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Art

Swapped in space

Interesting things happen when two contemporary art dealers get together for a drink in Berlin.

For a gallery owner to allow another to move in and take over their space is rare. For the arrangement to be reciprocal, cross-continental and a month in duration is even more so.

From mid-July, gallerists Dominik Mersch and Patrick Ebensperger are doing just that.

It's like a house swap, but for galleries. Mersch is taking a group of his Australian artists to Berlin, where he will occupy Ebensperger's space, while the latter will move in to Mersch's Sydney gallery, where he will show a suite of European artists.

The German-born and raised Mersch came up with the idea after meeting Ebensperger five years ago through an artist they both represent. "One night in

Berlin we went out for a beer and I said I had this crazy idea, what do you think of it? And within seconds he said 'yeah let's do it,'" says Mersch with a laugh. "Then we had to do it."

Mersch has shown European as well as Australian artists since moving here in 2007 and opening a gallery in Waterloo.

The timing is right, with both gallerists having moved into new premises; Ebensperger into a converted crematorium in Wedding, Berlin's newest creative hub, and Mersch into a light-filled former sailmaker's workshop in Rushcutters Bay.

Mersch selected his artists – Philip Wolfhagen, Jon Cattapan, Tim Johnson, Marion Borgelt, Anton Pulvirenti, and Lucas

Davidson – based on what they could create for Ebensperger's 1000-square-metre-space, for which he gave them the floor plans. Mersch won't be the only Sydney gallerist in Berlin; Michael Reid opened there last year. "The Berlin crowd is very adventurous and curious and that's a good thing," Mersch says. Similarly, Ebensperger's artists are creating new works with Mersch's loft space in mind.

The whole thing hinges on trust. "Patrick and I have total freedom over the exhibitions, otherwise if you start curating your fellow gallerists, it's a recipe for disaster," says Mersch.

The swap is more about exposure than sales. "What's important for my clients and collectors is the excitement of seeing someone from Berlin bringing contemporary European art installation and video works here," Mersch says.

A former mechanical engineer, he began collecting contemporary art while studying.

"I did my PhD thesis on artificial hip joints," says Mersch. "Then I turned 40 and my father died. He had always had said he'd do things after he retired, but he died before that. Then I got seriously sick and thought, 'life's too short, I should do what I want to do.'"

The engineering background informs Mersch's taste. There is often an underlying reference to innovation.

"If I look back to what art I relate to, what drives me would definitely be technology, biology, how to create an artwork," he says. "Technology is a vehicle for what you are trying to say and achieve, but there has to be playfulness. In that sense Patrick and I are similar in what we like."

Sounds like fun.
Pip Coates