people and then we started doing proper studio visits. That is one of the best things you can do—go and visit their studios and talk to them and understand what they are doing. Because it is quite complicated; their thinking process is very different.¹⁰

Simon Hayman describes Michael Buxton's interactions with artists and gallery owners as genuine and heartfelt, rather than part of an investment or acquisition. Buxton involves himself, and it is very personal, as some of the artists are his dear friends. Over the years, the Buxtons have held many social events at their home, at which they have invited artists and curators to lead discussions about works and associated ideas, and to which non-collectors have also been invited.

People at these events 'have always commented that they understood the depth and complexity of contemporary art when described first-hand. They always want to know more'.

The friendships with artists have emerged from Michael Buxton's love of understanding their practice. Once, he called an artist whose work was to be acquired, as he wanted to visit the foundry where the piece was being cast. A call from the artist to Luisa Bosci ensued: Was there anxiety



about the quality of the work? Bosci was amused and explained that this was certainly not the case—Michael simply had a passion for investigating how art comes to be. Says Bosci: ‘He is intrigued. I think at the end of the day he would have liked to have been an artist. But he ended up acquiring and learning from others.’

It has been estimated that there are more than 300 significant private contemporary art collections in the world.¹¹ Some collectors’ names are inextricable from the collections they have shared and, often, the architecture spawned to house them: Medici, Frick, Getty, Saatchi, Walsh, Guggenheim and Broad are among the most famous. The influence of private art museums in the global art landscape is considerable, with some research indicating that the quality of artworks and exhibitions rivals, or even surpasses, that of institutions, with visitor numbers often equalling those of public museums.¹²

Some commentators have wondered whether private collectors’ personal tastes might increasingly influence the kind of art that is commissioned, exhibited and ultimately written into history.¹³ When German art collectors Christian and Karen Boros opened their Berlin museum in 2012, they went to the heart of this conversation,

arguing that state museums are crucial for historical purposes, as opposed to ‘private collections, with their mistakes, their subjective tastes’.¹⁴ Observers in the art world, however, deeply admire the strategy the Michael Buxton Collection has followed in order to ameliorate such concerns. People such as Simon Hayman, for example, have great respect for the way in which the collection has been amassed; he has been especially impressed by the way the long-term goal of a museum has been the prime moving force, along with Michael’s energy, especially at board and curatorial meetings.

A strong reinforcement has been the way in which the move towards a museum has straddled different models of art collecting and patronage. Along the way, there has been extraordinary support for artists, both in purchasing their work directly and through enriching artists’ freedom by providing resources for residencies and other opportunities. Anna Schwartz’s observation is that the Buxton approach offers an excellent model for art collecting in Australia: ‘There’s often been a bit of a kind of “souvenirizing” approach by collectors, whether public or private; of wanting one of everything, and so collections can look a little homogeneous’. In collecting in

depth and across time, the Michael Buxton Collection provides a different insight into the artists’ works and their genesis: ‘The attempt was to give a chronology within an artist’s practice, and a diversity ... to make a connection between a viewer and the whole of the artist’s work’.¹⁵

In planning to make the collection public and permanent, the Buxtons and their advisors examined different management models, including a Buxton-owned and managed private museum, run along similar lines to other private collector art venues. There was much research, and plans were drawn up, but none proceeded when various issues around long-term governance were investigated. The priority was to have an entity that could exist beyond the lifetime of the Buxtons, yet remain true to its founding aims and ideals.

In 2012, a board member suggested involving the University of Melbourne. Through 18 months of conversations—during which time other universities made approaches about housing the collection—the idea to refurbish and extend a site at the Victorian College of the Arts, on the corner of Dodds Street and Southbank Boulevard, emerged as the favoured solution. In 2014 a deed was signed. Renowned architecture firm Fender Katsalidis was briefed to integrate

Installation view of *The shape of things to come*. To the left is the sculpture by Patricia Piccinini, *Game boys advanced*, 2002. Photograph by Christian Capurro.

and celebrate the intricate heritage building fabric into a series of new, uplifting gallery spaces and associated facilities to display the collection. The aim was to create an exciting new contemporary art experience that would, at its heart, showcase Michael Buxton's commitment to contemporary Australian art. Karl Fender considered it a masterstroke to enact this within the educational realm of the university, and to locate it in Melbourne's arts district:

The harmonious blend of old and new architecture was an important driver of the design. The stately presence of the heritage police stables administrative building provides the initial arrival experience to visitors and this subsequently morphs into the modern new additions which include more gallery space, administrative areas, loading [areas], work spaces and storage.¹⁶

The resulting space, like the collection itself, gently emits certain understated qualities. According to Luisa Bosci, the man for whom the building is named is neither brash nor showy: 'He is very down to earth and I think that the building reflects him'.

