

THE ART WHISPERERS

words JENNIFER ENNION

Behind many prominent private and public art collections are experts helping buyers navigate the industry

There are art dealers and then there are the art whisperers – art advisers independent of galleries but with the expertise to help people invest in meaningful and valuable artwork. Some work with collectors whose pieces will be passed through families for generations. Others advise corporations on art for office buildings, while a few specialise in liaising with governments to create impactful public art to be enjoyed by everyone. Advisors are the bridge between the artist and the collector.

“An art advisor is part translator, part navigator and part sounding board,” says Amanda Love, from independent art advisory LoveArt. “The art world has its own language, full of codes, politics and subtleties, and my job is to make it legible.”

Art advisors, also known as consultants, have extensive knowledge of the industry, both in Australia and internationally. Many have several years’ experience working in galleries, some as owners, others in sales, and the world’s best art fairs, such as the Art Basel events, are firmly on their annual schedule. But why does a potential collector need someone else to tell them which art to buy? The simple answer is that good art is more than a pretty picture to hang on a wall.

“I help clients see not just *what* they’re looking at, but *why* it matters and how it fits into a bigger story,” says Love, who’s worked on the Biennale of Sydney, Australia’s largest contemporary art event. “The people who benefit most are those who care deeply about art but don’t have the time, access or insider knowledge to navigate it alone.”

Buyers need someone immersed in the art world; someone who cannot only take them to the best places to buy a fine art painting, for example, but also assess its value.

David Hulme, of Banziger Hulme Fine Art Consultants, Sydney, is a certified art valuer. He helps clients appraise, acquire and sell artwork, with a focus on fine art fit for museums. “The role that we created over the last 20 or so years is one where we are very interested in buying the best of the best,” says Hulme. “So we’re looking at museum-quality art in the collecting that we’re doing.”



Art valuer David Hulme
viewing of *pollen* (2013)
by Del Kathryn Barton.



LEFT Sharing Barkandji stories of land, water and sky, 2022 by William Brian 'Badger' Bates. BELOW Curatorial advisor Barbara Flynn. OPPOSITE PAGE Art Basel Paris.

That said, Hulme is clear on what “museum-quality art” is, explaining that it can be one of Pablo Picasso’s most important paintings, worth tens of millions of dollars, as well as a hand-signed original etching with a much lower price tag of around \$10,000. The focus is on quality, and longevity, which brings us to the importance of art advisory independence.

Art advisors are not attached to a retail gallery, a collective of artists, a genre or a market. An advisor who is wholly independent is free to counsel collectors on art no matter where it’s housed, without conflict of interest. In fact, their careers and reputation are built on transparency around the value of an artwork. But don’t mistake value for dollars. Of course, the financial cost of a painting, photograph or sculpture comes into play, but there are many elements to consider when ascertaining worth. Those elements include the condition of the artwork, and whether it’s a good example of an artist’s style.

“You have to be able to discern the good from the bad, the wheat from the chaff,” says Hulme. “If you can’t do it yourself, that’s when you need somebody to advise you, and that’s where the skill of the art advisor really comes in, because we’ve just been doing it for so long. We have the experience and we want to share that knowledge.”

The sharing of knowledge is something Barbara Flynn is also passionate about. Flynn’s exceptional career has led her to become one of



Photography: Mark Pokorny (this page); courtesy Art Basel (opposite page).

“The role that we have created over the last 20 years or so is one where we are very interested in buying the best of the best. So we’re looking at museum-quality art”

– David Hulme

Australia’s go-to consultants on contemporary public art. Ever paused outside Sydney’s Paul Ramsay Foundation headquarters to admire the intricate forged steel gates by William Brian ‘Badger’ Bates (*Sharing Barkandji stories of land, water and sky*, 2022)? Or pondered the significance of the words of Aboriginal writers, poets and commentators that stretch across a 19-metre-high column in the CBD (Jenny Holzer, *I STAY* (Ngaya ngalawa), 2014)? Flynn was behind both artworks, and considers them among her best projects.

She found it exciting working with Barka/Darling River activist and Barkandji artist Bates because he’s a highly respected “knowledge holder” who didn’t yet have a work in the Sydney public realm. Of his piece, she says: “I think it’s sublime the way these very beautifully made forged steel



gates direct your eye up to a ceiling painting. There's something very satisfying about the overall composition of it."

Through Flynn's unique role as curatorial advisor for the City of Sydney (2013-20), and her work with architects, developers, universities and foundations, she has helped shape Australia's art industry and its ever-developing cultural identity. She is also, perhaps unwittingly, ensuring that Australian art continues to be supported and appreciated with her personal passion for nurturing up-and-coming art advisors and artists.

She has a particular fondness for working with Aboriginal artists, and is passionate about choosing art that has meaning. She admits it's impossible to know what every artist is doing because the field has expanded so greatly and, therefore, constant research is key.

Mark Hughes of Mark Hughes Art Advisory in Sydney stays abreast of artists' work by attending the world's top Frieze and Basel art fairs, as well as Umbrella Art Fairs for younger galleries showcasing works from countries including South Africa, Mexico and Chile.

Although the public can attend fairs, Hughes says the role of an advisor is to help private collectors navigate what can be an overwhelming and distracting environment. Essentially, collectors need help with the volume of art in front of them, he says, so an advisor will streamline the process based on a client's tastes

and budget. "You really are looking for what you feel might connect to the client in a particular way," Hughes adds. However, advisors must also safeguard clients against trends that may not resonate in a few years' time.

"When you see something that is very attractive or speaks to you, you have to think carefully about how sustainable you think that language will be over a period of time, and it's very hard to analyse that when you're in front of something and you think there's something very special about it," Hughes says.

Love agrees: "I always encourage clients to prioritise authenticity over fashion. The best collections aren't built around trends, they're built slowly, *with* the grain of the collector's sensibility, not against it."

One of the common points Love, Hughes and Hulme mention is the importance of educating their private and corporate clients. It's something they're all passionate about, and consider a primary role of the advisor. Love describes collecting without context as like reading only the last page of a novel.

"Understanding a work's journey adds depth and dimension to the experience of owning it," she says, "and it gives collectors the confidence to make choices that are both emotionally satisfying and strategically sound." HB

"When you see something that is very attractive or speaks to you, you have to think carefully about how sustainable you think that language will be over a period of time"

— Mark Hughes