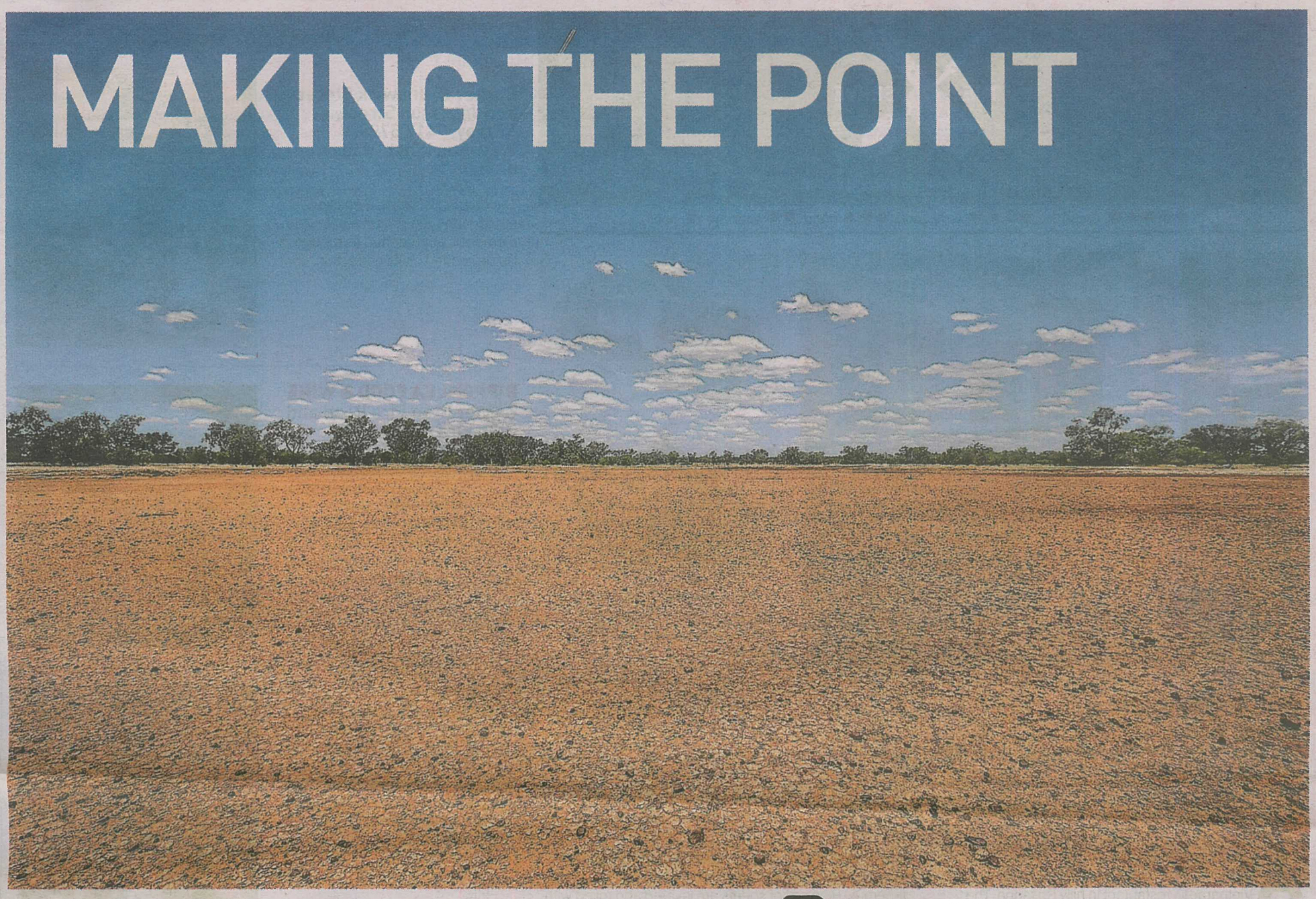
MAKING THE POINT



From intricate needlepoint to vast landscapes, Melbourne's artists find their voice in the NGV's Triennial, writes **GABRIELLA COSLOVICH**.

