

YOUR MOVE  
AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS  
PLAY CHESS



JAMIN ARMSTRONG

LIONEL BAWDEN

SEBASTIAN DI MAURO

MICHAEL DOOLAN

EMILY FLOYD

CLAIRE HEALY &  
SEAN CORDEIRO

ROBERT JACKS

DANIE MELLOR

KATE ROHDE

CAROLINE ROTHWELL

SALLY SMART

KEN YONETANI

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# YOUR MOVE

Inspired by the London-based organisation RS&A and its highly acclaimed touring exhibition *The Art of Chess*, Bendigo Art Gallery is delighted to present the exhibition *Your Move: Australian artists play chess* for an Australian audience.

My special thanks to the Federal Government through its Visions of Australia program for providing the necessary funding which has allowed us to commission the following artists to investigate the themes surrounding the game of chess: Benjamin Armstrong, Lionel Bawden, Sebastian Di Mauro, Michael Doolan, Emily Floyd, Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, Robert Jacks, Danie Mellor, Kate Rohde, Caroline Rothwell, Sally Smart and Ken Yonetani.

The selection of artists was conducted by Bendigo Art Gallery in an informal manner and based upon a curatorial rationale that was driven by each individual artist's preferred medium, their history and, ultimately, their proposal. On this basis, both emerging and established artists were selected. I acknowledge and thank Tracy Cooper-Lavery for overseeing this process and ensuring that the final selection formed a dynamic and diverse group, the basis of *Your Move: Australian artists play chess*. In addition I thank Tansy Curtin for drawing together the threads of the exhibition and articulating the concepts within her catalogue essay.

This exhibition will tour to the Queensland University Art Museum, Brisbane; McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park, Langwarrin and the Anne and Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia,

Adelaide. In accordance with the Visions of Australia guidelines, these commissioned artworks will then be donated to participating venues and public galleries within Australia at the conclusion of the tour.

I thank the Bendigo Art Gallery Board of Management who contributed to this exhibition and I acknowledge its ongoing support of all of our projects. I am indebted to donor Rod Fyffe who has assisted the Gallery by contributing additional funding for the commissioning, and I thank International Art Services for ensuring that our tour will be seamless.

*Your Move: Australian artists play chess* is the result of a twelve-month process and I thank the staff of Bendigo Art Gallery for their individual participation in its development and delivery throughout this short timeline.

I especially wish to thank the artists for embracing the exhibition's concept with tremendous energy and enthusiasm. For lovers of chess and lovers of art, this exhibition has intertwined the two: the predictable and unpredictable, the game, the strategy, the pieces, their move, your move, all of the fundamentals of chess and, most importantly, for us, the art.

**Karen Quinlan**  
Director

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## Opening

*Your Move: Australian artists play chess* has been inspired by the concurrent international exhibition *The Art of Chess*, touring from RS&A Ltd, London. This exhibition was itself inspired by the iconic 1944 exhibition *The Imagery of Chess*, held at Julien Levy Gallery, New York. In realising the Australian chess-art project, Bendigo Art Gallery sought proposals from a number of Australia's leading contemporary artists; from these we selected twelve new works by thirteen artists. Unlike many of the artists in the international exhibition, *The Art of Chess*, the artists in *Your Move* have advanced beyond the boundaries of the traditional chess set.

The artists included in *Your Move* are Benjamin Armstrong, Lionel Bawden, Sebastian Di Mauro, Michael Doolan, Emily Floyd, Claire Healy & Sean Cordelro, Robert Jacks, Danie Mellor, Kate Rohde, Caroline Rothwell, Sally Smart and Ken Yonetani.

By juxtaposing the Australian artists with their international peers, Bendigo Art Gallery seeks to position Australian artists and the wider national art scene firmly within the international art milieu. And, just as relevantly, these artists have been given the opportunity to create works about chess which relate more specifically to the Australian experience.

