John McDonald jmcdartcritic+newsletter@substack.com

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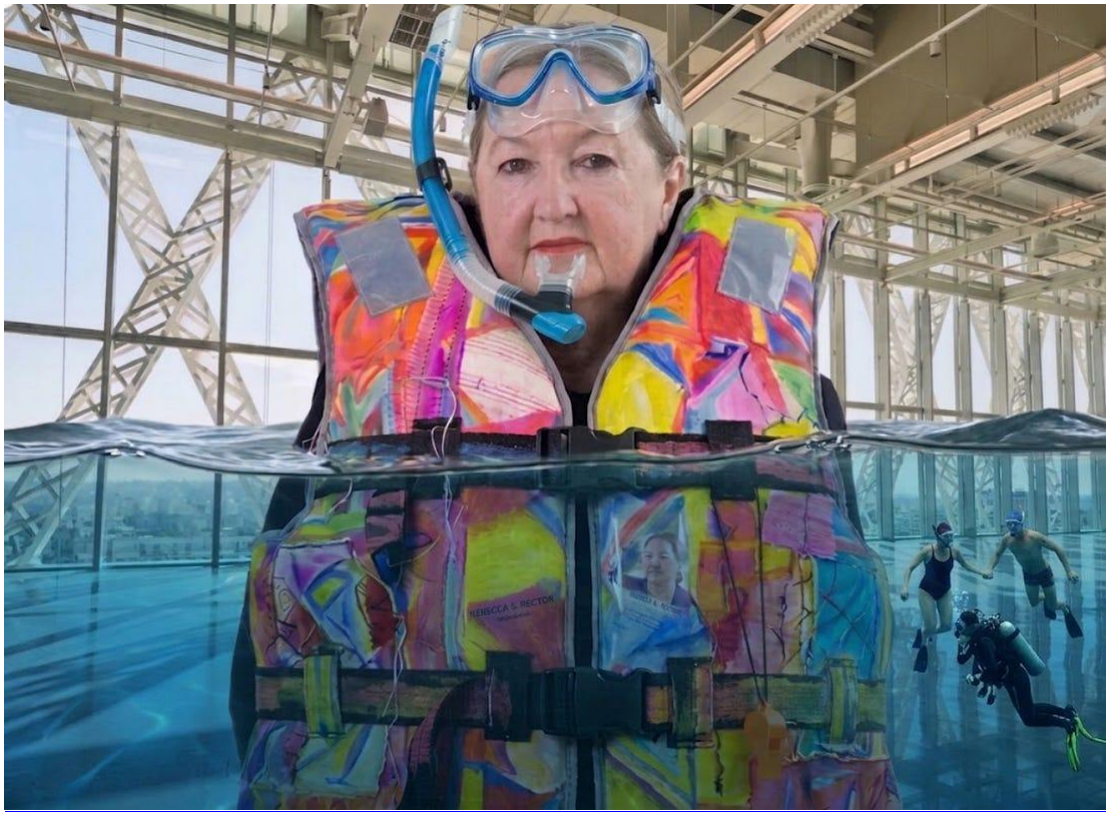
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A Fair and Timely Process

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JOHN MCDONALD

NOV 4



Lisa Havilah models the new Powerhouse Parramatta designer lifejackets

It's a little disturbing how often correspondents mention "all those people you hate", or something similar. Let me make it clear once and for all, I'm not interested in feeling or promulgating hatred. It's an unproductive emotion that poisons the mind and blurs one's judgement. It reduces the world to a battlefield in which you see yourself surrounded by enemies and need to win at all costs. I can honestly say I don't hate anyone, although I'm regularly appalled

by the things people do, and the things they say. I'm concerned with the way they portray their self-interested activities as acts of social justice. I'm saddened by the crazed over-politicisation of the cultural sphere, which is killing the field for everyone and playing into the hands of intolerant populists. Most of all, I'm shocked by the hypocrisy, cowardice, complacency and sheer stupidity that have become such prominent features of Australian art and culture. Neither is humour in abundant supply.

