Where the statistical is the political

Artist Louisa Bufardeci uses statistics to give her work a political edge, writes **Ashley Crawford**.

Statistics and Excel spreadsheets. Hardly the stuff of art, one might think. But for Louisa Bufardeci they are the DNA of incredibly elaborate and colourful installations that say a great deal about the contemporary world.

Bufardeci's work is part of the group show, *Cycle Tracks Will Abound in Utopia*, at the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art in Southbank. Her monumental installation is a fragile-looking structure made of slats of coloured timber holding up precariously leaning walls.

It's all too easy to imagine tripping over one of the struts and the whole structure coming crashing down. And that is the point. The struts represent government and non-governmental agencies and their various financial programs, including those dealing with Third-World countries, and it is a delicate-looking assemblage indeed.

Despite its heavy subject matter, Bufardeci's coloured timber creates a room of fairy-floss hues. The viewer can be seduced before realising that one of those support structures represents the pitiful funds going to landmine victims in Cambodia or AIDS victims in Kenya.

Bufardeci believes that art can inform people about social and political issues — Picasso's *Guernica* is a famous example — but concedes that altered political awareness may not necessarily be a direct consequence of exposure to art.

Her aesthetic and structural influences are firmly grounded in the 20th century's abstract art movements, most obviously minimalism and conceptualism: "While I have produced works that rely much less on aesthetics, I feel the work I do is most successful when I allow these influences to come through.

"There are times when the aesthetics of the piece are very important and *Team Joy* is an example. Here I'm asking the viewers to consider the role of international organisations in the wider ambitions of the world — if, indeed, there are any. It's a difficult question to pose because, a bit like the question of a utopia, it's somewhat inane."

Yet that question is what curator Juliana Engberg is exploring in *Cycle Tracks Will Abound in Utopia*. The exhibition, which draws its title from *A Modern Utopia* by H.G. Wells, explores concepts from architecture, social planning, migration, industrial relations,

Louisa Bufardeci, left. PICTURE: DOMINIC O'BRIEN

Her work *Team Joy*, right, on show at *Cycle Tracks Will Abound in Utopia*.

politics, economics, environmental activism and science fiction to "prod this perpetual place of hope and folly within societal imagining".

Bufardeci hopes the use of colour and the aesthetics in *Team Joy* opens the work to a much wider audience. "The appreciation of colour is universal, so there is a level on which the work can be appreciated without the viewers having to invest too much into the conceptual aspect. Young children can enjoy it too."

But there have been times when Bufardeci has eschewed colour entirely. *Cold Storage*, presented at the Anna Schwartz Gallery in 2001, invited viewers to consider the housing of asylum seekers in detention centres. The installation was made of brown cardboard boxes because "in this instance the use of colour seemed entirely inappropriate".

Similarly, *Another Rounding of Facts*, shown at 200 Gertrude Street in 1999, drew on information from the 1996 Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody and was executed almost entirely in white.

Despite her passionate pursuit of statistics, she admits that plugging figures into the Excel accounts program is her least favourite part of the process.

"My interest in statistics as a form of representing humans came from having to participate in a series of Australian Bureau of Statistics questionnaires on employment hours. At the time I was working as an artist and as a teacher and studying part-time. I didn't fit into any of the categories on the questionnaire and was often asked to select the 'nearest' category, which for me was like asking which colour was closest to red: yellow or blue. I was anxious about what policy the statistics would be used to inform and how it was ultimately going to affect me."

Bufardeci derives her information from a dazzling array of outlets, but she questions the accuracy of any set of facts and figures.

"I know from first-hand experience that statistical information is simply not accurate," she says. "Most frequently I use the Central Intelligence Agency's *World Factbook* as my data source. The CIA is an excellent source of information for many reasons; mostly, the fact that it has all this information stored is already interesting.

"The *Factbook* lists information on over 230 different countries, which is 40 more than the United Nations lists on its website. Information that can be updated is done so every year, but there's also a lot of data that dates back to the early '90s. Now that the veracity of the CIA's intelligence is being called into question, it's an even more disquieting source."

Cycle Tracks Will Abound in Utopia is at the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, Southbank, until September 11.