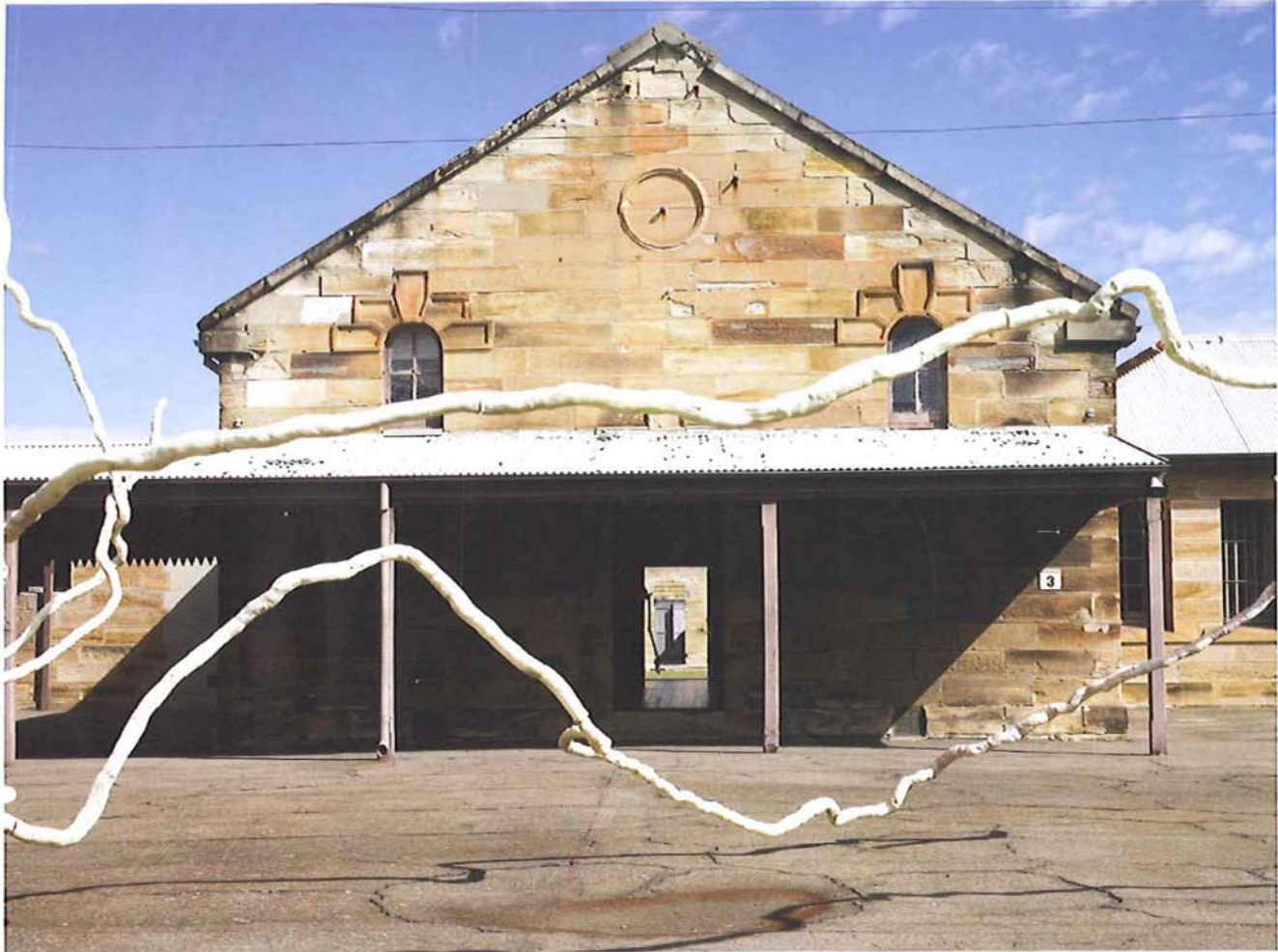


Urs Fischer: a surprising twist on Cockatoo Island, Sydney

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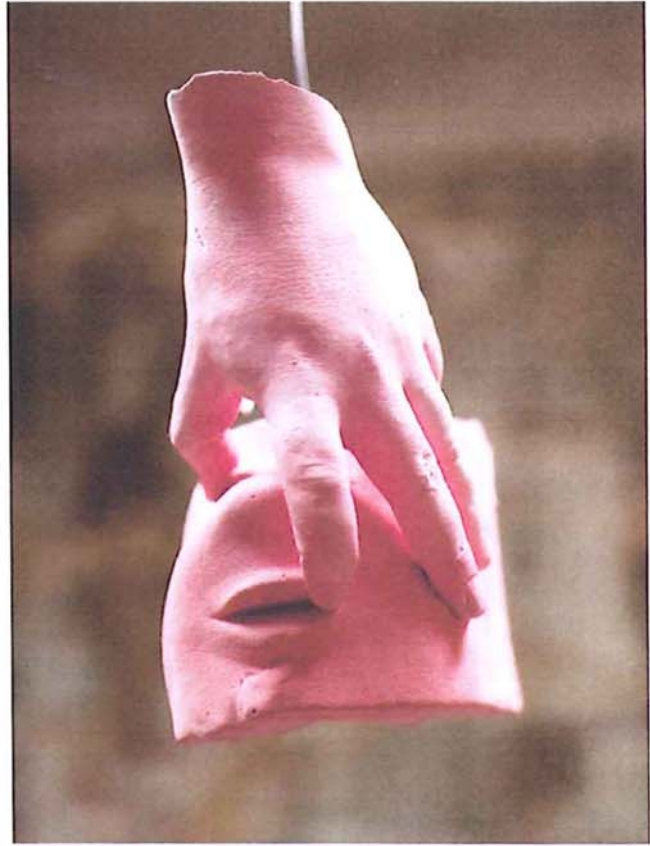
Urs Fischer, *Installation* (detail), 2007, Cockatoo Island, Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and Kaldor Art Projects. Photo Jenny Hare.

Wrapped coastlines, oversized potted pooches and sublime wall drawings – in Australia we have become accustomed to these audacious forays into contemporary art that are the signature of Kaldor Art Projects and seem to encapsulate a larrikin spirit that is peculiarly Australian. For nearly forty years John Kaldor's endeavours have nurtured the embrace of contemporary art in Australia and placed Australian art projects firmly on the radar of the international art community.

Sydney has just hosted the latest chapter in the Kaldor Art Projects (KAP) history (number thirteen). Swiss artist Urs Fischer (born 1973) chose the historic Sydney Harbour site of Cockatoo Island for a six-part mixed media installation, juxtaposing mundane objects against the symmetry of the location's spectacular nineteenth-century convict architecture. While the site is impressively

consistent with past Kaldor projects, Fischer's installation isn't perhaps as bold as his previous work and offers a more modest, understated dialogue with the site. Fischer has used the location as a receptacle, a kind of stage-set for his art, choosing not to engage directly with the island's past history, for him, he says '...it's more honest this way'. John Kaldor has described the ambition and rationale of KAP thus: 'We don't want to compete with museums. The desire has always been to bring artists of significance here to do projects that interact with challenging locations that are typically Australian.'

Cockatoo Island is about as Australian as we get. Situated two nautical miles west of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, it is the largest of Sydney's seven islands and has a rich history. It was long used by Aboriginal people, and in the nineteenth century it operated as a prison and as a



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maritime facility; in the twentieth century it was the largest shipbuilding and repair facility in the country. Deserted since the last supply ship *HMAS Success* was built on the island in 1992, Cockatoo Island was saved from private commercial development by community action, and in 2003 the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust initiated a ten-year plan to rejuvenate the island for public use.

Urs Fischer was drawn to the setting of the 1839 colonial barracks and guardhouse located high on the

island as a cluster of low-rise sandstone structures. Entering their internal courtyard, visitors are surprised to encounter Fischer's centerpiece to the project, a sinewy fibreglass branch-form suspended by wires and hovering above the worn pavement. It gently sways in the harbour breeze; its shadows echoing the bitumen's cracks as history and contemporary art meld in a single linear expression. Although exhibited previously and shipped to Sydney for the installation, it has a resonance with the