It's perfectly possible to hold all those feelings and not descend into personal hatred, although that doesn't seem to be a fashionable position nowadays. We should never tire of quoting Aldous Huxley's line from *Brave New World*, that "hate pays a greater emotional dividend than love," because the truth of this maxim is being demonstrated across the planet on a daily basis.

The paradox is that this angry society in which thousands of people are filled with rage and hatred for others with whom they have no tangible connection, is also hypersensitive about even the mildest criticism of anyone who belongs to a supposedly oppressed minority. This is madness, because evil deeds, nepotism and corruption are not confined to any one race or gender.

When I started this site, I wondered if I'd have enough material to come up with something worth discussing every week. As it has turned out, there's so much going on that it's difficult to decide what to tackle first, especially when travel and other commitments take me away from these postings for a while. Last week, for instance, I was able to view Khaled Sabsabi's contribution to the Australian pavilion at the Venice Biennale and write a piece for *The Australian*. Beyond payment for the article, the newspaper did not put a cent towards the trip, but I felt it was something I needed to do.

I know a lot of readers are phobic about the dreaded Murdoch press, but *The Australian* is seemingly the only mainstream outlet willing to publish my work nowadays. I'll wait until a decent interval has passed before reprinting the piece in these pages. This week I also emailed *The Saturday Paper* and *The Guardian*, offering to contribute. (The former declined an article but invited me to write a

letter). I'm apparently blackbanned from the NINE Media papers, who repaid decades of service wth an attempted career assassination.

I record this not in a spirit of grievance, because I'm enjoying the independence of this site more than I ever enjoyed churning out columns for the *Sydney Morning Herald* which they proceeded to chop to bits. The main point is the failure of the press to report frankly and critically on the parlous state of Australian culture (and most other things).

As a lone wolf, I've been receiving a quantity of information from friends and contacts, as well as sources who wish to remain anonymous. I understand that in many cases anonymity is simply a matter of self-protection, because jobs, friendships and even personal safety can be threatened in the increasingly polarised environment we call the artworld.

The biggest revelation has been how closely linked all the most problematic parts of that world have become. I can visualise it as a complex Venn diagram in which there is a significant overlap between all the major players.

Let's start with the Powerhouse – a really big circle. Lisa Havilah, the Powerhouse CEO currently stood down and under investigation, is a massive fan of Khaled Sabsabi, who has been commissioned to do a project for the new venue. Khaled, as we know, has been the beneficiary of large sums of taxpayers' money, though his Venice Biennale gig, but also through previous connections with Creative Australia, Create NSW and the Biennale of Sydney. That's three more circles, just for starters.

Then there's the lovely Skye O'Meara, CEO of the APY Artists Collective, who likes to troll me on social media and announce that "Lisa is a legend". Add another circle. But hey, one couldn't mention Skye without acknowledging her enablers, notably Nick Mitzevich, director of the National Gallery of Australia, and Lisa Slade, now professor of Australian Art History at Melbourne University. Two more. And what about the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) – an organisation that overlaps with most these groups? Then, there's the Federal Ministry of the Arts under Tony Burke, which deserves the biggest circle of all.

I could go on and on, but the diagram is already too unwieldy. At this point I need some mathematical advice as to how to indicate various individuals who seem to pop up everywhere, such as all-round Aussie Good Bloke, Ben Quilty, or various socialites who crave to be where the money and status is, even if it means lending support to organisations with a serious lack of transparency and accountability.

I also need a way of indicating those popular political campaigns that spread themselves across the entire diagram: the 'anti-zionist' campaign that looks suspiciously like mere Jew hatred; the ludicrous equation of Palestine and Australia as "settler colonies", that creates a false alignment of interests between Palestinian and Indigenous activists; or those well-intentioned 'First Nations First' policies which have produced a completely unbalanced mechanism for arts funding, causing more harm than good.

Maybe I should just give up on the idea that this vast swamp of bad behaviour could ever be represented diagrammatically. It's too big, too dark and sticky, and it smells terrible - unless you're one of the beneficiaries.

