



## WOMEN OF STYLE

## FOR ART'S SAKE

SHE'S ONE OF THE MOST PERSUASIVE, PASSIONATE PROPONENTS OF THE VISUAL ARTS AUSTRALIA'S EVER KNOWN, BUT **ELIZABETH ANN MACGREGOR** OBE HAS FACED HER SHARE OF STRUGGLES. WE SPOKE TO THE MCA DIRECTOR ABOUT THE STANDOUT MOMENTS IN HER EXTRAORDINARY CAREER

by **RACHEL SHARP**

It's a jewel in Australia's arts' crown, a spectacular building with an unbeatable view, and now officially the most visited modern art gallery in the world, with more than a million visitors a year. But when Elizabeth Ann Macgregor was handed the key to Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) exactly 20 years ago, it was more akin to inheriting the Titanic.

Back then, MCA had a seriously dismal public image, even worse financial woes and was on the brink of closing its doors. The fact that Macgregor—affectionately known as Liz Ann to friends and associates—turned the ship around to such spectacular effect is legendary in global art circles. “Someone once asked me what's the most dangerous thing I've tried in my life, thinking I'd say bungee jumping or scuba diving with sharks—which I have done, by the way,” says Scotland-born Macgregor, whose five-page resume full of achievements, accolades, board appointments and charity interests makes for fascinating—if not deeply humbling—reading. “But I think giving up a secure job [as director of the prestigious Ikon Gallery in Birmingham] to travel to the other side of the world to a different country, to an institution that was on the verge of bankruptcy, was scarier.”

Even her first radical proposal as boss—to scrap the broke museum's only income source by making entrance free to the public—seemed crazy, given it wiped \$500,000 from its annual bottom line. Macgregor secured Telstra as her first commercial partner to cover the shortfall, a sponsorship that remains to this day. “That allowed us to build the [visitor] numbers, which helped us challenge that tag of art being elitist, which was driving me nuts, then approach the government [for more funding].” Fast forward to 2012 and she'd raised \$53 million to redevelop and modernise the museum, which is famously situated on the Circular Quay waterfront opposite the Sydney Opera House.

To say Macgregor has a knack for making the impossible happen is an epic understatement. Charismatic, with signature auburn hair and a thick Scottish accent, she's charming, incredibly clever and owns a reputation for being tenacious, hardworking and having spectacular skills of persuasion. She's served on no less than 16 boards throughout her career, including her current fixtures at UNICEF, the Sydney Swans Foundation and the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art. In 2011, she was made an Officer in the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the Queen's Birthday Honours. When Macgregor's partner introduced her to scuba diving to help distract her from work, he ignited another philanthropic passion point: ocean conservation. “Now, if I'm not diving, I'm researching the next trip,” she says of her marine obsession.

Much of Macgregor's curious, creative spirit can be traced back to her formative years in Scotland. “The Orkney Islands are remote but culturally rich. I went to a small school there but had opportunities to do all kinds of things beyond the academic,” recalls the eldest of four. It was an idyllic upbringing. Her father, a bishop who often challenged church ideas, was focused intently on helping people. To this day, her devoted mother has a framed nativity painting Macgregor created at age five on her wall. “I was very musical—I played violin, piano, guitar, organ—I was in the Scottish National Youth String Orchestra. I really thought I was



LEFT: A detail from Janet Laurence's *Deep Breathing: Resuscitation for the Reef*, 2015–16/2019 exhibition highlighting climate change. BELOW: Liam Benson's *hello, good to meet you* 2019 installation in the MCA's Jackson Bella Room, was designed to engage children with special needs.