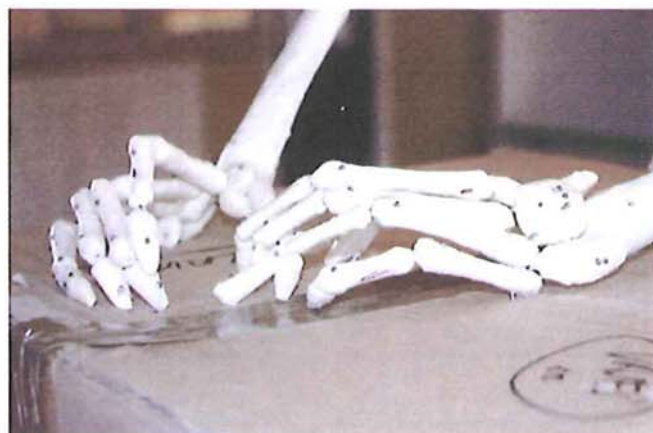
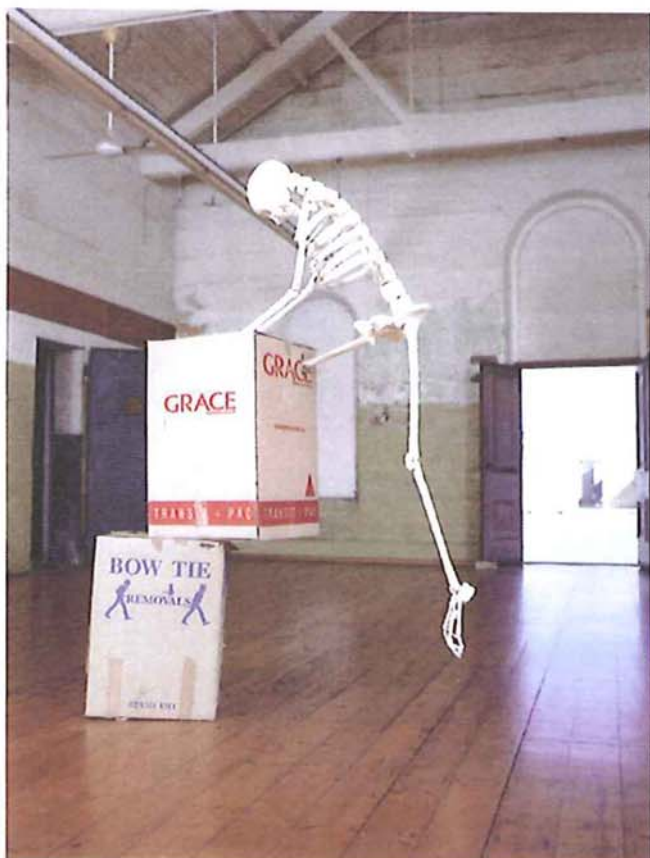
hardship of the Australian landscape and the austerity of the island's convict buildings; little succour here.

As visitors move around the historic quadrangle of the barracks they discover other works embedded in the cracks of occupation: a plaster cast of the artist's arm suspended in an ante-room; a lolly-pink plaster head hovering in the old kitchen, now harshly illuminated by fluorescent tubes; in another room is a sideboard, found, smashed and painstakingly reconstructed, evoking

