

Artists on board with piecework

Art and strategy come together in the other beautiful game

ASHLEIGH WILSON

OF all the leading artists of the 20th century, few devoted themselves to the game of chess with such single-mindedness as Marcel Duchamp.

In 1918, the Frenchman moved from Paris to Buenos Aires and played chess obsessively, sometimes against himself, while also making boards and pieces. He later moved to the US, where he studied the game closely for years. He even wrote a technical book on endgames in chess.

Duchamp's work as an artist would continue, but chess had a hold on his imagination. In 1952, he noted he was "still a victim" of the game that had all the beauty of art but, unlike art, "cannot be commercialised".

Lest his position be unclear, he added: "From my close contact with artists and chess players, I have come to the personal conclusion that while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists."

Like a mathematician who comes to admire the elegance of equations, Duchamp was a chess master who found the artistic potential of the game irresistible. Some of his contemporaries felt the same, and in 1944, New York art dealer Julien Levy put on a show called *The Imagery of Chess*. The exhibition was a success, with contemporary artists relishing the opportunity to reflect on the game.

More than half a century later, the experiment continues. This weekend, a new exhibition opens at the Bendigo Art Gallery featuring the work of 28 leading British and Australian artists, all responding to an invitation to bring their perspectives to chess. The result, organisers say, transforms chess from a cerebral game to a visual spectacle.

"The game of chess is traditionally perceived as a subdued, cerebral and introspective activity," curator Tansy Curtin writes in the catalogue.

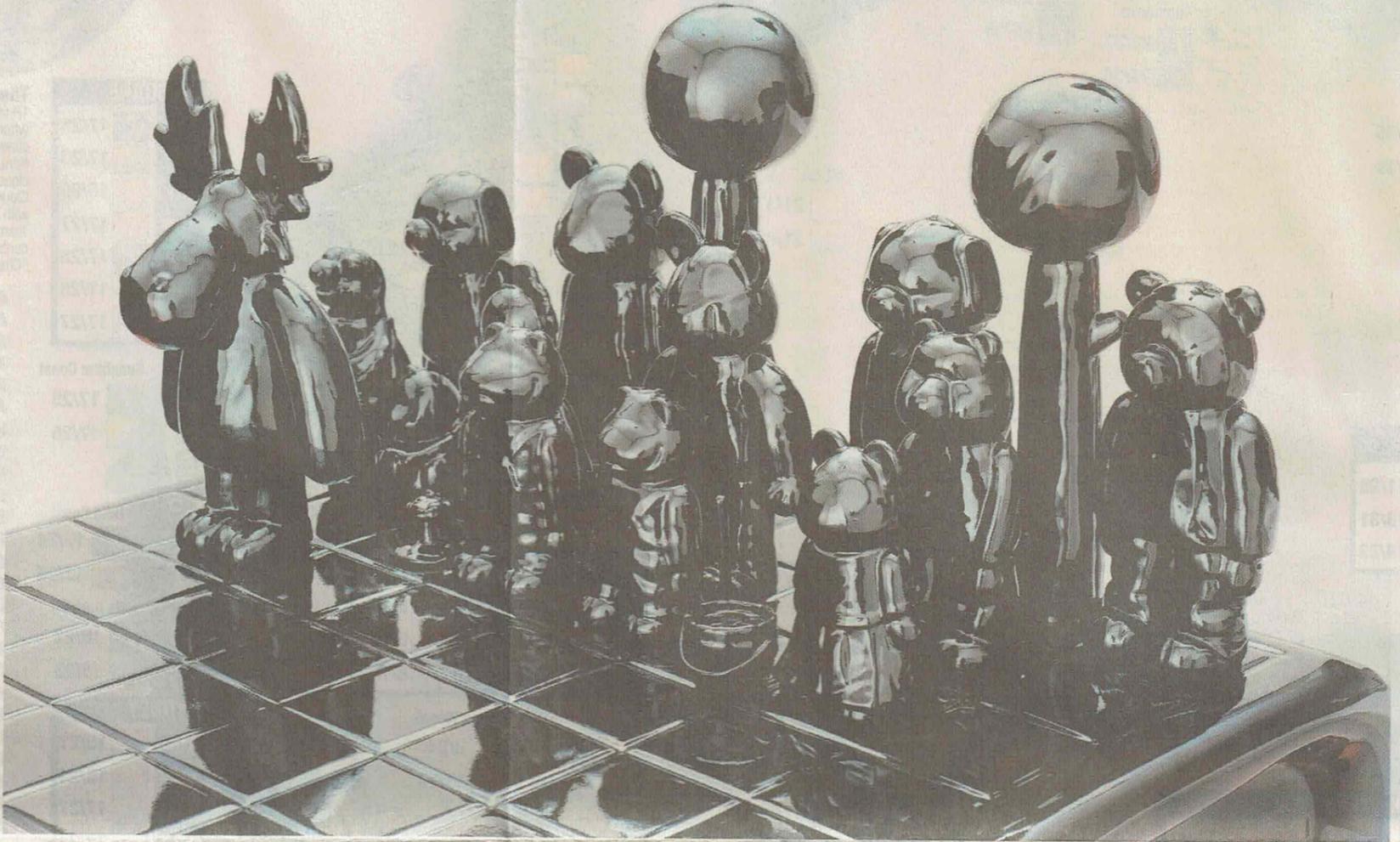
"However, the creation of new artworks informed by the notion of the game of chess adds a new dimension to the game itself: chess acquires a new visual persona; beauty and drama alongside intrigue and threat become implicit aspects of the game."

