

Play it again, SAM

The Art Of Chess and Your Move

by MEGAN SPENCER (c) 2011

Published in Art Monthly, Issue 246, Summer 2011.

When I was little I my brother and I would play chess. We taught ourselves after being given what we thought was a draughts board with odd-looking pieces. We were never very good, but we were deeply fascinated by the way the pieces moved and how we could outwit each other.

I loved the Queen; she could go anywhere and do anything. He loved Knights who would knock you sideways if you weren't looking, which he did to my Queen many times.

We used to spend what seemed like hours nutting out how we were going to beat each other, arguing when he cheated (which he did), or I lost (which I hated.) Banal memories perhaps but nonetheless intense and personal, and triggered upon seeing the inaugural showing in Australia of the internationally touring *The Art of Chess* and nationally touring *Your Move* exhibitions at Bendigo Art Gallery.

Thankfully the multitude of sculptures, prints, paintings and installations in both exhibitions far eclipsed my own perfunctory associations with 'the Royal game of rulers, soldiers, prisoners and exiles'.[\[i\]](#) These works also represent intense, personal art responses to the

game, making both exhibitions particularly potent and a timely reminder of how bewitching and symbolic chess can be.

The teams ...

The Art Of Chess includes thirty-two artist-made chess sets commissioned by the RS&A Gallery, London, from artists in Europe, the Americas and Asia. (Thirty-two is the number of pieces in a chess set.) In taking on this exhibition Bendigo Art Gallery shrewdly included a local response, by commissioning thirteen Australian artists to make their own chess sets. The result is two world-class exhibitions of inspired, complex work that complements each other perfectly – just like a great chess game. Or in this case, an Olympic-size chess marathon: Australia versus The Rest of the World.

Let the games begin ...

French Surrealist Marcel Duchamp is the flag-bearer for the Opening Ceremony. Perhaps the game's most famous artworld exponent, Duchamp consistently included chess in his work up until his death in 1968, inspiring others to follow suit. (Let's not forget the game of chess also inspired one of the world's most successful stage musicals.) A photo of Duchamp taken in 1963 frames the entry (and publicity) for the international show. In this infamous image Duchamp is ensconced in a game with nude 'model' [\[ii\]](#) Eve Babitz. It's a cheeky primer: in stark black-and-white Duchamp is shown in a state of bemused seduction – with the game, not the naked Eve. He has his priorities straight. That's the direction in which we're also headed, as we move further into *The Art Of Chess*.

There's plenty of cheeky (i.e., sexually explicit) work, less so in *Your Move*. Both shows do strike a nice balance between aesthetics, form and entertainment. One of the funniest – and most bizarre – of the chess sets is by Jake and Dinos Chapman. Black and white mutant figurines face off on an exquisite ebony and rosewood



chessboard, with skull-and-crossbones inlays in each square. Each figure resembles an

inflatable sex doll, with human hair (the black side has afros while the whites wear English judiciary wigs), penis-shaped noses, holes for mouths, and wearing Nike runners. In an Australian context, it appeared to be a wild, running battle between natives and colonials.

The nice family picnic is perverted by American artist Matthew Ronay into a profanely funny chess set. Pretty gingham squares make a cloth chessboard (gingham being the material of American pioneers) supporting thirty-two pastel-painted bronze pieces in the form of fairy cakes, pizza slices, marijuana joints, dead canaries and carefully sculpted dildos. Here the straight-laced family picnic is heartily given the queer finger.



