

A changing of the guard in contemporary art galleries means there's plenty of room for new artists – but will the customers follow?

LAST NOVEMBER, IN A WAREHOUSE IN THE inner-western Sydney suburb of Marrickville, a scene unfolded that would have given demographers a field day. The hoppers and roasters of the previous occupant, Brazilian Coffee & Sugar Factory, had been hauled out. In their place, carpenters were nail-gunning walls for intimate new rooms – picking coffee beans out of the joints as they went – while painters covered everything up to the six-metre-high ceilings with classic white.

Amid the hubbub stood the tall, suited figure of Sorì Sorìriou, who is preparing to fill these smooth surfaces with something a few rungs above a flat white – contemporary art. First up will be a show of portraits from Melbourne-via-Santa Fe painter Justin Williams, to open on January 31.

Sorìriou's new COMA Gallery is just one of more than a dozen major commercial gallery openings in Australia's capital cities in the past year alone. This seems remarkable, given the post-pandemic mini-boom in art-buying has, anecdotally at least, well and truly burst. So what is going on? For Sorìriou, opening here is partly about favourable demographics, and partly about gaining extra walls with which to back his global ambitions. Sydney property prices mean that the kind of person who aspires to buy paintings or sculpture might now look for a house around the inner west, rather than the prohibitively priced east. Sorìriou has followed them. Having opened COTA in 2016 in the harbourside enclave of Rushcutters Bay, he's moved to bigger premises ever westward, first to Darlinghurst and then Chippendale.

The new gallery in Marrickville is twice as big as his existing space. It doesn't yet look like the \$200,000-plus he will spend on it, but as Sorìriou shows *The Australian Financial Review Magazine* around the two-level, 468-square-metre building, his excitement is palpable. "There will be a coffee table and some big chairs here, where a collector can relax, and we'll bring out more works by an artist they've requested," he says, ushering us into a former workshop.

Then we're cutting back towards the sliding garage door entry. "This will be the gallery shop – I've always wanted one of those," he exclaims, pointing to an alcove soon to be filled with the exhibition books that COMA will begin producing from March, as well as T-shirts and postcards. "Merchandise means a price point for everyone. If I have a bunch of young, interested people coming in here and they're not buying paintings, it doesn't matter to me. At least not yet."

SORÌRIOU'S ENTHUSIASM MIGHT SEEM MISPLACED given the current state of the art market. Nobody collects total sales figures for commercial art galleries, but the auction houses – where some of their wares inevitably end up – are in a slump. Led by Deutsche and Hackett and Smith & Singer, Australia's gavel-wielders made just over \$134 million of sales in 2024 (inclusive of buyer's premium, which is usually about 2.5 per cent), down from \$141 million and \$144 million



NEXT WAVE

STORY BY MICHAEL BAILEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOUISE KENNERLEY

Sorì Sorìriou is setting up his new COMA Gallery in a former coffee warehouse in Marrickville, Sydney.

the two years prior. Sales hit their record of \$176 million way back in 2007 – that's not even adjusted for inflation – before the entire art market was hit by the confidence-sapping global financial crisis. Also slowing things down were changes in 2011 that prevented displaying of an artwork if it was part of a self-managed super fund.

December's decision by Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art to reintroduce a general entry fee after 25 years, in a bid to stave off a budget crunch, has cast further gloom. The

Despite it all, Sorìriou is far from alone in rolling the dice. A block away from him in Marrickville, Syrup Contemporary sprang up in April led by Carolyn Craig and Damian Dillon, who previously founded non-profit artist-run gallery Schmitt in Chinatown. That month also saw the inaugural exhibition for Palas in Zetland, founded by Matt Glenn and Tania Doropoulos, a former director at Melbourne's Anna Schwartz Gallery, after they returned to Australia from glittering international careers. (That first show was by

no less a figure than Australia's 2022 Venice Biennale artist, Marco Fusinato.)

Cassandra Bird, a long-time associate at the 42-year-old Roslyn Osley's Gallery, has gone her own way in Kings Cross. Dominic French and partners have opened the futuristic 1301SW in Alexandria, and Can Yavuz has opened a second space in Surry Hills for Ames Yavuz, whose eclectic roster also has outlets via its gallery in Singapore and, shortly, London's Mayfair. Meanwhile, Melbourne has seen

expansion in the form of new abstract specialist Five Walls, new emerging artists champion Animal House Fine Arts, and the return of Sarah Scout Presents, which moved its roster dominated by queer and female artists from the city to Collingwood.

Last November, Olsen declared to the *Financial Review* that all these new galleries amounted to a glitzy sending shock waves through the usual surface-level politeness of the art scene. "There are not enough highly collectable living artists