

The beast within

By [Eamon Evans](#) ArtsHub | Friday, October 13, 2006

The Melbourne International Arts Festival is underway yet again, heading into its 21st year. Although some critics have charged that the festival (the second from Artistic Director Kirsty Edmunds') is too self-consciously abstract and 'high-concept', this theory doesn't seem to stick when it comes to the festival's visual arts program.

"Kristy and I were really keen to put a program together that people would be interested in and engage with," says Festival Curatorial Consultant, Jane Scott (who also works as the Director of the Monash Gallery of Art).

"We wanted them to get into it and get it."

Their first step was to make it big. Over 40 artists from seven countries have contributed paintings, sculptures, installations, videos and photos to this year's program – and they'll be on display in a total of nine CBD venues (NGV, Federation Square, Gallery 101, Span Gallery, 45 Downstairs, Arc One Gallery, RMIT Gallery, Craft Victoria and Tolarno Gallery.)

"We certainly wanted more people to be involved in the visual program, and I thought that one of the key ways of doing that was to engage more venues and more curators in the actual presentation of exhibitions," says Scott. "The only reason it's not bigger is because we didn't have more money."

Step two was to let people know it's big. A deal with industry publication *Art Almanac* has seen 10,000 free catalogues distributed around Melbourne this month, "full of essays and introductions to the artists to help get people excited."

The final step was to give us something to get excited about. This is where the 'abstract and 'elite' charges really slide away. For this year's theme, Edmunds and Scott have chosen animals. From the pandas of Zhao Bandi to the kangaroos of Adam Cullen, each of the works on show in the visual arts program depict animals somewhere, somehow.

"Whether we like it or not, we as human beings are also animals, and we have many of the needs and wants and desires that animals do," says Scott. Animals in art, the curator argues, can provoke a visceral response that modern pictures sometimes lack.

"As a society we're so exposed to such extraordinary images in the media and on the six o'clock news that artists have been really struggling to find an emotional connection with an audience. (We've found) that a number of artists are actually using animals to address that and try and get audiences to re-engage with the ideas and emotions of the artwork."

"We see a human down and out and in poverty and we look a little blankly. We don't actually connect. But see an animal in distress, and people will actually have a response, because the animal is helpless and we need to care for them."

"It's a really strange phenomenon, I think. We can spend so much money on our pets, yet won't actually give money to a beggar on the street."

But then again, when some people see an animal in distress, they smile. Cockfighting and bearbaiting may have died out over the centuries, but hunting is alive and well. And for every pampered pooch there thousands of factory hens and veal calves – animals we systematically

imprison, torture and murder, just for the sake of a tasty meal.

It's exactly these sorts of anomalies this year's program explores. "It is amazing what we are prepared to accept for the fate of animals that we wouldn't tolerate for ourselves – and vice versa," says Scott.

"It's extraordinary how we're able to compartmentalise certain aspects of the way that we respond to things that are happening around us."

"I felt the title *Unsettled Boundaries* reflected this sense we have that we often don't know when we're dealing with animals whether they're this cute, soft, furry friend or something we eat."

Further, the curator argues, "the way we engage with animals is often reflective of the way in which we engage with one another. We can feel for the plight of some human beings, but we choose to be disengaged or not be affected by the plight of other human beings."

"How does that work and why is that going on?"

Some of the program's more interesting explorations of this question will likely come courtesy of Ariel Orozco. In Melbourne for the festival, the Cuban-born, Mexico-based performance artist "very much places himself in his artworks", says Scott, "and confronts people about the way we live and think".

One of Orozco's more arresting performances in recent years was to build a huge fish tank on the back of his truck, capture a shark, and drive it around Mexico in an act of 'reverse tourism.' Another involved taking a starving and ill-treated stray dog, and painting soccerball patterns on its white fur. The mongrel instantly became a beloved town mascot, constantly fed and cared for, and never kicked again.

A second well-treated dog will be on display at RMIT Gallery. Melbourne artist Kate Ellis has used her highly domesticated pet poodle as a model for extremely delicate, faintly creepy wax sculptures which "morph and blur the line between human and other".

For a full guide to this year's menagerie, [CLICK HERE](#).

Copies of the *Unsettled Boundaries* catalogue are available at all nine CBD venues.

Alternatively, email contact.us@melbournefestival.com.au