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ARTS

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galleries



er says they represent "practi-
tended to allow the fellows time
Nicholson (above), who teaches
something of an archaeologist to
ic memory. His *Comparative
Melbourne Now*. Other Victorian
Emma Donovan, Stephanie
Erkki Veltheim.

from car workshop

f new gallery Slopes, before
all. "It's the elephant in the room,"
t-for-profit, supported by
with Street, was once a Citroen
topian Slumps, Loughnan is
and the gallery - set to run for 12
oke Babington. Opening Thurs-
n, *The Knock-off Show*, counts
off, draw from or are otherwise
as Jon Campbell's *Pure Bewdy*,
ty, (1966-1968).



up into art world

faced graduates hatch from art
to become the emerging artists of
the VCA School of Art opening (on
y it's RMIT University's turn. The
graduate and undergraduate
courses and is on show until Friday,
rmit.edu.au/creativefestival
Dylan Rainforth

Visual arts Melbourne's cultural landscape showcased

Down-and-dirty

Contrasts, conflicts in complicated mix

MELBOURNE NOW

Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia
Federation Square, until March 23
Reviewed by Penny Modra

You can't avoid it. Halfway up the escalator at NGV Australia you'll cross paths with a black cat. It'll wave at you, too - goodbye if you're going down, hello if you're just arriving - in the hypnotic style of Japan's fortune-bringing maneki-neko. Stuffed and animated via some mechanical wizardry, it's exactly half omen, half lucky charm. The paradoxical invention of Melbourne trio Greatest Hits (Gavin Bell, Jarrah de Kuijer and Simon McGlinn), the cat offers a way, according to the wall plaque, "for the artists to comment on the numbing effects of exposure to excessive information."

What a perfect introduction to *Melbourne Now* - a blockbuster simultaneously touted as the biggest exhibition in the NGV's history and pre-emptively criticised as too broad and splashy. Will we - as a recent essay in *un Magazine* forewarned - "find ourselves lost in a trendy, pluralist, 'happy-mix' wash"?

The scale of the exhibition is daunting, for sure. Thumbing through my multi-page gallery map I remembered the art world complaint of critic Jerry Saltz: "Who is all this bigness good for? Is it any good at all?"

My feeling is that big doesn't have to be bad, as long as it's complicated. And *Melbourne Now* is teeming with zingy contradictions, resonant juxtapositions and tempting wormholes. All of this is aptly introduced by The Hotham Street Ladies, whose foyer installation might as well announce, "Welcome to our

lounge room, sorry we haven't cleaned up." Known for their food-based artworks (remember when they entered the Melbourne Show's cake competition with a pile of pizza boxes moulded out of fondant?) the group has re-created their Collingwood share house using icing. We're talking iced cushions, iced floor rugs, iced dirty dishes. Even the beer bottles have icing labels.

The ladies seem to promise a sprawling, messy tour, and the two floors above deliver. One of the most interesting aspects of the layout is the way that artworks displayed in the foyers on each level both position and foreshadow the works inside the galleries. The proximity, in the level 3 foyer, of Lauren Berkowitz's edible and medicinal *Physic Garden* to Janet Beckhouse's darker, punker take on nature and folklore is satisfyingly discordant.

But both works resonate with what I'll clumsily dub "the life room", a few steps away. This gallery is a quiet riot of mortality, mourning, nature, life-likeness, disease and science - from Stelarc's infamous ear-on-arm growth to Douglas McManus' decorative and degenerative textile "organs".

Georgia Metaxas' row of *Mourners* - portraits of widows, white faces glowing against black drapery - echo in binary colour and demeanour the mourning women representing Victoria's 38 indigenous tribes in Maree Clarke's stunning *Ritual and Ceremony* two floors below.

I'm not sure whether the cross-references are deliberate, but I like the way that proximity breeds parallels and conflicts here. There's also a kind of chaotic treasure-huntiness about the whole thing. A great exam-



ple of this is Slow Art Collective's installation - a musical habitat cobbled together from recycled materials and hidden between two ground-floor galleries. You can hear the handmade instruments reverberating through stairwells. You can also see it via the light wells - I spotted a kid from three storeys up break-dancing on the woven floor mats, then it took me 20 minutes to figure out how to get in. I loved it.

Given all this cross-pollination and vibey conflict I wanted to like the inclusion of design and architecture as part of the curatorial mix. In some ways it works: Clare Rae's photo series documenting her intrepid forays into the NGV's storage vaults is neatly placed next to the "open studio" of ARM architecture -

ONLINE MELBOURNE NOW

See full coverage of the the NGV exhibition, including a photo gallery and an interactive guide, featuring a 360-degree tour of the NGV International entrance, at theage.com.au/entertainment/arts-and-culture



TOMORROW LOST IN AUSTEN

Our film writers review a bumper crop of new releases, including romantic comedy *Austenland*, teen action/adventure movie *How I Live Now* and *One Chance*, based on the real-life story of a TV talent show winner.

blockbuster in disguise

Imaginative work together on poetic

MELBOURNE NOW

NGV International, 180 St Kilda Rd, Southbank, until March 23
Reviewed by Robert Nelson

There's a large dome made out of plastic bins in the courtyard of the NGV International. The white bucket shapes look like some new building material, hosting bits of hardy indoor plant, to make us believe that the built environment can be both green and domestic.

Called *Bin Dome*, this utopian satire by the architect Rory Hyde provides a keynote to many works in *Melbourne Now*, a show with much design and art that takes up the challenge of reshaping our city.

Hyde's witty structure recalls a geodesic dome from the 1940s, the affordable utopia of Buckminster Fuller. Though good engineering, the design was an impractical space-hog, having no rapport with a street or community. At the gallery, however, tent of buckets adds a happy walk-through function, like a pavilion in a park.

Rich in imaginative works, *Melbourne Now* accurately reflects the poetic and critical enthusiasms of our decade. The show only hangs together because the curators have bunched the heterogeneous spread around liaisons or juxtapositions.

A fine poetic strand of this celebration of Melbourne's richness and rancour is the impossibility of utopia. Melbourne, which tops world liveability metrics on account of its peacefulness, has always bred or attracted artists who are prepared to discredit paradise.

Consider Daniel Crooks, who stitches together footage of city al-



Charlie Soff's video work *33 objects*

leys to form a continuous laneway. Called *An embroidery of voids*, the process suggests quilting, where discrete vignettes are joined with conspicuous seams.

At each junction, we pass through a window or mirror to sample the back-end of properties from a different part of town. The rear vistas are sometimes enticing and intimate, when there are chefs taking a break in the chasms of the city; but the urban ravines give way to the low horizons of the inner suburbs and end, finally, in a fence, the ultimate void of Melbourne.

This tour of neglected nooks is respectfully installed near a fine painting by Rick Amor that takes down an urban blind alley, relishing the stressful monumentality of the narrow enclosed space. With this appreciation for architecture as theatre, Amor would have known how to contribute to Ewan McEoin's project with Zoom, which asks, "How might we design our future city?"

The paradise that artists decor-



Big creation: Slow Art Collective's installation at the Melbourne Now exhibition (above), waved in by Greatest Hits' black cat (right).

in which they'll examine unused areas of the city.

I spent a while staring at Laith McGregor's *S-O-M-E-O-N-E*. Echoing Picasso's *Guernica* in scale and structure, it's a morass of tiny doodles and notes-to-self. The one I read said, "If you want to see something, look at something else." I think that's what's going on here. Amid the deafening marketing and the "too-much-gloss" protests, the NGV has pulled off the ol' bait and switch: an awesome, down-and-dirty art tour disguised as a blockbuster.

