

Ah Xian wins Clemenger

By [Gary Anderson](#) ArtsHub | Wednesday, September 16, 2009

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Photo courtesy ArtHistory Club

This year's triennial Clemenger Award for Contemporary Art has been won by sculptor Ah Xian for an installation work of 36 concrete busts impressed with foliage entitled "Concrete forest, 2009".

Endowed in 1991 by patrons Peter and Joan Clemenger and first awarded in 1993, the Clemenger- conceived from its inception as a 20 year long project- has grown in stature to become one to the most sought after and prestigious awards of its kind. This year will be its 6th and last iteration. Artists for the Clemenger are invited after short-listing by the curators at NGV based on their career achievement and their current creative trajectories and the selection has always been notable for the interplay of indigenous and non-indigenous art

This strategy, and that of avoiding predetermined themes in the selection process, which was stewarded by the NGV Contemporary Art curators, Alex Baker (Senior Curator), Kelly Gellarty (Curator) and Jane Debery (assistant Curator) has again fielded an impressive and diverse group of artists and practices.

The full list of exhibiting artists comprises, Ah Xian (Award recipient), Peter Atkins, Vivienne Binns, Stephen Bush, Destiny Deacon, Domenico de Clario, Janenne Eaton, Julie Gough, Guan Wei, Louise Hearman, Janet Laurence, Trevor Nickolls, Dennis Nona, Scott Redford and Julie Rrap.

I was particularly taken by Julie Gough's moving (and 224 min long) video, a drive-through of contemporary Tasmania where every Colonial land grant made in the past is detailed in text overlay, county by county, and her fenced in interior overarched by a dead apple tree where we are invited to trample underfoot the notoriously controversial text of "The Fabrication of Aboriginal History". Peter Atkins "Disney Colour Project/Ready made, while vaguely evoking Hirst's pharmacopeia imagery was inspired by found colour swatches of Disney branded house paints for children's rooms and comments aptly on the pervasiveness of this brand of US export culture. Nearby Louise Hearman has assembled a haunting multipanelled installation of her luminous, highly personal paintings whose imagery hovers uncomfortably between humour and malaise.

But today all eyes were on Ah Xian and his serene, yet unnerving, "Concrete Forest".

Ai Xian first came to Australia in 1989 and after discovering porcelain has worked largely on busts and full-body sculptures that have been decorated with traditional Chinese elements often realised on his sculptured forms by highly skilled Chinese artisans, most often from Jingdezhen, a centre for ceramic production since the Ming period, and always under his meticulous direction. His work was soon exhibited in important groups

shows and he came to particular prominence when he won the inaugural National Sculpture Prize at NGA 2001. Last year he had his first one man show in Europe in 2008 at the Gemeente Museum, Den Haag, Amsterdam.

As well as his porcelains he has also made carved lacquer and elaborate whole body cloisonné enamels on beaten copper underforms. Commentators on his work, noting the internal oppositions between form and content, and between traditional Chinese and western practises, in his work and the resemblance of the decoration to tattoos, have evoked the hand of indelible cultural imprints viewed afresh from a western art-production context. Xian himself has stated “when you’re away from China, you have a clearer picture of the country and its culture.” Collectors, both State and private have been keen to acquire his work (A bust, "Human Human (Bust 5)" sold for a record \$A150,000 this august.

I spoke with Xian after the formalities today about his Award winning work.

This work displays individual 36 life-cast busts, including his wife daughter and son, each with eyes quiet and closed, that appear on first glance to be overlaid or incised with foliage patterns. Each bust set with a different botanically named named plant species. The busts are placed on pale blue plinths (he would have liked concrete) and are arrayed in a loose 6 x 6 square, an auspicious configuration referencing Chinese numerology.

On closer inspection the foliage is not incised, or overlaid ,but rather the negative image of material pressed to the inside of his two-pat cast before the cool grey concrete is poured, capturing the underside of the leaf. In some places the stems leave deep holes penetrating onto the form. His edges have been meticulously chastened. This is quite different form his past work where the foliage and decorative elements have been added or realized in positive relief. In the present work each leaf, and branch and stem and seed pod defines a negative space, literally the lack of a leaf. As each of the mostly young faces has their eyes closed the work has a meditative calm quality and evokes on closer inspection a sense of yearning for the absence of the natural world impressed in negation as an altered skin, literally a lack or incompleteness of the human element.

And Xian is explicit that the work, in its execution and conceptual use of concrete, deals with the evaporation of the natural environment under urban encroachment (“not just in China”). Xian also speaks of the threat of human extinction and others, including Emma Mayall in her catalogue have made reference to the function of sculptures as human fossils and elsewhere as evocations of death masks. But there is nothing macabre or funereal in this work.

Perhaps it is because Ah Xian peoples his work with the young and because the sculptural effects, and their subtle patination achieved with light wax burnishes, are so beautiful, that “Concrete Forest” seems to be meditating clearly and calmly on a pressing and perhaps immanent calamity.



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