Where to begin? As Creative Australia has just made another appearance at Senate Estimates, there's plenty of new material to discuss. I was especially interested to hear CEO, Adrian Collette, say he might have to reassess funding provided to NAVA, given that organisation's penchant for extreme political posturing. To this end, he is asking them for an assurance "that as a membership organisation NAVA will support and provide services to the full range and diversity of Australian visual artists." If CA runs true to form, NAVA will send them a note saying: "We assure you we'll do just that," and funding will continue to flow.

One of the most fascinating disclosures was the breakdown of expenses for the $2.5 million spent on this year's Venice Biennale.

Michael Brand, the former director of the AGNSW, is a renowned specialist in running up lavish travel expenses on the public purse, and in his capacity as a board member of Creative Australia he didn't disappoint. There was a $13,130.28 airfare, a hotel bill of $8,144.58, an allowance of $2,253.80, and a

figure for ground transport – which presumably means water taxis – of $667.76, for a grand total of $24,196.42. Not bad for a few days in Venice, although there's no indication what vital role Michael played in proceedings.

Honourable mention must go to Franchesca Cubillo, CA's Executive Director, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts, who wracked up a bill of $20,471.67, during what appears to be a shorter stay. As Khaled Sabsabi, last time I looked, was neither Aboriginal nor a Torres Strait Islander, it's even more difficult to figure out Franchesca's involvement.

I could go on but let's allow these two cases to stand as representative of the whole. The full figures are available on-line, but you'll have to dig for them.

CA may always be good for a scandal or two, but the real action this week is the long-awaited opening of Powerhouse Parramatta on Saturday 7 November. My official invitation must have have got held up in the mail, but if Louise Heron, Abbie Galvin or Cassandra Wilkinson are reading this, feel free to slip me a quick email.

As you may recall, in our last exciting episode, Lisa Havilah, the "visionary" leader who has managed to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a project destined to be a perpetual sinkhole in the NSW Budget, had been asked to stand down pending investigations into governance and procurement issues. This had all the makings of operatic tragedy, especially for Lisa's close personal friends who had been doing so well up to this point. The suspension of her Associates program, which channelled at least $2.6 million into the pockets of a handful of favoured consultants, did not interrupt the flow of cash to celebrity chef, Kylie Kwong, who was given a $440,000 two-year contract to be an "Ambassador" for the PHM. Neither did it interrupt Julie Gibbs's Culinary Archive project, which was supposed to launch with Parramatta, but is still dragging on. Some estimates are saying the final cost of this collection of old restaurant menus and bric-à-brac, will exceed a million dollars.

To paraphrase a famous line by Karl Marx, tragedy is often followed by farce, and this occurred in the form of a petition, organised by Kon Gouriotis, editor of *Artist Profile* magazine, who was so heartbroken at the fate that had befallen the

empress of his suburban dreams, that he called upon friends and supporters to rally round and demand that Lisa be reinstated.

It's worth quoting in full (with commentary):

> We call on the NSW Government to lift Lisa Havilah's suspension and reinstate her as Chief Executive of Powerhouse, allowing her to lead the opening of Powerhouse Parramatta in November 2026. [Even though she is currently under investigation].
>
> Over the past eight years, Lisa Havilah has led the renewal of the Powerhouse [read: complete destruction of the Powerhouse] and the creation of Powerhouse Parramatta [whatever that is]. She conceived and championed the vision for Western Sydney's first NSW cultural institution [there have apparently been no cultural institutions in Western Sydney until now] recognising that one of Australia's most diverse, dynamic and rapidly growing regions deserved a cultural institution of international significance. [And is still waiting].
>
> Working alongside the Powerhouse team, Infrastructure NSW, the Trust, Lendlease and communities across Western Sydney, she has helped create an institution that will transform cultural opportunity and leave a lasting legacy for generations. [This is very true. It will be a monumental drain on the taxpayer for years to come].
>
> Across a 30-year career, including leadership roles at Liverpool, Campbelltown, Carriageworks [which she left in a state of near bankruptcy] and Powerhouse, she has contributed to Australian cultural life. [Although it's an ambiguous contribution at best]. Her commitment to public service, creative ambition, and community has been unwavering. [Let alone her loyalty to close personal friends].
>
> We understand Lisa is fully cooperating with the investigation and has always unequivocally denied the allegations against her. [Oh, that's OK then]. We believe Lisa deserves a fair and timely process, and with the opening of Powerhouse Parramatta just weeks away, we call on the NSW Government to

