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A new do-it-yourself guidebook, *Private*, makes the top collections in Australia and New Zealand public.



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The number of private museums in Australia and New Zealand has grown so noticeably over the past two decades that a guidebook has been released this week offering a way to navigate them.

Researched and written by German-born Skadi Heckmueller, *Private* is a combination of intimate insights into the personalities and motivations of our most dedicated collectors, practical travel tips and on the ground knowledge for art lovers.

Heckmueller's criteria for the 28 collections she covers are that they need to be privately owned and chosen by the collector, accessible to the public and exhibiting more than one artist. The book includes eight New Zealand collections and twenty Australian, many newly open to the public.

'The entire idea of private collections open to the public really grew in 2008-2009, with a few in 2003 and 2004. Everybody else is new in the game,' she said.

Heckmueller's is also the author of *Privatzugang*, a guide to 60 private art collections across Germany, Austria and Switzerland, published by Distanz Verlag, Berlin in 2010, which drew on the remarkable generosity of public display among Germany's private collectors.

'One third of the private art collections (in Europe) open to public are in Germany,' said Heckmueller.

While we have not met those numbers yet, Heckmueller said research showed that private museums offer more memorable experiences than public institutions.

'Usually they are smaller and you have to focus more on the artworks - as there are less of them - and also they are quieter, more intimate spaces. You are forced into having that engagement,' she told ArtsHub.

Australia is also different from Europe in that it lacks a tradition of collecting in families over generations. over several 'The Besons (Eva and Mark who set up TarraWarra Museum of Art) will be the first to do it, and White Rabbit probably too, but historically there is not that understanding here'.

Heckmueller hopes the book will help people get to know private collections and decide which to visit.

'Sometimes the places are an effort to get to, and they are not necessarily large, so you need to make the decision "is it worth the effort as an individual?' she said.

She also wants people to know what is being collected, such as the focus on Asia in Australian and on the Pacific in New Zealand.

'I really want both sides (of the Tasman Sea) to be informed about the other one' said Heckmueller.

Who are the collectors?

The unifying factor among the collectors, Heckmueller believes is simply passion for art. 'Plus the guts to show their soul, because that is what they do through their collections,' she added.

NZ collectors seem particularly drawn to outdoor sculpture. 'Nowhere in the world have I found that many sculpture parks; New Zealand is number one with eight and Australia would be number two.'

'The Gibbs Farm (on the North Island) is probably one of the best sculptural parks in the world,' she added. Her theory is that New Zealand's strong tradition in Maori carving has led to an intuitive cultural embrace of sculpture, and that it also has a lot to do with our connection with landscape.

The other fact Heckmueller unveiled was that seven of the private museums in Australia are steered by women, contrary to her European findings.

Among them are what she describes as the 'only really international private collections' in Australia, that of Naomi Milgrom and of *White Rabbit* with Judith Neilson as its helm.

Heckmueller was also keen to mention the more obscure and personal house collections, such as the home of Gordon Elliott in the Sydney suburb of Erskville and the Lyon Housemuseum in Melbourne.

'Gordon loves the interaction with other people interested in art. That is a form of philanthropy too, in my opinion, it is just on a more private scale,' she added.

On the bigger picture Heckmueller added: 'I am sure worldwide (collecting) is seen as asset class. Most of them are tough business people, particularly the collectors in the German-speaking world, but when you speak art to them you see a different side. This is as personal as it gets,' she told ArtsHub.

While collecting at this level may be viewed as an elite pastime, by actually opening their collections as public museums, their gesture is again dissolving that elite barrier and that is an attitudinal changes.

'It is kind of like disruptive technologies – the private museum model is disruptive on the academic art world, therefore reaching a different audience suddenly,' she said.

Heckmueller said that many of these private museums are doing this not only by opening their collection but also offering a high level of conversation by placing an emphasis on programming, such as the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation with their Culture and Ideas program, White Rabbit with their research library, or looking at other connections such as Palmer Sculpture Landscape, which is primarily into re-vegetation.

'(Founder Greg Johns) opinion is that the sculptures are only there to entertain and enhance nature. It has an environmental aspect to it,' said Heckmueller.

'Many of these places are creating layers.'



Sustainable museums of the future

Heckmueller made the point that as governments worldwide no longer have the money, the role of the philanthropist has become vital in continuing this responsibility for collecting and showing art.

'That is the other political question: what will happen to these museums long term?' asked Heckmueller. 'The smart ones like, David (Walsh of Mona) are looking ahead and asking how to make it sustainable for the future. David is such a courageous person because he is trying really hard to establish new models and making people aware of, "hey you need to think ahead. The Lyon Housemuseum is also the same.'

She also mentioned Brick Bay Sculpture Train in New Zealand as a further interesting model for sustainability. 'It is actually selling works to put back into a fund to commission new work; so it is not about making money but is constantly changing the collection by that system – it is a very interesting model.'

The concept was based on the UK Cass Sculpture Foundation, which Brick Bay founders Christine and Richard Didsbury discovered travelling the world with the question "how do others keep a sculpture park interesting?"

'The next generation of us will see which model is the most feasible one,' Heckmueller said. 'It's trial and error like everything and everybody benefits from knowing.'

Heckmueller said the most valuable private collections open to the public in Australia are Mona, David Walsh's stunning museum in Hobart, followed by White Rabbit in Sydney, with the Gibbs Farm leading New Zealand.

She also noted that Sir James Wallace, behind Auckland's TSB Bank Wallace Arts Centre, collects around 300 pieces annually.