Before my visit, Melbourne artist Louisa Bufardeci sends me a short, thoughtful email: "I must let you know my studio is very small, quite stuffy and I share it with a dog. Do you suffer from claustrophobia? Are you afraid of (or allergic to) dogs?"

I reply: "I like dogs and while I'm not a fan of confined spaces, I'm sure I'll cope."

Bufardeci works from a tiny front room of her home in Melbourne's inner north, often in the early hours before her eight-year-old daughter wakes. It's a cocoon-like space that I find more cosy than claustrophobic, and the only thing remotely alarming about Tony, her lagotto romagnolo (an Italian water retriever), is his exuberance. He lathers me in dog-kisses.

It's often said that an artist's working space influences the kind of art they produce, so perhaps it's no coincidence that Bufardeci's recent work involves finely detailed needlepoint. A large, angle-poise magnifying glass hovers over a needlepoint in progress. She's been practising since childhood, she says, showing me a recently rediscovered needlepoint bag she made in her teens. It's an astonishing feat of design, patience and skill.

These days, Bufardeci uses the traditional craft in surprisingly contemporary and subtly political ways. In her work *The sea between A and I*, the delicacy of needlepoint draws attention to the indelicate and unjust. Created from 2014 to 2015, the work is a suite of eight needlepoints that depicts murky patches of ocean between Australia and Indonesia (the "A" and "I" of the title) where refugee-laden boats have come to an unfortunate end.

The National Gallery of Victoria snapped up the series after seeing it at Anna Schwartz Gallery and will exhibit it in its inaugural Triennial, an international exhibition of art and design which opens on December 15. Bufardeci is one of a handful of Melbourne artists included in the Triennial – chosen for work that complements or contrasts with the prevailing interests of their international peers, the global refugee crisis being one of them. Making art about political subjects is inevitably fraught, but it's the only sort of art that Bufardeci is interested in producing.

"I want to make work about things that matter, otherwise it won't be engaging for me to make it in the first place, and it's a challenge. It's a challenge to come up with the ideas, it's a challenge to see them through sometimes, and it's a challenge to get them shown some times."

Troubled by the Australian government's treatment of asylum seekers, Bufardeci began searching Google Earth using media reports to locate areas where boats had sunk on specific dates. As she peered into the shadowy images online, bodies seemed to materialise, and, in one case, a baby's face. These imagined figures inspired *The sea between A and I*, which maps and dates these easily forgotten sites of needless tragedy.

"It's saying 'this happened, to these people, in this place'," Bufardeci says. "It's not somewhere random. These are real people and it happened in a real place."

The needlepoints, with their intensity of colour – varying blue shades of Australian merino wool meticulously threaded through fibreglass mesh – have an abstract beauty that belies their significance.

"That's what appeals to me about visual art," Bufardeci says, " so I have to somehow marry the making of these beautiful objects ... and the ideas behind it as well. We just can't keep making anti-aesthetic work about political issues because that turns people off. There's an engagement with beauty, and I don't think that can be denied."

The Triennial is, in some ways, a response to the critical and popular success of *Melbourne Now*, the gallery's ambitious 2013-2014 exhibition that presented the work of more than 175 local contemporary artists.

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"As soon as we opened that show we were asked when the next would be, and it felt a bit reductive to do a show on Melbourne every few years," says the NGV's senior curator of contemporary art, Simon Maidment.

For the Triennial, the gallery has cast far beyond Melbourne, bringing together more than 100 artists and designers working at the forefront of contemporary issues and practice – and they are not necessarily household names.