> act without delay, reinstate Lisa Havilah as Chief Executive and allow her to stand alongside the extraordinary team who have brought this vision to life.

What's mind-boggling about this document is the idea that because Lisa is co-operating with the investigation, and says she did nothing wrong, it would be timely to reinstate her before any verdict was reached. How any grown-up, able to tie their own shoelaces and other useful skills, would see this as a possibility, is beyond my understanding.

There is a legal process underway, and NSW Arts Minister John Graham, who has allowed this gargantuan travesty to fester, has already come out and said that process must be completed. For Graham, and his hand-picked Chair, David Borger, their own reputations and involvement are on the line, as nothing Lisa Havilah has done could have proceeded without their complicity. Now they are willing to let her carry the can while they pose as models of probity.

What was Kon thinking when he posted this petition? Did he imagine that because Khaled Sabsabi got reinstated to the Venice gig when CA backed down, it would be just as easy to bully the NSW government into submission? CA made their dubious decision after an 'independent report' had cleared them of any blame or responsibility. The very least one might expect in this case is that John Graham would wait until Lisa was cleared of any wrongdoing before reinstating her to the job. Whether she will be cleared is another matter altogether.

We keep hearing about the "$915 million project", but that is only a fraction of the cost of a protracted exercise in civic vandalism extended over a decade, courtesy of two separate governments. One needs to take account of the delays in the opening of Parramatta, and the increasing extravagance of the project, in which new indulgences kept being added on, helter-skelter. Another major cost has been the so-called "revitalisation" of the Ultimo site – an Orwellian term for wholesale destruction. Ultimo has been declared "saved" on more than one occasion but is now faced with the prospect of *being sold off to pay for the demolition!* The bill for all these shenanigans, undertaken in defiance of expert and public opinion by governments with secretive political (and corporate?) agendas, will come to more than $2 billion.

It is not coincidental that over the past two years the NSW Arts Budget has been completely discombobulated: well-run regional galleries have been defunded, the Australian Design Centre has been forced to close, leaving Sydney as the only capital city in Australia without such an institution. Major museums such as the AGNSW have seen their budgets cut. Money has been redirected to suburban festivals and other ephemera, which will feed into the Powerhouse project under a new policy of keeping secret the names of grant recipients. This has been done in the name of "privacy", although no-one ever seemed to complain when lucky recipients were listed in the past. The newfound concern for privacy looks suspicuously like a lack of transparency.

While all this has been going on, Lisa Havilah has demanded more and more money for Powerhouse Parramatta. She has been hiring new staff when everyone else was cutting staff numbers. Those she has hired are largely people with no museum experience, while longterm curators have left or been fired. Like Donald Trump, she has prioritised loyalty over competence or experience. Most of those hired to staff this great boon for the western suburbs don't even live in the western suburbs.

She has spent up big on luxury accommodation suites, fine dining options, hyper-expensive works of contemporary art, and numerous other projects that could never be justified by the museum's charter – and have nothing to do with the core business of *any* museum. The STEM component seems to have gone missing altogether. She has been making up her "vision" as she goes along, waving her wand and demanding ever more moolah to pay for her whims. She has lavishly rewarded her close associates and ruined the lives and careers of those who did not appreciate her autocratic style of rule. She even commissioned a $2 million documentary to celebrate these achievements – from tried-and-true associates, needless to say.

And this is the person Kon Gouriotis and his chums wish to see reinstated, no questions asked, before any semblance of due process has been concluded.