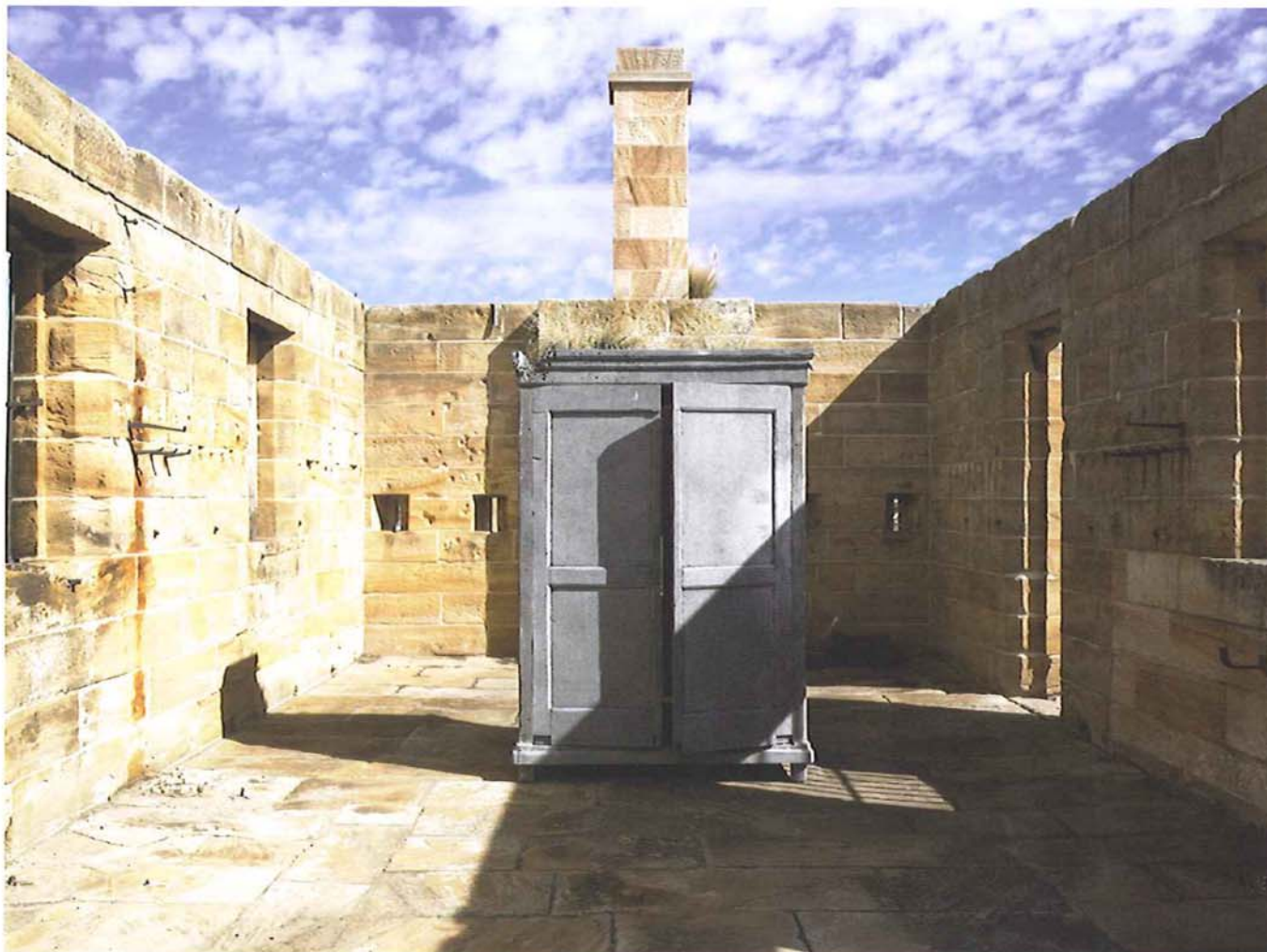
sentiments of fragility and resilience. And commanding the old mess hall is a skeleton carved from Styrofoam boxes. Fischer's dexterity with found materials takes on a local flavour here – he has used cartons from local freight companies in this installation, which speaks of a kind of witty, bitter irony in terms of the island's convict inhabitants: incarcerated, unable to move, waiting for death. Now of course the place is home to visitors who may come and go at will – the cultural tourists of the twenty-first century.

The sixth installation in the adjacent roofless guardhouse plays with illusion, space and place. A cast aluminum wardrobe, fabricated and shipped from China, is defined by the building's symmetry. Its door ajar, its mirror-lining catches passing reflections, an eerie effect that is a hit with visitors. But this piece doesn't much move beyond sideshow antics. Fischer starts an interesting conversation with the site's volume and geometry, one that might have been quite provocative in this charged location, but the potential subtlety of such a dialogue is blown away in the space.

For this writer the real story here is the sustained contribution Kaldor Art Projects has made to the contemporary landscape in Australian art, and the



Urs Fischer, *Installation* (detail), 2007, Cockatoo Island, Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and Kaldor Art Projects. Photo Gina Fairley.



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Cockatoo Island project is to be celebrated for leading the charge in a new era of use for this landmark site. The project will continue on as a calling card on the international art scene, especially given that Urs Fischer is representing Switzerland at this year's Venice Biennale along with Ugo Rondinone, another Kaldor Art Projects alumni (2003).

Speaking with John Kaldor about the artists he had chosen over the years he said, 'Urs is very much in the spirit of what Kaldor wants to achieve. We wanted to represent the latest trend in contemporary art. We want to find artists who have established themselves internationally as having something new to say... One thing I am really proud of is all the artists have remained important.'

One just has to look at the lineage of Kaldor projects from Christo & Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped coast – one million square feet, Little Bay* (1969), to Gilbert & George's *Singing sculpture* (1973), the refined wall

drawing of Sol LeWitt in 1977 and 1998, Richard Long's *A straight hundred mile walk in Australia* (1978) to the incredibly popular *Puppy* (1995) by Jeff Koons (which now sits permanently outside Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao), and the sensational grunge installation of Barry McGee at the Meat Market in Melbourne in 2004, *The stars were aligned* (2004). These are seminal contemporary art projects, not only for Australia, but in the world.

Urs Fischer's Cockatoo Island Installation was on Cockatoo Island, Sydney, from 20 April to 3 June this year.

Kaldor Art Projects gained charity status in 2003. John Kaldor was Commissioner for this year's Australian Pavilion at Venice Biennale. <http://www.kaldorartprojects.org.au>

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