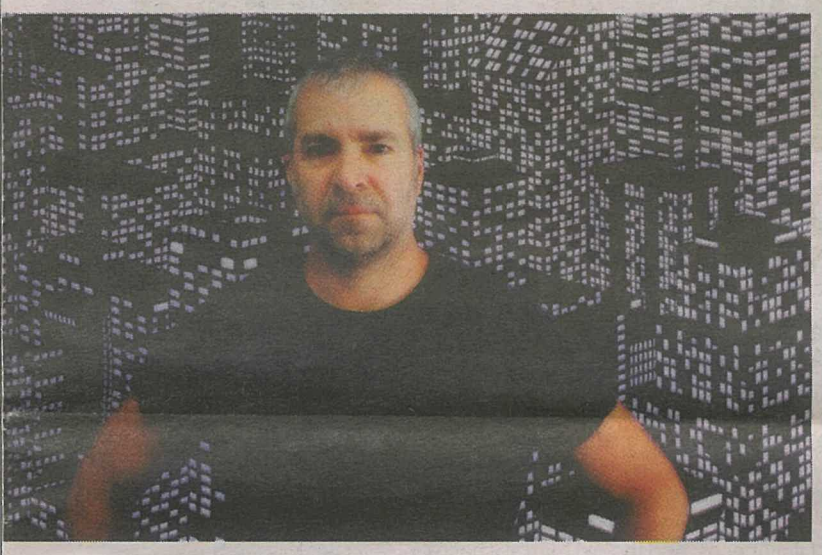
"Wherever possible we have aimed to introduce new artists and designers to audiences," Maidment says.

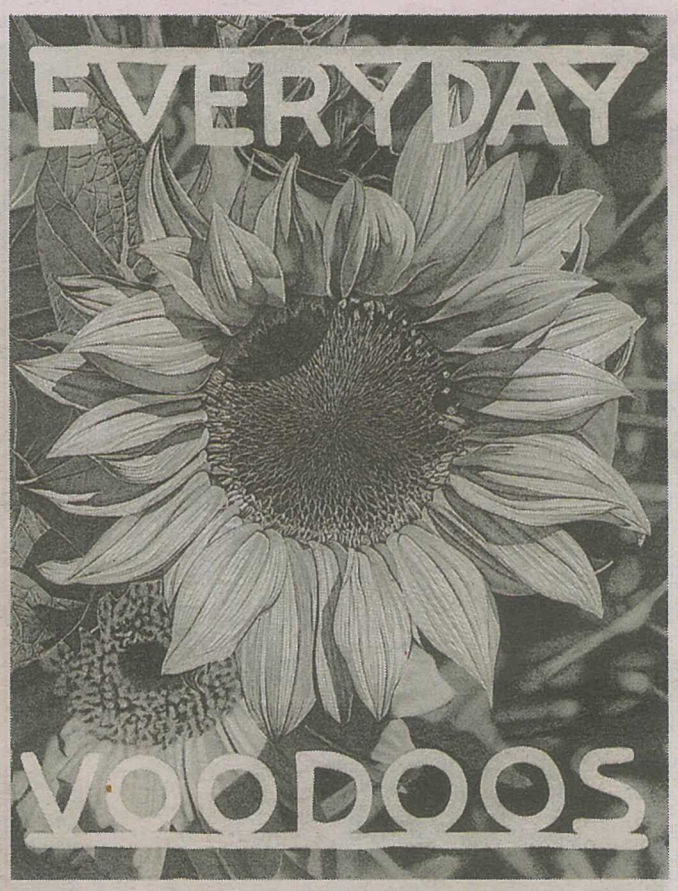
As artists were chosen, themes emerged, and one of the refrains was, unsurprisingly, the unprecedented movement of people across the globe. According to the UNHCR, 65.6 million people are currently displaced, among them nearly 22.5 million refugees, more than half of whom are under the age of 18.