As for the effectiveness of the petition, Suzette Meade from Parramatta, said it best on a social media post: "Eeek only 700 supporting petition in a week. Community got 12,000 + signatures on a petition in ten days calling for

Willowgrove not to be demolished for Powerhouse and we know they didn't listen to that."

Not only did John Graham and his cronies ignore the much larger, grass-roots petition to save heritage-protected Willowgrove, the only remaining Victorian terrace in the Parramatta CBD, they disregarded successive petitions put together by groups that tried to save Powerhouse Ultimo and call for accountability in these brutal processes. Now we're supposed to be impressed by 700 signatures from people who have shown no concern about the huge waste and destruction of cultural assets, the extraordinary diversion of public funds into private pockets, or the future of this monumental folly.

There are some signatories who are clearly upset that the gravy train seems to have slipped off the rails. Others have an ideological or personal agenda. I suspect the vast majority are simply people who have never taken the time to look into the facts of this case, reacting in Pavlovian fashion to the tragic thought of "visionary" Lisa not being on hand to preside over "her" museum opening. I would respectfully ask these people to read some of the pieces published on this site over the past two years, if they'd like a bit of background. I'd also ask them to consider the huge number of people who have been bulldozered by Lisa and her enablers, from sacked curators to the forlorn supporters of Powerhouse Ultimo, who have been cast aside, lied to, and generally treated like dirt.

Anyone who has put their name to this ill-conceived petition has identified themselves as someone acting out of pure self-interest or simple ignorance of the facts. The bottom line is that due process must be observed, even if one feels cynical about how these investigations proceed. While Lisa's buddies are terrified she'll be convicted of wrongdoing and dumped, her foes are just as frightened at the thought she could be cleared and reinstated, free to carry on spending taxpayers' money in ways that would have made Louis XIV blush.

Kon has form when it comes to kissing the coattails of Queen Lisa and King Khaled, but he has been abject in the way he has turned *Artist Profile* into a propaganda organ for these figures – forever being portrayed as victims of