The show is, in fact, two distinct exhibitions in separate gallery spaces at Bendigo. The first is a travelling exhibition from RS&A, a London-based art commissioning company that in 2003 invited artists to ponder the game. Artists included Tracey Emin, Yayoi Kusama, Damien Hirst and Maurizio Cattelan. Each reimagined the possibilities of the traditional chess board, with Jake and Dinos Chapman, for example, designing a set populated by "post-apocalyptic adolescents."

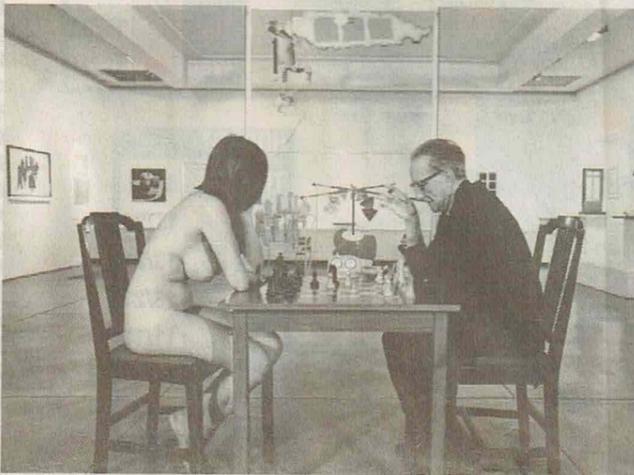
To complement the London project, called *The Art of Chess*, Bendigo has commissioned 13 Australian artists. The result is *Your Move: Australian Artists Play Chess*, an exhibition that will tour other Australian cities next year.

It features works by Danie Mellor, Lionel Bawden, Sebastian Di Mauro, Emily Floyd, Sally Smart and others.

Among them is a joint work by Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, whose chess set is made up of beer bottles representing the main players in World War I. A hammer sits alongside the board, ready to



Chess, a cautionary tale (2010) by Michael Doolan, made with polystyrene, polyurethane, ceramic and auto enamel



Julian Wasser's *Marcel Duchamp Playing Chess with a Nude*



Untitled (2003) by Jake and Dinos Chapman

'All chess players are artists'

MARCEL DUCHAMP

destroy pieces as they are taken. For artists in both exhibitions, proficiency in chess was not mandatory. Even some of the curators had only a cursory interest in the game. Julia Royse, one of the directors of RS&A, says her inspiration was "more art than chess".

"None of us really play," she says. "We all know how to play, but it's not a big part of our lives."

The London project followed the example set by Levy in 1944. Royse says the artists seemed to enjoy responding to a limited brief with a set number of squares and pieces.

There were other benefits, too, of basing an exhibition on a game that has evolved across the world over 1500 years. Royse says the works of art may be appreciated by those who are not familiar with the artists, because of the almost universal language of chess.

"Even if one had never understood Maurizio Cattelan before, if you look at his chess set you get a very good idea of his sense of hu-

mour, the kind of mindset that he's in and how he constructed his set," she says. "All of a sudden all this stuff just makes sense and is easier to understand."

The game of chess is, indeed, a beguiling art: rich in symbolism, built on heavy overtones of military campaigns, full of strategy, deception and calculations. And efforts to enhance its aesthetic appeal are almost as old as the game.

The dual exhibitions in Bendigo coincide with the release of a book by art collector George Dean, *Chess Masterpieces*. Dean, who lent a 1905 Faberge chess set to RS&A for its exhibition, shows how the game developed into its modern form after it was created in India about AD500.

Just as the rules evolved, so did the look of the game. Islamic craftsmen embraced abstract shapes, then the game spread across Europe after the 11th century, picking up gothic and baroque influences and returning to a representational style.

Chess became a status symbol, and the list of materials used to make the pieces appears limited only by imagination: ivory, crystal, marble, jade, quartz, gold, silver, glass, porcelain, tortoiseshell, even silk.

Over the years, military connotations morphed into allegorical figures based on medieval social structures, and then to the development of a female — the queen — as the most powerful piece on the board. But war remained a central theme, and in his book, published next month by Abrams, Dean has included several sets based on conflicts over the years, from the American Civil War to the Cold War.

In 2005, RS&A's *The Art of Chess* went on tour to Russia, where Garry Kasparov, the former grandmaster turned political activist, was among those who saw it. His favourite work, says Royse, was a set designed by Paul McCarthy called *Kitchen Set*, which used an assortment of items found in his kitchen (ketchup, lime, a kettle) as pieces.

Kasparov evidently savoured

the chance to contemplate the visual aspects of chess after a long career staring at the board. In the introduction to Dean's book, he says he is fascinated by the way the game has changed over the years.

"For a professional chess player, the pieces are almost an abstraction, symbols that have the same value whether they are cast in wood, stone, or even as pixels on a computer screen," Kasparov writes. "Therefore it was always a pleasure, during my travels as world champion, to encounter ex-

traordinary chess sets that were created not for play but for display. Instead of creating art on the board by moving the pieces, the pieces are themselves art."

The Art of Chess: Your Move is at Bendigo Art Gallery from Saturday until January 11. *Your Move* travels to Queensland University Art Museum in February, McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park, Victoria, in May, and Adelaide's Samstag Museum in October.