Bufardeci's intimate needlepoints will be shown alongside the work of international artists with similar concerns, among them Berlin-based South African artist Candice Breitz, whose multiscreen video installation, *Love Story*, enlists Hollywood stars including Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin to recount the personal stories of those who have been forced to leave their countries. In using Hollywood celebrities, Breitz, like Bufardeci, is compelling Western audiences to consider their common humanity with the seemingly anonymous multitudes fleeing their homelands.

The increasing urbanisation of the human race, and the ensuing pressures on resources and infrastructure, is another of the subjects occupying contemporary artists. More than half of the world's population (54 per cent) currently lives in cities and, according to UN projections, by 2050, the figure will rise to 66 per cent. By 2045, the world's urban population is expected to surpass 6 billion.

Cities have long fascinated Melbourne artist Richard Giblett, and he strongly suspects that growing up in Hong Kong has something to do with that. "We lived up on the eighth floor, so I spent all





IT STARTS WITH A SKETCH

For Melbourne furniture and interior designer Chris Connell, "drawing is the most personal expression you can make without voice". Self-taught, he hails from an era when design was done by hand, and he continues to use freehand sketches to develop his ideas. Connell has been a fixture on the Melbourne design scene for more than 30 years, famed for his work in hospitality and retail. The outlets bearing his mark include Caffe e Cucina, Mr Wolf, the Prince Wine Store and, most recently, Bar Carolina in South Yarra.

The G'Day chair by Chris Connell and Brian Sayer.

The NGV is also about to feature his handiwork – the gallery has commissioned Connell to create a new chair for its Great Hall, to be launched at the Triennial.

From his studio and showroom on St Kilda Road, Connell shows me his light, loose sketches for the new chair which draws inspiration from the Great Hall's enticing Leonard French ceiling and the hall's slender black columns.

"I remember as a kid when it first opened just lying on the floor and looking up at the ceiling. Many people have," Connell says.

The resulting chair subtly echoes the colours and shard-like shapes of the ceiling's stained glass – the last thing Connell wanted was to compete with its timeless allure.

"I didn't want to design a statement piece," Connell says. "Less is more is quite an important part of our mantra." **GC**

those first years looking out and looking down on things, this bird's eye view," he says, as we sit in his studio, a spacious, turntable-equipped garage at the back of his home in Melbourne's inner west. He recalls many hair-raising landings between skyscrapers at Hong Kong's now closed Kai Tak airport – ranked as one of the world's most dangerous.

"I remember looking out the airplane window and seeing people in the apartments. You literally had to fly between apartment blocks to land," he says.

When he reluctantly moved to Perth with his family in 1973, aged 7, the flat, suburban landscape was a shock to his urban sensibilities.

"It was unlike anything I'd experienced before," he says. Now 51, he remains a dedicated urbanite, with no intention of joining the drift of sea and tree-changers. Images of teeming city skylines adorn his studio-garage – there's a fabulous old record cover of Italian conductor Mantovani's 1964 *Manhattan* album, and a photograph of one of Giblett's own paintings capturing the sprawling, scintillating grid of Los Angeles.

A more futuristic and dystopian work has been acquired for the Triennial. Titled *Sump system (2015-2016)*, it's a seven-metre long triptych, an aesthetically stunning labyrinth of buildings and pipelines reflected in an oil-black sea. German film-maker Werner Herzog's 1992 documentary *Lessons of Darkness* was an inspiration for the work. One of Giblett's all-time favourite films, it's an apocalyptic portrayal of Kuwait's devastated oil fields in the wake of the Gulf War.

Giblett resists overtly environmental messages, but his Herzog-influenced painting can be read as a comment on the world's catastrophic consumption of energy. The logos of consumer culture lurk in this complex and strangely contemplative landscape – McDonald's double arches, Mercedes' three-pointed star, Ikea's bold block lettering.