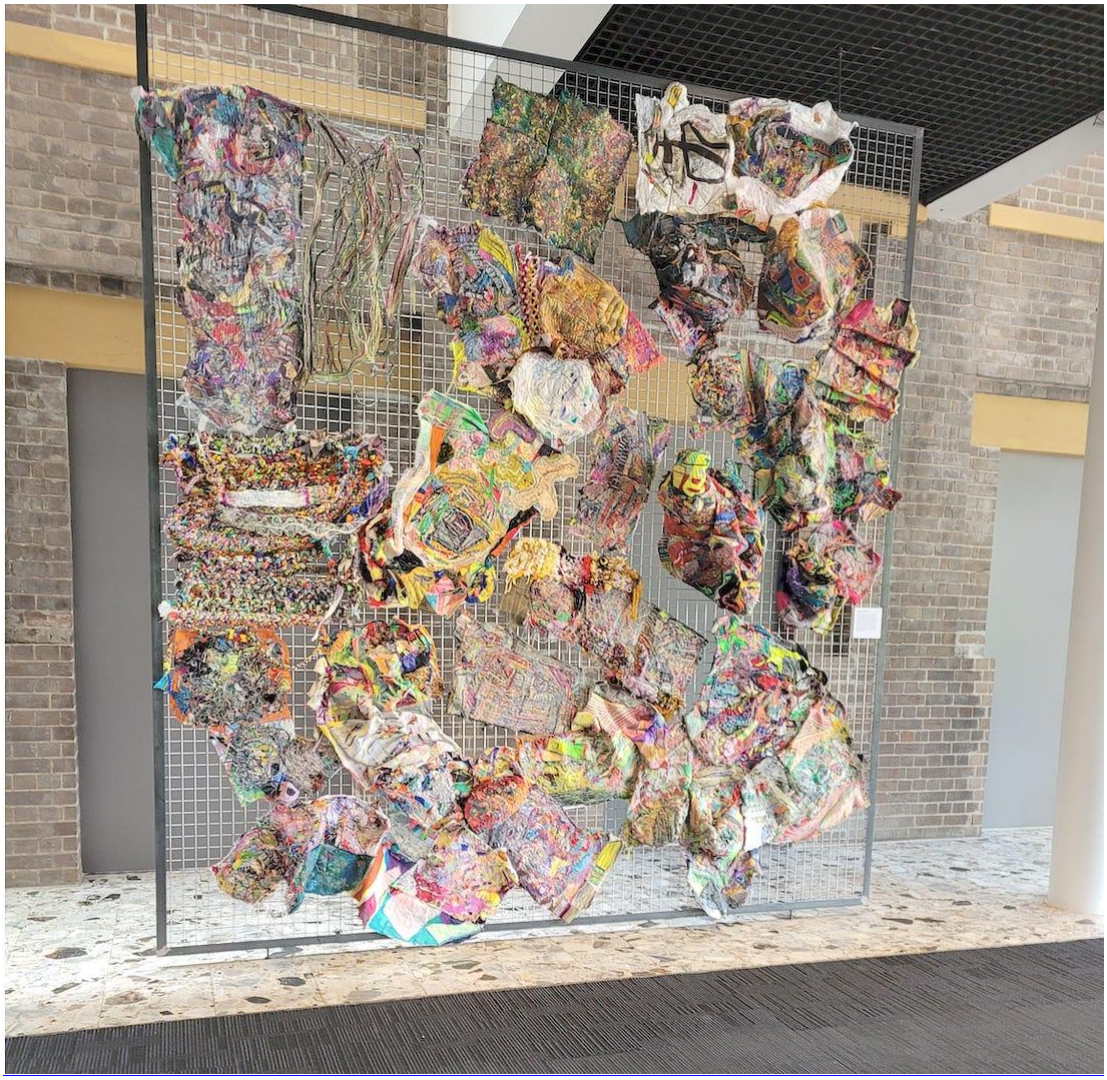
injustice, although they are among the best remunerated and most powerful people in Australia's public culture.

Rather than dwell on all the details of the petition I'll settle for looking at one case: the artist described by *Artist Profile* as "the wonderful Jordan Gogos", whose eloquent defence of Lisa may be found on the magazine's Instagram feed.

In a brief clip, Jordan tells us it's "insane" that Lisa is under investigation, and that "nobody understands why". He says it's all because of "the *Sydney Morning Herald* trash" and "if there was anything that was that bad, I'm sure we would know about it by now." He also tells us "I personally haven't had any input. I have nothing in that project so but I'm like everyone equally excited for the Australian fashion, art, science, technology, you know."

Let's unpack the Wonderful One's words. If he thinks "nobody" understands why Lisa is being investigated, he must have a very small circle of acquaintance. Questions about governance and procurement practices have been clearly signposted, and many people would simply read this as code for "corruption". Far be from me to make this association. If Mr. Wonderful thinks Lisa is a victim of the ferocious reporting of the SMH, he must have missed all those marshmallow articles singing the praises of the director and her schemes. It's only recently that the SMH has begun to grow a little cautious, as the clouds on the horizon have become too ominous to ignore. When it comes to not knowing about "anything that was bad", Jordan clearly has not been following the postings of the friends and supporters of the Powerhouse (for the past decade) or browsing this site. Perhaps he's not a great reader.

As for personally not having any input, this is a little rich coming from a fashion designer to whom Lisa has gifted studio space at Powerhouse Ultimo since December 2021. I say 'gifted' but it's still unclear what arrangements were made for favoured candidates to have workshop space at the museum. Were they paying rent, getting everything for free, or donating works to the collection in lieu of rent? Havilah told Budget Estimates that creative residents were not being paid but were providing free services and programs.