One of the most fervent wishes of Michael Buxton is for his collection to be used extensively for educational purposes—a poignant reflection of his own enriching experiences with the visual arts over the past few



decades. Opportunities to integrate the University of Melbourne’s formal academic programs in visual arts, critical theory and curatorial studies alongside the exhibition component of Buxton Contemporary have been built into the museum’s foundations. The students form the future of their industry and, by creating networks between the different strands of practitioners at such an early stage in their careers, one aim is to deepen the local arts ecology. The emphasis on education that Michael Buxton infused into the idea for a museum from early on inevitably extends to the broader reach of his collecting habits; he has long tried to acquire peripheral materials related to an artwork, such as preliminary drawings, sketches, moulds, casts and so on. He has sought these things not only for his own elucidation but also as a reflection of the complexity of making art and all the research and contemplation that underpin its production.

At the time of the opening of Buxton Contemporary, its founder wrote:

Twenty-three years ago, I had a dream—a dream to develop a major, forward-thinking private collection that would demonstrate excellence in the development of contemporary

Australian art. It was my dream to someday house that collection in a custom-built museum. Today, that dream has been realised. [...]

The collection has provided a brilliant source of education for my family and me, an in-depth understanding of contemporary practice that I don’t think could have been achieved had we chosen to collect art in a different way. It is now my dream that the collection will continue to serve as an educational tool, not only for students at the University of Melbourne but for all people who would like to understand and collect challenging contemporary art.¹⁷

Buxton Contemporary, located on the corner of Southbank Boulevard and Dodds Street, University of Melbourne Southbank campus, is open every Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 11 am to 5 pm, and Thursday from 11 am to 8 pm. Admission is free: buxtoncontemporary.com.

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- 1 This article is adapted from a longer essay by Andrew Stephens, ‘A history of the Michael Buxton Collection’, in *Buxton Contemporary*, Melbourne: Buxton Contemporary, University of Melbourne, 2018, pp. 14–29. *University of Melbourne Collections* thanks the author and Buxton Contemporary for granting permission to use this text.
- 2 Michael Buxton, interview with Andrew Stephens, 30 November 2017.
- 3 Michael Buxton, interview.
- 4 John Buckley, *The Loti and Victor Smorgon Collection of Contemporary Australian Art: Selected works*, Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 1988, p. 3.
- 5 Anna Schwartz, interview with Andrew Stephens, 13 December 2017.
- 6 Janet Buxton, interview with Andrew Stephens, 30 November 2017.
- 7 Janet Buxton, email correspondence with Andrew Stephens, 18 December 2017.
- 8 Luisa Bosci, interview with Andrew Stephens, 5 December 2017.
- 9 Bosci, interview.
- 10 Michael Buxton, interview.
- 11 Larry’s List/AMMA (eds), *Private art museum report*, Vienna: Modern Arts Publishing, 2016, p. 5, www.larryslist.com/report/Private Art Museum Report.pdf.
- 12 Larry’s List/AMMA (eds), *Private art museum report*, p. 6.
- 13 Kathryn Brown, ‘Public vs private art collections: Who controls our cultural heritage?’, *The Conversation*, 11 August 2017, www.theconversation.com/public-vs-private-art-collections-who-controls-our-cultural-heritage-80594.
- 14 Ben Mauk, ‘The rise of the private art “museum”’, *New Yorker*, 28 May 2015, www.newyorker.com/business/currency/the-rise-of-the-private-art-museum.
- 15 Schwartz, interview.
- 16 Karl Fender, email correspondence with Andrew Stephens, 12 January 2018.
- 17 Michael Buxton, ‘Foreword’, in *Buxton Contemporary*, pp. 8–9.