Chess is a game whose ending can never quite be anticipated or predicted, with the outcome being influenced by the individual skills and qualities of the players. The game's dramatic progression – its excitement

and challenges, duration and, above all, its winner – is a function of the individual protagonists. And each game is different. This same unpredictability of outcomes is equally true for commissioned artworks. Although each of the artists begins with the same brief – in this instance, to create a new work inspired by the game of chess – they bring their own knowledge, personality and, of course, art practice to the work. Like 'success' in a game of chess, success in an artwork is largely determined by the artist's skill and vision.

## Middlegame

Chess is thought to have originated in India or Persia around the seventh century and since this time it has maintained its prominence and popularity worldwide. During the early Middle Ages chess became a source of inspiration and fascination for artists and writers alike and has continued to do so over the last 700 years, inspiring poems and novels as well as paintings and illuminations – works that elaborate and ponder on notions of strategy, problem-solving and skill.

For the general public today the game of chess evokes ideas of strategy, tactics, endurance and patience; the chessboard is perceived as a battleground – black versus white, good versus evil, wrong versus right. It is a game of opposites fighting for power – each player alternating between offense and defence. Yet it is rarely a game of equality; one team must always begin (white). This can be seen to be both an advantage and disadvantage; by making the first move the player

begins the offensive moves of the game, but in doing so immediately declares their skill and knowledge. This allows their opponent time to understand and interpret this move, prompting a strong counterattack.

Chess is a game circumscribed by strict rules: what is and is not allowable, the moves that can and those that cannot be made. This notion appears in stark contrast to contemporary art which often tries to challenge and subvert art's prescribed 'rules'. Despite the inflexibility imposed by the rules, chess is nevertheless a game of creativity and individuality – it is the players who determine the direction and outcome of the game. Similarly, in the commissioning of an artwork the artist is presented with a brief – a set of rules – to create a work about chess, but again, the solution, the creation of the work, requires creativity, strategy and problem-solving.

The game of chess is traditionally perceived as a subdued, cerebral and introspective activity. 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.

## Endgame

From the outset each of the artists in this project responded in entirely different ways. The ideas and issues they adopted to inform their works relate to a diverse range of current social, political and environmental problems, with the artists using their

works to encourage the viewer to consider these issues and, perhaps more importantly, asking the viewer to look at solving these problems through different strategies and tactics.

For many of the artists the chess set or game of chess has become a metaphor for battles throughout history. Healy and Cordeiro's *The Great War* reinterprets the First World War – the war to end all wars – through chess. Each chess piece represents a major player in the war, but rather than making use of traditional chess pieces to represent the various protagonist countries, beer bottles are used, and the chequered board itself is made up of a series of beer coasters, again signifying the countries at war.

Rothwell's *Chess*, Rohde's *Glacial chess set* and Yonetani's *Dead sea* each examine ecological battles – the battle between native and introduced species of flora and fauna and the effects of human-related pollution and climate change on sea and land environments.

*Homeland rule* and *The fruits of labour* by Di Mauro and Mellor, respectively, engage with the notion of colonisation and the impact of British Imperialism on Australia. Di Mauro uses the monarchy of the traditional chess set to do battle with those well-loved Australian icons – kangaroos, koalas and Tasmanian devils. He asks his players: should Australia remain a constitutional monarchy or become a republic? Mellor's work also utilises the metaphor of the British monarchy and the effects of colonisation.

However, while Di Mauro looks to the future to change the current constitution of Australia, Mellor asks us to examine the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation on Australia's Indigenous peoples.

Entirely different conflicts interest Bawden and Doolan. In a self-referential manner, Bawden's *The marksmen* transposes the internal battle of the artist to the chessboard: graphite versus eraser. The role of the artist is ultimately to make a mark or take it away – just as the chess game is about making moves and taking pieces away. An alternative perspective is offered by Doolan in *Chess, a cautionary tale*; making use of a fairytale context, he questions the nature of chess – and ultimately all battles. Does the intrinsic dichotomy of the chessboard necessitate a good side and thus an evil one? Who determines which team is good and which evil?

