



SPRING 1883 – a narrative-based art fair for the experience age

Melbourne's preeminent art event, SPRING 1883, returns to The Hotel Windsor as part of Melbourne Art Week. The four-day event (Wednesday 1 August – Saturday 4 August) sees 24 leading galleries – from Australia, New Zealand and the USA – each take over a suite of the iconic venue.

Now in its fifth year, SPRING 1883 shows the best of contemporary art from a full spectrum of galleries, from emerging artist-run initiatives to long-established institutions such as Jan Murphy Gallery and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Participation is by invitation, allowing the exhibitions to evolve out of shared conversations and conceptual concerns.

SPRING 1883 co-founder Kate Barber says the hotel-based art fair responds to demand from both galleries and audiences for a more experience-driven version of the international art fair format.

"SPRING 1883 responds to the idea of the experience age: audiences and collectors enjoy exploring the four open levels of the historic Windsor Hotel, discovering challenging and cutting-edge contemporary art behind each new door," Barber says.

"A number of galleries will be presenting performance art events and new, site-specific installations responding to the luxury hotel environment. That couldn't happen in a traditional white-cube context."

Modeled on the Gramercy International Art Fair (now The Armory Show), SPRING 1883 taps into a growing trend of galleries looking for immersive ways of showing art and for audiences seeking something more intimate or experiential.

Vikki McInnes is Spring1883 co-founder and, with Barber, co-director of Melbourne gallery Sarah Scout Presents. She notes a strong trend of commercial galleries engaging narrative to signal their broader contexts, including environmental, social and historical concerns.

"Recently major galleries such as Gagosian and Hauser & Wirth have gone to elaborate lengths – for example at last year's Frieze art fairs – to recreate the ambience of historical exhibitions, artists' studios or museum displays within the art-fair environment," McInnes says.

“What’s interesting are the ways these galleries are attempting to impose narrative and storytelling into the more sterile fair format. Of course, many commercial galleries were originally based in dealers’ homes and, today, we see collectors increasingly opening their homes to the public, so a hotel-based art fair – in a quasi-domestic context – strikes me as a more authentic way to go about it.”

“The contrast of showing contemporary art against the historic glory of such a ‘grande dame’ as The Hotel Windsor adds a terrific frisson.”

The collegiate atmosphere SPRING 1883 engenders is also significant, with galleries enjoying the chance to share ideas with colleagues, while also meeting collectors, in the relaxed ambience of the hotel rooms.

SPRING 1883 co-founder, and director of Neon Parc, Geoff Newton says this collegiality is important in a sometimes cutthroat art world.

“Neon Parc attends several art fairs internationally every year but I always look forward to SPRING 1883. It’s collegiate – both in the way we interact with collectors in the rooms and for the chance to interact with other gallerists after hours,” Newton says.

“Coming together as artists, galleries and collectors we form something of a ‘brains trust’ – there’s a real sense of collectivity and building a better art world. That aspect is becoming increasingly crucial in a more globalised art world.”

The success of the hotel-based model of creating an immersive narrative for art is such that some galleries have entirely abandoned the old bricks-and-mortar way of doing business.

Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art, for example, shows that a gallery can represent the works of highly respected artists such as Howard Arkley and Juan Davila without a traditional storefront.

“It’s a trend that even the largest art fairs internationally are now responding to, with Frieze only recently moving to admit galleries with no physical premises,” McInnes notes.

“For galleries like Kalli Rolfe the opportunity to place amazing art into a splendid hotel suite creates an immersive art environment that is a much better approximation of art living and breathing in a domestic setting,” she says.

Barber says the hotel format is also an excellent way for new collectors to meet art experts and learn more in an accessible environment.

“All the gallery owners are very approachable. The nature of the hotel suites means people are there to have a conversation with, so if you’re just starting your personal art journey it’s perfect,” she says.

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SPRING 1883

SPRING 1883 is a young and exciting hotel-based art fair that draws on the traditions of the Gramercy Park Fair, New York to present the best of contemporary art practice from Australia, New Zealand and beyond in a luxury setting.

SPRING 1883 was established in 2014 by Geoff Newton (Director, Neon Parc), Vikki McInnes and Kate Barber (Directors, Sarah Scout Presents) and Vasili Kaliman (art advisor), and first presented at The Hotel Windsor, Melbourne in August 2014.

Further editions of the fair have been presented at The Establishment Hotel, Sydney (September 2015, 2017) and The Hotel Windsor (17-21 August 2016). The fifth edition of SPRING 1883 will take place at The Hotel Windsor, Melbourne from 1-4 August 2018 as part of Melbourne Art Week.

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