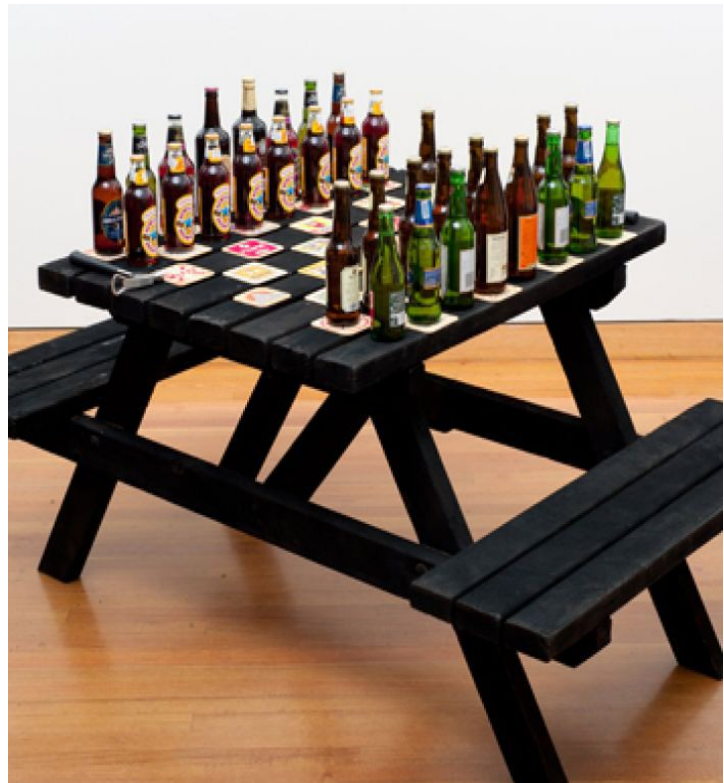
Tracey Emin's contribution is less confronting than you might expect from an artist famous for diarising her sexual experiences. Instead she presents a delicately embroidered patchwork chessboard, topped with small, nebulous bronze pieces, which may or may not be sexual body parts. In 'the only travelling set in the group' [\[iii\]](#), Emin blends craft (the traditional realm of women) with art (the historic realm of men). Inked onto two patches are words Very Wet and Move Faster, with a sketch of a woman's nude body on a third. Flanked by other decorative cloth and porcelain pieces, this is a haunting tale of loss and personal history.

In one of the most politically charged works, Italy's Maurizio Cattelan pits history's baddies and goodies [\[iv\]](#). The righteous side includes Gandhi, Superman, the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, and the Virgin Mary as the Queen, with Martin Luther King as the King. The opposing villains include Hitler, Rasputin, Dracula, Al Capone, Stalin and the snake from the Garden of Eden. The pieces are made from bronze and painted colourfully in shiny enamel. Interestingly, Italian porn star Cicciolina turns up on the good side, a revered figure in her home country. *This* is the great game of Cattelan's chess set – identifying who he has cast as good or evil, and further, identifying the Pawns (Mother Teresa is one). It speaks volumes.

While the chess sets by art stars Damien Hirst and Barbra Kruger are slickly executed and aesthetically exquisite, I was left cold (perhaps intentionally), especially next to Paul Fryer's inspired *Chess Set for Tesla* made from light valves plugged into a powered chess board (one side glows red, the other blue). Then there's Alistair MacKenzie's divine ode to man-versus-nature, *Amorphous Organic*, whose pieces are exotic insects set in amber inside glass vessels. One side has winged insects, the other ground crawlers. They sit atop a white lightboard framed by beautiful oak specimen drawers. It's a timeless, mesmerising piece.

Your move ...

Don't misunderstand me; *The Art Of Chess* is a fine exhibition. But by the end of it I felt as if I had run a marathon – sweaty, a bit sore and out of breath; chess as a contact sport. By comparison, *Your Move* strikes a more meditative, internal and contemplative mood, perhaps closer to the true nature of playing chess. While just as beautiful,



adversarial and compelling, it does provide a welcome counterpoint.

Notably, *Your Move* features drawing and painting alongside sculpture. Collage artist Sally Smart and printmakers Benjamin Armstrong and Danie Mellor all interpret chess on the wall [v]. Mellor presents a powerful, finely-illustrated work on paper, representing 'the game of warfare and settlement over the centuries' [vi] in Australia. Entitled *The fruits of labour*, Mellor depicts a battle between colonialists and Indigenous Australians, 'in the name of king and/or queen' [vii]. It's not just clever but quietly epic, an image brimming with insights about the best and worst sides of our colonialist history.

