

Biting the Big Apple

Curator Nicholas Baume talks to **Fran Molloy**

Alumnus Nicholas Baume has a new gallery space to curate: New York City. He has recently been appointed Director and Chief Curator of the New York Public Art Fund, where he will guide the selection and installation of artworks by established and emerging artists in public spaces throughout the city.

“The role does make me look at New York in a different way,” Baume says. “I’m really excited about it.”

This is also the first time Baume has lived in New York, though his long association with the city’s cultural landscape started with a high school art club trip in the early ’80s while an exchange student in Houston, Texas.

Graduating from the University in 1987 with joint honours in Fine Arts and Philosophy, Baume became an influential Australian curator, exhibiting such artists as Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Sol LeWitt at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art. He moved to the US in 1998 to curate contemporary art at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, where he directed the well-respected Matrix exhibitions that featured new and emerging artists.

At the time, his father, Michael Baume AO (BA ’50), was Australian Consul-General in New York – which made it much easier to make the move to the US, Baume says.

From Hartford, he went to Boston as Chief Curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art, working closely with the architects designing the new waterfront galleries that tripled the ICA’s exhibition space.

Baume was strongly influenced by a childhood neighbour, Australian fabric designer and leading contemporary art patron, John Kaldor.

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“Nicholas is like a son to me,” Kaldor says. “He is a brilliant young man who is very passionate about art.”

Baume and his two brothers were similar in age and close friends with Kaldor’s sons and spent a lot of time at the Kaldor home. But while his brothers preferred the swimming pool, Nicholas was drawn to Kaldor’s extraordinary art collection.

“John was one of the most progressive and ambitious collectors of international contemporary art in Australia,” Baume recalls. “He was also a great patron, bringing artists out to do projects in Australia, so I had an avant-garde education from a very young age.”

Baume adds that attending the University was a natural progression for him. “The University of Sydney was the only option if you were serious about studying Fine Art and Art History,” he says. “Most Australian art schools were far more practically focused, and I was drawn to the intellectual side of art.”

Baume’s final high school year as an exchange student in the US encouraged him to embark on a liberal arts degree before making a vocational commitment.

“It did strike me as being premature at the age of 17 to cast

my lot in a professional direction, I felt that education for its own sake was a very valuable thing.”

Baume has fond memories of his time at the University. “It was the first time I felt I was in an environment that nourished my intellectual and creative development. I loved discovering the world of ideas.”

The Australian connection remains a strong influence, with some of Baume’s close New York-based friends including Mark Hughes, director of Galerie Lelong and Melissa Chiu, who is the director of the Asia Society Museum and her husband, art critic Ben Genocchio. And while Baume says he doesn’t have the resources to be a collector, Australian works take pride of place in his home: one by Michael Nelson Jagamara and another “wonderful piece” by Lindy Lee.

His mentor John Kaldor recently donated his \$35 million collection to the Art Gallery of NSW, a fitting reflection of Baume’s own current focus on public art rather than private collecting.

“Having the whole of New York city as a potential space for art is an extraordinary privilege,” Baume says. **SAM**

Photo: John Kennard