Jordan Gogos, back on the rack

This was contradicted on at least one occasion, on Thursday 22 May, when Jordan Gogos was paid $31,900 for a ‘Powerhouse Lates’ presentation, allegedly to six people, and an installation. To appreciate Jordan’s creative genius in full one need only look at the rack of patchwork squares he set up in the foyer at Ultimo, to which new fragments were occasionally added. Some have unkindly compared the piece to a storm water filter trap, but you’ll have to work hard to convince me this isn’t a masterpiece.

Gogos was also the beneficiary of the Powerhouse’s first ever runway show in May 2022, which necessitated the rearrangement of a lot of exhibits and considerable expenditure. Over the past few years, well over a hundred items associated with Gogos have been acquired for the permanent collection –

outfits, prints, drawings, ephemera, acrylic fingernails… you name it. The museum also purchased a collection of drawings by Gogos's friend and collaborator, Brittany Wyper, and found a position for her on staff.



Very nice drawing by Brittany Wyper, collected by the Powerhouse

The icing on the cake was Lisa Havilah's gushing cover story for *Artist Profile* No 75, May 2026. It begins with the memorable pronouncement: "Jordan Gogos is electric, with an energy so big it can't be contained within a discipline, a room, an industry. I see him walking past me and he is already one hundred steps into the next idea. Jordan Gogos is a future; he will call anyone, at any moment in the fluid fight forward."

Aside from demonstrating that Lisa is no writer, this rave casts a faint shadow on the idea that Jordan has "personally" no skin in the game. If I had to venture a critical opinion on the youthful Gogos *œuvre*, I'd describe it as immature, shapeless and lurid, looking like the aftermath of an explosion in Jenny Kee's wardrobe.

I've singled out Jordan Gogos for attention largely because he has singled himself out in his outspoken – if incoherent – defence of his benefactor. I could find dozens of others worthy of scrutiny, from Kon, the obsequious courtier, to Lisa's estranged husband, Glenn Barkley, who has been active on social media attacking everyone who expresses any doubts about Lisa's visionary greatness. It's nice that Glenn has rediscovered all this conjugal loyalty, but his fidelity is more admirable than his debating style. I'm sure I'll be hearing from him soon enough.

The shadow that hangs over this entire affair is the success or failure of Powerhouse Parramatta. Despite a multi-million-dollar promotional campaign, it remains to be seen how many people make their way through the new building in the first weeks. The only thing of which we can be certain is that whatever numbers it gets at the beginning (and I'll be one of them), they will drastically diminish in the months that follow.

With a standard entry fee set at $30, and a concession of $20, a family of four is up for $100 just to enter the building. If you'd like to see the James Turrell installation that's another $10 – although similar Turrell pieces may be seen at venues around the world for free.

The two major opening shows, *Task Eternal* and *The Mall*, budgeted at an eye-watering $31 million, are set to run for over three years, ensuring that almost nobody will be forking out for a second visit. This so-called museum will display far fewer items from the collection than were ever exhibited in Ultimo, although following criticism they are racing to cram in some extra pieces. Whatever this monstrous edifice might be, it's got little to do with the Powerhouse and should be given another name. They're calling the NGV's new building The Fox, after its major sponsor. I'd suggest Parramatta should be called 'The Titanic' because of its great size and luxurious fittings, not to mention the fact that it may find itself partially submerged the next time the Parramatta River overflows its banks. Jordan Gogos is rumoured to be designing the life preservers.

The latest art column looks at the Margaret Preston retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria. It's a great show, even allowing for the curators' unfortunate obsession with "settler-colonialism", a topic that probably never gave Preston

much pause for thought. With more than 200 works on display, there's plenty to take in from all stages of the artist's career. As ever, Preston's energy and wide-ranging interests set her apart as a unique figure in Australian art.

I was keen to review Aaron Sorkin's *The Social Reckoning*, even though it has bombed at the box office. Today, when so many successful Hollywood films are pure trash, this almost constitutes a badge of honour but it's also a reflection not only on the public's taste in movies but on the kind of subjects we prefer *not* to talk about. High on the list is the malign influence of social media, which is undermining our attention spans and our democracies. Did we want Aaron Sorkin to remind us of this? Apparently not, but it's still a classy production.

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