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18 June, 2020

From
John
McDonald ☺

NEWS



[We wrote to Gladys. She said - quote - "I'd like to help you girls but you're too young to vote.."](#)

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Against my own inclinations I'm at home writing this newsletter when I'd prefer to be at a rally in support of the Powerhouse Museum. The only reason I'm not in Harris Street is a promise to avoid large groups of people while the coronavirus is still active. This is, of course, one of the reasons why the NSW Government is aiming to fast-track the shut down and demolition of the museum – to take advantage of the lingering restrictions on public assembly and people's natural sense of caution. It's the latest disgusting tactic in an affair which will remain as an indelible blot on Australia's cultural landscape.

I've been over this ground so many times I risk sounding like the proverbial broken record but I'm still staggered at the thought that the state government intend to wilfully destroy a major public asset at a cost of well in excess of a billion dollars (\$2 billion would be closer to the mark) - at a time when the virus lockdown has made a mess of the economy. The clincher is that nobody apart from the Premier and few croneys actually WANTS this to happen.

The plan now is to begin to close down the museum at the end of the month and start clearing out the collection. As the new venue is not intended to open until 2025 this will mean four years in which the Powerhouse collection is inaccessible to the public. A large percentage of staff will lose their jobs at a time of economic insecurity, while those that remain will be unable to work on exhibitions and displays – and all because of the government's desire to thwart legitimate protests.

The final indignity is that the proposed new building in Parramatta will have only 25% of the exhibition space of the current museum, which means the vast bulk of the Powerhouse's priceless collection will never be seen – and will most probably sold off to help pay for the government's vandalism. Nothing will compensate for the demolition of Willow Grove, one of the last remaining pieces of Victorian architecture in Parramatta, which will be another casualty of this wildly insensitive scheme.

There are a thousand good reasons why this project should not proceed and the government has turned a deaf ear to all of them. It's not so easy to find a convincing argument for the pro-demolition case, unless we believe that it's vital to allow private developers to enrich themselves at the public expense. Not for the first time, Gladys's mob have shown themselves to be unconcerned about anybody but themselves. Remember the fig trees cut down to make way for the light rail? The proposal to spend \$2 billion knocking down and rebuilding stadiums? The dubious decisions over the Newcastle rail link? The massive costs blow-out on a tram system that hardly anybody seems to use? The fact that 95% of arts grants went to Coalition electorates?

One wishes the Labor Party in NSW – and federally – was a genuinely effective opposition. Labor doesn't know what it stands for any more and the latest round of scandals in the Victorian branch

their aims. Their sole motivations are self-interest and the maintenance of power. Their trump card is public complacency. While Labor is the epitome of mediocrity, the Coalition could only be described as evil.

The destruction of the Powerhouse museum is a major scandal, and the Opposition should be fighting tooth and nail to raise awareness and prevent this disaster. At this stage there's no longer any time to waste.

This week's art column looks at a place where private money has been put to the public benefit: the White Rabbit Gallery, which is entering its second decade with a show called *And Now*. If it ever seemed as if the momentum would drain out of the Chinese contemporary art scene, it's not apparent in this survey of new acquisitions. Judith Neilson is still shopping wisely in China, and still finding remarkable works.

As China is being reconfigured as a political enemy we shouldn't forget the achievements of Chinese artists who have to negotiate a tricky environment and make work that holds its own on the international stage.

The movie being reviewed is Elia Sulieman's *It Must Be Heaven*, a peculiar comedy in which the director stars in an almost completely silent role. It's an idiosyncratic production that gives us an oblique sense of what it feels like to be a Palestinian in a world that is rapidly becoming more paranoid and security-conscious. Sulieman seems to be suggesting that for Palestinians this is all part of everyday life.

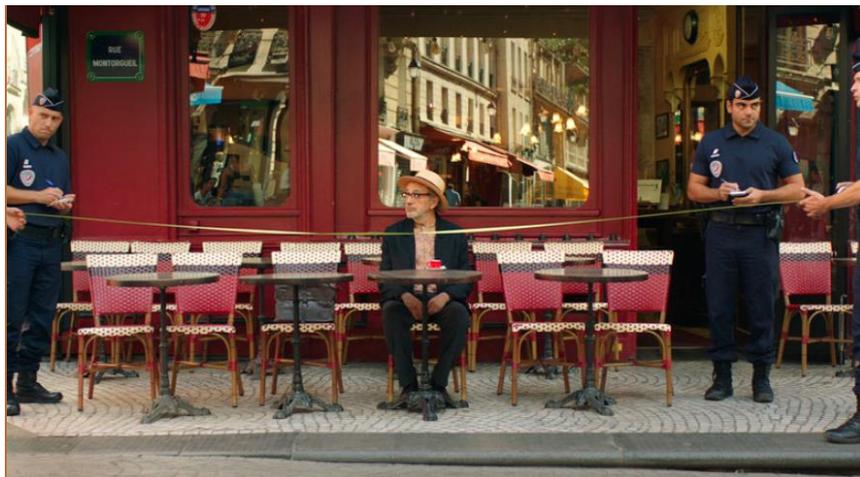
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