

ART & DESIGN

EXHIBITION

Evolving in an easterly direction

BY RAY EDGAR

When design impresario Lou Weis saw Azuma Makoto arrange thick steaks of prized wagyu beef into an ikebana-style sculpture, he knew he had his man. Marrying meat and flowers, the Japanese rock musician-turned-floral artist clearly understood the fetish object.

The punk florist would be ideal to translate the 19th-century fetishisation of Asia and particularly flowers – the decorative motif common to the period's arts and crafts and aesthetic movements – for Weis' latest project, *Broached East*.

Over the past four years, Weis' Broached Commissions and its core team of Australian designers – Trent Jansen, Adam Goodrum and Charles Wilson – has immersed itself in Australian history to reflect how white settlement has been influenced by our relationship with the original inhabitants, the land and its flora and fauna, and the subsequent migration of other cultures.

But these aren't slavish copies by any means.

For Weis, *Broached* is an exercise in design history that explores how ideas arrived and evolved in Australia. "It's about deepening the narrative of place," he says. "With *Broached Colonial*, it was the representation of the 'make-do' culture of Australia. With *Broached East*, there's the desire to belong to a part of the world we don't actually geographically inhabit. We're taking European trends to reflect upon the beauty of Asia, rather than just engaging with it."

Employing contemporary designers from those key countries is part of the *Broached* ambition. For *Broached Colonial*, English designer Max Lamb was selected; for *Broached East*, Makoto and Chinese designer Naihan Li provide the contemporary Asian perspective. The Asian influence is particularly resonant in Australia's past due to the massive migration of Asian prospectors during the gold rush.

Parallel to the decorative aspect was the physical trade in exotic specimens. The Wardian case was invented to transport plants around the globe. Makoto's obsession with plants made him the perfect interpreter for a 21st-century version. A fetish object in itself, Makoto's aluminium hothouse recalls Damien



Broached East explores the Asian influence on Australia. (Above and right) Armillary Whisky Bar, by Naihan Li; (top right) Chinaman's File Rocking Chair, by Trent Jansen; Paludarium Shigelu, by Azuma Makoto.

Hirst or Marc Quinn's vitrines. Instead of preserved animals, Makoto preserves bonsai plants.

Broached Commission uncovers a narrative for each designer and the objects they make. "Stories are a way for me to orient myself around what is particular about living here," Weis says.

Weis has mapped out about seven "heavily encrusted popular

"It represents people who thrive in harsh conditions."

periods" that *Broached* will tackle. Alongside the colonial and gold rush periods, the Great Depression is an obvious choice. Keen not to let a chronological approach stifle them, the Vietnam War is next.

"But it's also about uncovering stories you think you know," Weis says. "It's about dispelling preconceptions. People go, 'Oh, I know what that is'. Really, do you? They're not sufficiently reconsidered."

So while the poor, lonely, persecuted Chinese prospector is considered in Jansen's Chinaman's File rocking chair, it's countered by Li's whisky bar.

"Whites were convinced the Chinese were working all the time," Li says from her studio in Beijing. "They actually had fun in their own way. They even brought opera teams with them to the goldfields."

The story Li's object tells is based on a successful Chinese entrepreneur who travelled the world and partook of the good life. Her whisky bar conflates travel, exoticism, storytelling. The pattern of the brass armillary spheres is based on another flower motif, the plum blossom.

"It's one of the four flowers the Chinese scholars appreciate," Li says. "The plum blossom thrives in winter at the most strange location and time. It's also associated with pride. It represents people who thrive in harsh conditions – a character who travelled all the way to Australia and managed to be successful."

Where the 19th century saw the emergence of fetish objects such as the Japanese vase for a newly emergent middle class, Weis and his



team are creating them for upper-middle-class collectors. Ranging between \$5500 and \$45,000, only they can afford them.

Just as Weis was aware of the darker implications of white settlement with the colonial series, he is acutely aware that creating another fetish object is not necessary in any practical sense.

After spending the past four years creating about 30 high-priced pieces of furniture, this may seem surprising.

"We don't need any of these objects," he admits. "It's very much in the realm of desire, as is most creative practice."

Nevertheless, the commissions



have captured the imaginations of collectors and brought further commissions.

In Canberra, the Molonglo Group asked Weis to provide a series for its Hotel Hotel, which launches in May. Inspired by Walter Burley Griffin's utopian vision for Canberra, Weis' team has created a patterned table reflecting Griffin's idea to represent Gondwanaland by surrounding Canberra with various plants from around the world. Meanwhile, a bench emulates Griffin's faceted masonry.

The difference between the commissions and Griffin's utopian vision, Weis says, is that where Griffin dreamed of a clean city, they're interested in its opposite.

"Ultimately, the best parts of a city are the messy parts," he says. "We isolate these little bits of history because the messy parts have all been cleaned away – and they're the fun parts."

■ *Broached East* is at Level 7, 388 Bourke Street, city, until April 20. Tuesday-Saturday, 11am-6pm. broachedcommissions.com

deutscherandhackett



**final
call for
entries**

JEFFREY SMART
STUDY FOR THE TERRACE,
VARIATIONS ON A THEME, 1994
EST: \$140,000 – 180,000

important australian and
international fine art auction
melbourne • 24 april 2013

For a confidential and obligation
free appraisal please contact:
Melbourne • 03 9865 6333
info@deutscherandhackett.com
www.deutscherandhackett.com

VIEW CATALOGUE ONLINE

WORKS FROM THE
STUDIO OF JOHN
PERCEVAL AO



Auction: Tuesday
19 March at 2pm
Viewing: Sat 16
to Mon 18 March
from 11am-5pm

JOHN DE BURGH
PERCEVAL AO (1923-
2000), *Portrait after
Modigliani*, oil on canvas
Est: \$6,000-8,000

The Collins Collection of Royal Doulton
to be auctioned prior at 10.30am

310 Toorak Rd, South Yarra, VIC 3141
View online: www.mossgreen.com.au
mossgreen
AUCTIONS

Enquiries: 03 9826 0822
mail@mossgreen.com.au

**SUSAN SUTTON
RECENT PAINTINGS**

Geelong, the Surf Coast and Beyond

15 – 30 March



Ready to Race Oil on linen 75 x 95 cm

View works now at:

www.metropolisgallery.com.au

METROPOLIS GALLERY 64 Ryrie Street Geelong
5221 6505 • Open 9-5.30 weekdays, 10-4 Saturday