Australian identity is further, comedically explored in *The Great War* by Australian-born Berlin-based installation artists Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro. They create a drinking game to reflect the combat of World War I. A bushfire-blackened outdoor picnic table is set up with cardboard drink coasters from Europe arranged as chessboard squares. The chess pieces are

beer bottles. We are invited to open each bottle and drink the contents, then smash each bottle with a hammer as we play the game. The subtext is a serious one about conflict and mass violence but I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

Robert Jacks, Lionel Bawden, Benjamin Armstrong and Emily Floyd all celebrate the game's iconic black-and-white-ness. Victorian artist Jacks – a self-confessed Duchamp devotee – returned to sculpture (from painting) for his *Your Move* commission, bringing with him his love for the minimal and serial processes. In *Black on black, white on white* he creates a tight, abstract grid made from timber, acrylic and enamel, a representation of binary code which reflects a battle between on/off, black/white, and form/colour.

There are other interesting wars raging in *Your Move*. English-born Sydney artist Caroline Rothwell brings her alien status to bear in *Chess (detail)*. She depicts a right royal battleground between invading species introduced by English colonists (such as rabbits and foxes) which endanger the survival of Australia's native species like bilbies, Tasmanian devils and grey nurse sharks. Feeling this special contest keenly, Rothwell uses an intriguing technique – the various animal figures are cast from molten metal poured inside fabric moulds, which gives them a distinctly soft, almost inflatable look. Playing further with type, she paints the endangered species in menacing black, while the alien aggressors are silver and noble, appearing cuddly and friendly. Humans are also implicated in this ecological war zone.

A spectacular glacial war wages in Kate Rohde's *Glacial Chess Set*, all agog with dripping ice-caps, translucent crystals, and polar animals arranged in a food-chain pecking order. Backlit in-situ, they glow dangerously, to perhaps alarm us to the imminent threat of climate change. Destruction never looked so luscious.



The fracas that excited me most however belonged to Melbourne sculptor Michael Doolan. My initial reading of his *Chess: a cautionary tale* as a dark representation of Desert Storm, or the war in Afghanistan, was informed by Doolan's faceless, glossy black cartoon figures, lined up and about to fight an anonymous, secret war. I intuited George Bush, the CIA and general doom. In fact, Doolan's chess set was inspired by his daughter's mass-produced toys. It's a sardonic morality tale about fairytale figures fighting shadowy woodland creatures in a forest which blurs good and evil.

Long live Bobby Fisher ...

Marcel Duchamp apparently 'retired from painting' to 'devote himself to chess' [\[viii\]](#). I can't imagine that *The Art Of Chess* and *Your Move* will inspire viewers to do the same, such is the quality of the work. But I can imagine a good number will follow Duchamp's example by picking up chess – again or for the first time – to see what they might be missing out on.

Notes

Your Move: Australian artists play chess is currently showing at Samstag Art Museum, Adelaide, 14 October to 16 December 2011.

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[\[i\]](#) Page 15 of the essay 'New Forms For A New Era' by Larry List in *32 Pieces: The Art Of Chess* exhibition catalogue, Mark Sanders (ed.), Reykjavik Art Museum, 2009.

[\[ii\]](#) 'In the notes from photo Fig. 46 'Marcel Duchamp and Eve Babitz', page 53 of essay 'New Forms For A New Era' by Larry List, in *32 Pieces: The Art Of Chess* exhibition catalogue, Mark Sanders (ed.), Reykjavik Art Museum, 2009.

[\[iii\]](#) *32 Pieces: The Art Of Chess* exhibition catalogue, page 104, Mark Sanders (ed.), Reykjavik Art Museum, 2009.

[\[iv\]](#) A reference to the 'good' and 'bad' description in notes for Cattelan's chess set, on page 60 of *32 Pieces: The Art Of Chess* exhibition catalogue, page 104, Mark Sanders (ed.), Reykjavik Art Museum, 2009.

[\[v\]](#) A reference to Sally Smart's artist statement in catalogue *Your Move: Australian Artists Play Chess*; Authors: Tansy Curtin, Karen Quinlan; Published by Bendigo Art Gallery, 2009 (No page no's listed).

[\[vi\]](#) A reference to Danie Mellor's artist statement in catalogue *Your Move: Australian Artists Play Chess*; Authors: Tansy Curtin, Karen Quinlan; Published by Bendigo Art Gallery, 2009. (No page no's listed).

[\[vii\]](#) As above.

[\[viii\]](#) Page 17 of the essay 'New Forms For A New Era' by Larry List, in *32 Pieces: The Art Of Chess* exhibition catalogue, Mark Sanders (ed.), Reykjavik Art Museum, 2009.