

# PROJECT 15

## Urs Fischer

### 2007

*Cockatoo Island installation*

20 April – 3 June 2007

Cockatoo Island

## BIOGRAPHY

Through Urs Fischer's ad hoc creative process he configures poetic drawings, sculptures and large-scale installations using cast-off materials or whatever may be at hand. His works are committed more to the creative means than the ends. Beginning with traditional genres – such as still life, portraiture or landscape – Fischer displaces these established classifications by his use of unconventional and unstable materials (from foodstuffs to soft wax), which introduces time as an additional medium. The form's ephemerality becomes the object.

## FACTS

- Urs Fischer's vocabulary draws from all levels of culture, often combining philosophical themes with cartoonish, punk, pop and kitsch elements.
- After an initial visit to Sydney, Fischer chose historic Cockatoo Island for his new project, the site of an old convict prison dating back to 1839.
- The works for Sydney were all newly created for the Cockatoo Island site.
- The works transformed over time, with destruction becoming an inherent part of the creation process.
- Two of the larger sculptures were constructed overseas and shipped to Sydney. The smaller works and overall exhibition design were more intuitive and spontaneous in nature and were completed only days before the opening.
- The works were suspended throughout the site and visitor had to search and discover them.
- Some works were intentionally shattered, broken and reconstructed with glue forming gashes, tears and breaks and adding to the sense of fragility inherent in the work.
- Fischer's method is deliberately unsystematic and immediate, absorbing marks and mistakes in the finished work.

*Each work begins with a quick sketch, but as soon as I start to work with materials, something goes wrong... My work never ends up looking the way I had intended. I don't consider these sculptures unsuccessful. Something just developed while I was working. It's a two-way street. Your thoughts determine the images, and it is the images, in turn, which determine your thoughts.*

– Urs Fischer

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#### PROJECT OVERVIEW

Urs Fischer works across a wide range of media to create poetic drawings, objects and installations, handcrafted forms that often show the pencil marks, seams and folds of their construction. Fischer created a series of new works for his ambitious installation on Cockatoo Island for Project 15. In 2007, before most visitors had been to this haunting island in Sydney harbour, Fischer invited them to experience the old convict prison grounds as the stage for an eerie installation of enigmatic sculptures and carnival hall forms. A strange, dreamlike experience, the works seemed to manifest absent figures and evoke the island's past.

Dating back to 1839, the island's old convict prison grounds is a place layered with forgotten tragedy. Closed down in 1869, the prison site later housed a reform school and facilities for homeless, orphaned and delinquent children. In Fischer's installation, visitors encountered a large sculpture positioned in the central courtyard of the old prison grounds. Long, sinuous, branch-like forms were suspended in the air, swaying with the wind and casting linear shadows in motion. This enigmatic structure was shaped from fragile, ivory-coloured fibreglass. Curator Adam Free described its shifting organic appearance as "bleached bone, tree root and then alternately intestinal, arterial".

Off the courtyard, doors were opened to the public, leading into the many spaces of the old prison buildings. Sculptures were hung mid-air in three of the spaces. In one, casts of two roughly hewn, chipped, powder-white hands were nailed together and strung by thick metal wire. In another room, a cast of a partial head and hand, painted a bright musk-lolly pink, was hung upside down. Echoing these broken figures, in one space an old dressing table, washbowl and chair were balanced together in the centre of the room. Fischer had shattered the objects and reconstructed them, their forms reshaped by fractures, gashes, tears and breaks. In another space, the old prison hall facing onto the courtyard, a full-sized fibreglass skeleton was hung from the ceiling by wire, like a ghost-train apparition.

Visitors moved through the exhibition towards a final destination. To the side of the old prison grounds, inside the roofless remains of an old stone military guardhouse, Fischer had installed a monumental cast of a grey cabinet. On the top of the cabinet, he added tufts of the long grass that grows wild around the guardhouse, blending the object with its surroundings and making it hard to discern whether it belonged in the space. The doors sat slightly ajar and compelled visitors to peer inside. Lined with a mirror, a historic tool of the artist and the illusionist, it created a startling effect.

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