Concepts of futurism and sci-fi influence Floyd's take on the game of chess – *Existentialism v science fiction*. She is particularly interested in the notion of a three-dimensional chess match – inspired for the most part by Star Trek's Tri-dimensional chess. Her work discusses the current interest in subverting the traditional game of chess, not merely by changing the shape and form of the pieces but by changing the rules and spatiality.

Jacks's *Black on black, white on white* adopts a different view; he has pared down the chess set to its essential forms, whereby each piece becomes a symbol of its fundamental character. He has taken an iconic and recognisable game and transformed it into an abstract sculpture.

Armstrong's approach to chess links notions of failure in his childhood to his current art practice. Through his work – *A turn of concentration* – he remembers losing a game of chess in five short moves. As an adult Armstrong engages with the dichotomy inherent in printmaking – positive and negative space. The game of chess becomes a metaphor for the life of the artist – always planning three, four or five moves ahead, looking for ways through the challenges and solutions to the problems.

The rules have been changed and sabotaged in Smart's *Conversation piece art family*. She combines members of her family with friends and colleagues in the art world, but without reference to traditional character assignment and hierarchy and, as the creator of this chess set, Smart assigns ultimate power to herself, altering the rules as the game progresses.

*Your Move* has provided each of the artists with the opportunity to engage with an age-old game to create new and dynamic artworks. Each has approached the subject matter differently, asking the audience to consider some of the most pressing issues in society today. Their moves transform chess from a cerebral game to a visual spectacle.

**Tansy Curtin**  
Curator, Bendigo Art Gallery

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## SEBASTIAN DI MAURO

*Homeland rule* revolves around the colonisation of Australia and the ties which bind us to Britain through the constitutional monarch. This game offers people an opportunity to challenge the current status of Australia's reliance on British rule. It empowers the player by providing an opportunity to cut those links and, in a way, be instrumental in creating their own Australian republic.

The two armies represent either country. The Australian army resembles native Australian animals, while the British side uses the conventional chess pieces which, of course, echo the English monarchy.

On the Australian side the king is symbolised by the quintessential Australian animal, the kangaroo; the queen is the emu; the bishop is the Taimanian devil; the rook is the rockaburra; and the pawn is the koala. The remaining piece, the knight is represented by the camel. Although not a native animal, it has long been part of Australia's history. The first camels were brought here in 1840 from the Canary Islands. The next major group

came in 1860 for the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition. Today the estimated population of camels in Australia is 400,000 and they are dispersed throughout the arid interior. I have included the camel to signify the importance of non-British immigrants to Australia since colonisation.

These native-animal chess pieces are constructed from resin and covered in rust paint, and they appear as though they have been dug from the red earth of the iconic Central Australian landscape.

I have used conventional chess pieces for the British side. These have also been constructed from resin but are covered in bronze - a material that has played a pivotal role in British history. I have constructed the chessboard and table from artificial grass because it offers a contrast between real and artificial and extends the nature/culture debate. It alludes to the time-honoured Australian pastime of lawn mowing, as well as the traditional European art of topiary, which has been embraced by many Australian gardeners in the pursuit of a manicured,

formal garden. The simulation of bronze, steel and synthetic grass also alludes to the superficial domination of Australia by a colonial power.

The search for the evergreen lawn harks back to a different land, yet lawns do not thrive in Australia - a continent where much of the land is dry and drought-stricken. I hope that *Homeland rule* will inspire those who play the game and give them an opportunity to fight for an Australian republic. Perhaps it will also assist the monarchists to see the light and convert to an independent Australian way of governance sans the shackles of the British monarchy rule.

Sebastian Di Mauro  
Australia 1976  
Doris and Pauline Institute, Queensland  
November 2002  
1000 x 1000  
100 x 100 x 100 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Deakin Art Gallery, Melbourne  
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