There's humour too – Giblett has snuck in some well-known artworks, including friend and fellow artist Callum Morton's *Hotel*, a well-known piece of Melbourne freeway art, and the Brancusi sculpture *Endless Column*. While the work appears as smooth and seamless as a computer-generated image, it is in fact painstakingly hand-drawn and then painted in gouache using the finest of brushes. Giblett holds up one of his triple zero brushes – a maddeningly thin tool, a mere wisp of hair.

Clockwise from main: Reko Rennie's huge photograph of the Australian outback will envelope the gallery's cylindrical elevator shaft in Federation Court.
From *The sea between A and I* (2014-15), suite of needlepoints by Louisa Bufardeci.
A season for every day (2015) by Riley Payne.
Riley Payne. Louise Bufardeci. Richard Giblett.

Finishing his vast three-panel canvas was an endurance test, he admits, but he enjoys the old-school craft of drawing, and the illusory play of a hand-made image that mimics computer-aided design. Before turning to fine arts, Giblett studied graphic design in the pre-computer age and the use of pencil and gouache has stuck.

"The best computer is the one up in your head. Well, that might change one day," he laughs, "but at the moment at least."

Drawing is also the method of choice for Melbourne-born Riley Payne, who moved to New York two years ago. From his windowless studio in Brooklyn, reassured by the knowledge that outside a thriving metropolis awaits, the 38-year-old, self-taught artist spends weeks, if not months, creating spectacular photo-realist images using nothing more than graphite pencils. He then undermines these drawings by leaving sections unmarked, highlighting the artifice of image-making and thwarting the desire for perfection.

An impeccably executed drawing of a sunflower has the words "everyday voodoos" oddly inscribed in negative white space. The drawing of two hands massaging a foot, every crease and sinew intricately marked, has an empty white ring left around the big toe. A greasy breakfast of sausage, baked beans and eggs has two white crosses inscribed in the yolks, transforming the garish feast into a wacky face.

I wonder whether Payne subverts his obvious gift because in the contemporary art world drawing for drawing's sake is no longer enough. He searches for a diplomatic answer, not wanting to offend enthusiasts of drawing for drawing's sake. He describes the dual nature of his personality – the clashing forces of ego and restraint.

"Something I strive for is extreme finish, but I can't show these drawings without negating that a little bit," he says via Skype from New York. "I'm aware that I'm a show-off, but I think things become a little bit problematic when you present something that's just what you can achieve technically."

His images are often sourced from the endless torrent of online material. Payne transforms these images from fleeting to lasting; he pins them down and pauses them. Like Giblett, he, too, is playing with notions of the hand-made and computer-generated.

Artists' enduring interest in age-old methods such as needlepoint and drawing is another trend that became evident as the Triennial evolved.

But on the NGV's ground floor, audiences will encounter the monumental with works such as Chinese artist Xu Zhen's 15-metre long replica of a reclining Buddha upon which are perched reproductions of Greco-Roman statues. Nearby a huge, beacon-like photograph of the Australian outback will envelope the gallery's cylindrical elevator shaft that rises up from Federation Court.

The photograph, by Melbourne artist Reko Rennie, is a magnificent image of red earth and blue sky, taken in northern New South Wales, near the birthplace of Rennie's paternal grandmother, Julia, a Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay woman.

The work is a change of direction for Rennie, known predominantly for his bold, strikingly coloured paintings and murals based on the traditional designs of his ancestors. The photograph was shot during Rennie's recent emotional return to his ancestral home, as part of an art project in which he marked the landscape in ceremonial circles by driving a camouflage-painted Rolls Royce through the red earth.

The Rolls signified the wealthy pastoralists who had once lived on the land and for whom his grandmother was forced to work after being taken from her family. Like Bufardeci's needlepoints, Rennie's photograph marries beauty and a disturbing subtext – the installation includes the words "I was always here".

In the context of an international exhibition, the work is a potent reminder of the displacement of Australia's first people.

"On the one hand, it's just a landscape photograph," Rennie says. "But it's more than that. It's about the connection to country and identity that realistically can never be taken away."