

Harbour for revolutionary ideals

With the 2008 Biennale of Sydney poised to open tomorrow, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev hopes chance meetings between participating artists will pay off, writes Rosalie Higson

WHAT goes around comes around. That could be a summation of artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's theme for the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, *Revolutions: Forms That Turn*.

The Biennale opens tomorrow with 180 artists selected by Christov-Bakargiev showing or performing in six venues and exploring every permutation of the word revolution.

It includes seminal artworks by early 20th-century revolutionaries such as Aleksandr Rodchenko and Kasimir Malevich, and new projects by international names William Kentridge and Janet Cardiff, and younger artists such as Qiu Anxiong, Gerard Byrne, Pierre Huyghe, Renata Lucas, Susan Philipsz and Michael Rakowitz.

There is a strong Australian contingent as well, with Vernon Ah Kee, Destiny Deacon, Simryn Gill, Shaun Gladwell, Rosemary Laing, Tracey Moffatt, TV Moore, Mike Parr, Stuart Ringholt and Julie Rrap.

"It's important to me that there are a lot of Australian artists," Christov-Bakargiev says, taking a brief respite from rushing between venues for last-minute arrangements. "I've learned an Australian expression: flat out!

"But I think that an international exhibition has to be very grounded in the context of where it is taking place. It's really about a dialogue, not about us shouting in a show.

"And it's about a dialogue of future dialogues: what will happen a year from now and how that changes art history. For instance, because of World War II, many artists from Europe went to New York, and out of that came a different direction for US art.

"I really believe in those connections, and those connections don't happen if the artists I've brought just come and then leave. They happen when the artists meet and have dinner together. Everything always happens in the gaps in life."

As well as this year's curator of the Sydney Biennale, Christov-Bakargiev is chief curator of the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art in Turin, Italy. Among the younger artists she has worked with there is Canadian sculptor Brian Jungen, one of the participants in Sydney.

Jungen grew up in northern British Columbia, in the Rocky Mountain foothills: his mother is Dane-Zaa First Nation and his father is Swiss. The themes of his work arise from the tensions and connections between aboriginal traditions, pop culture and consumerism. He transforms everyday commodities into captivating sculptures: whale skeletons crafted from white plastic chairs, for example, and Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial masks made from Nike Air Jordans.

Jungen and several other Biennale artists are installing their work at Cockatoo Island on Sydney Harbour. Jungen's untitled installation is made from luggage. His first idea was to use lost luggage from airports, but he couldn't get his hands on any. "There's a lot of lost luggage, but airlines don't want that known," he says. "But I still felt like suitcases were an interesting material."

Jungen settled on a hard plastic suitcase with wheels, the typical design found in every airport, in startling red, yellow, green and blue.

As soon as Jungen arrived on the island, he realised the difficulties of getting back and



Playful: Canadian sculptor Brian Jungen spent three weeks camping on Cockatoo Island to complete his luggage installation

Picture: Jeremy Piper

forth to the mainland by ferry or water taxi. He was soon on a road trip to the Gold Coast to buy a handcrafted wooden dinghy, circa 1950s. (For the duration of the Biennale there will be free ferries to and from the island.)

That trip up the NSW coast to Queensland, camping on the beach at night, firmed up his idea for his Biennale work.

"I was completely unfamiliar with the southern night sky and the constellations and wanted to know the indigenous mythologies," he says. "I thought it would be interesting to find out and it's quite amazing; they don't connect the stars, they use the negative space. To me that was amazing because when I look at objects I take them apart (mentally), I can see volumes and materials and stuff, so I felt an affinity with that.

"There are many different constellations from all the different (indigenous) cultures here, and also I was interested in the wildlife here. So all these different ideas were floating around and I wanted also to make something kinetic, a mobile."

From the suitcases he has constructed a larger-than-life possum, crocodile, emu and shark, which are suspended from an old industrial crane. He built a viewing platform with plywood salvaged from the set of *Wolverine*, the feature film shot on the island just before the Biennale artists arrived.

"It's quite a playful piece. I thought it would be nice to sit and watch them revolve like a planetarium, a very low-budget planetarium," Jungen says with a laugh.

"Also, I wanted some colour. This island is

history, its physicality is heavy and dark, and there's a lot of video and media-based work here, so I thought it would be nice to do something a bit lively and built on site."

Jungen — an adventurer who last year sailed across the North Atlantic to Greenland — spent three weeks camping out on the island. Sydney's cool weather didn't faze him.

Christov-Bakargiev says she wanted the island as a venue when she first saw it two years ago. "I thought it was wonderful, partly because it reminds me of Venice," she says, sheltering from the rain.

"You take a ferry ride and leave all the frets and confusion of the city and fall into this ... something like Alice in Wonderland."

The island, with its disused shipyards, heavy machinery workshops and prison, resonates

with the Biennale's revolutions theme. Some of the works reference the labour movement, such as British artist Jeremy Deller's film *The Battle of Orgreave*, directed by Mike Figgis. A re-enactment of a notorious incident during Britain's 1984 miners strike, the film includes some of the men who were involved.

"It's quite strange: everyone is older than they should be, from the miners to the policemen on the horses storming the crowd," Christov-Bakargiev says. "The intimidation and the brutality that were displayed are reminiscent of a Latin American state."

And that references another Biennale work, Leon Ferrari's 1965 sculpture *Western Christian Civilisation*, depicting a dying Christ nailed to a jet fighter instead of a cross, at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

SOUND AND FURY

Highlights of the 2008 Biennale of Sydney

- William Kentridge, *What Will Come* (2007): animated film from the South African artist. Cockatoo Island.
- Maurizio Cattelan, *Novecento* (1997): taxidermy horse, suspended from the ceiling of the Museum of Contemporary Art.
- Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *Murder of Crows*: large-scale sound installation. Pier 2/3.
- Christoph Buchel, *No Future* (2008): continuing performance as four octogenarian men play the punk anthem *God Save the Queen*. MCA.
- Stuart Ringholt: Australian artist holds free anger workshops. Art Gallery of NSW.
- Pierre Huyghe, *The Valley Obscured by Clouds*: the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall is transformed into a living forest, July 9-10.

The Biennale coincides with the Pope's visit next month: does Christov-Bakargiev expect any protests against the Argentinean artist's provocative work?

She says Ferrari's sculpture refers to the history of South America and forces such as Christianity, colonialism, the destruction of indigenous cultures, the rise of military dictatorships and US covert operations.

"I think the beauty of the artwork lies in the surrealism," she says. "There's a lot of latent surrealism in the show and here it is the juxtaposition of two opposite things, Christ and a fighter plane."

"I see it as a key work because of this constant spinning, in a formal sense: the plane is going downwards and Christ is facing upwards. But Christ is dying and the plane is bombing, and it has the ambivalence and ambiguity of all great artworks."

Ferrari, born in 1920, won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2007, and this is only the second time his work has been seen here. "He is part of a big rediscovery of major historical figures that for one reason or another have been overlooked because they weren't in New York or Paris at the time," Christov-Bakargiev says. "And we have the great privilege to be able to see it."

The Biennale catalogue, a hardcover book of artists' drawings, was also conceived around Christov-Bakargiev's theme: drawing is a revolutionary act because it occurs between the intellectual and the physical body.

"And I wanted to make a beautiful book, an object in itself. ... I come from Arte Povera," she says, referring to her studies of the art movement. "I'm used to doing a lot with very little, making things of beauty with simple humble materials."

"People throw out catalogues all the time, so I wanted to make it more of a guidebook, that people would want to keep."

The 2008 Biennale of Sydney is at various venues until September 7.