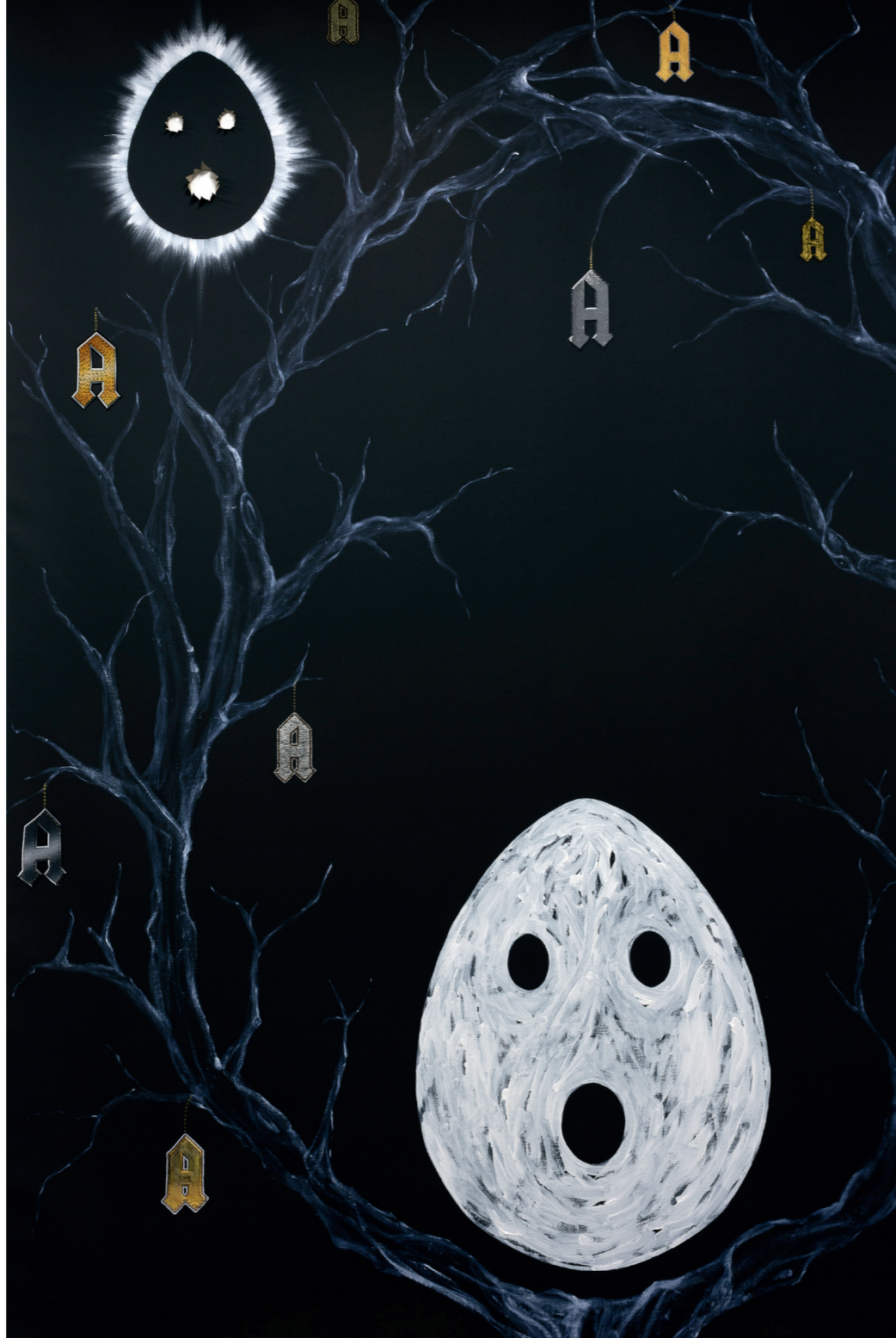


destined for music college.” When she did eventually go to Edinburgh University, it was to study languages, but after switching courses and finishing a Masters in History of Arts, then moving to Manchester to study a Diploma in Museum and Gallery Studies, she eventually chanced upon a job advertisement looking for a “curator/driver” for the Scottish Arts Council, touring a makeshift art gallery around Scotland in an adapted bus. “I spent the first three weeks of my career learning to drive a lorry,” she recalls. “I used to joke that if things were tough here, I could go back to my heavy-goods vehicle licence.”

Those early days of taking art to the masses on the road helped form her scorn for art being elitist or expensive. It also sparked a “light-bulb” realisation: when you talk directly to artists, their work comes to life in phenomenal ways. “I used to take artists on the bus with me, so they could demystify what they did [for the public]. Art is like a game—you need to learn the rules. If you’re a new cricket spectator watching for the first time, you think: what is this game that goes five days then ends in a draw? Then you learn about cricket, the...rules, and suddenly you see the game completely differently. It’s the same with art. Some art requires you to understand the philosophy behind it and what the artist was trying to say. Then you get it.”

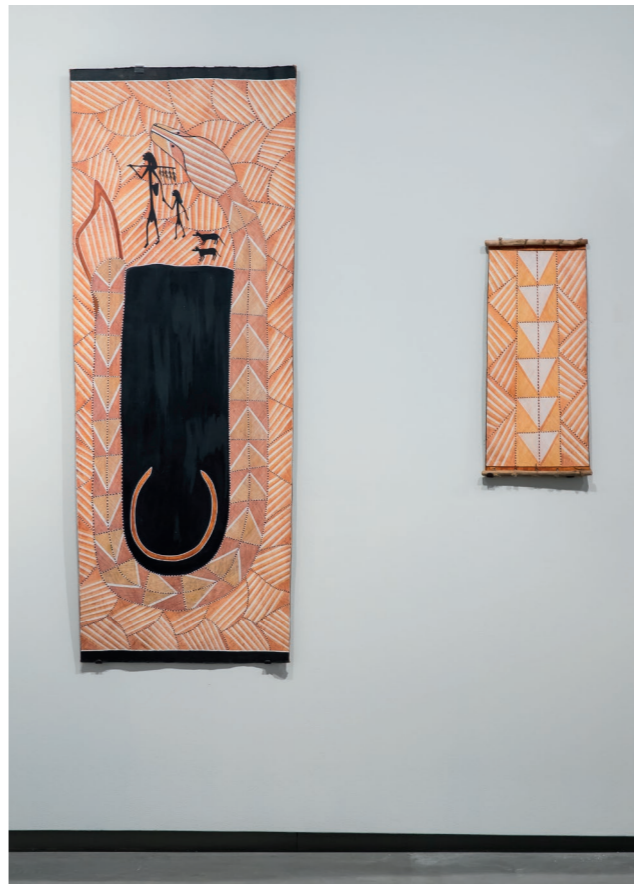
That’s one of the reasons the MCA is one of the biggest employers of working artists in Australia through its National Centre for Creative Learning. “Artists have a different way of looking at things—they don’t just teach creativity, they teach creatively,” says Macgregor. “We have a team of 40 to 50 artist-educators [employed as casuals] who we train to work with many different people. Liam Benson, for example, has done the Jackson Bella Room [a space within the MCA for audiences to engage with contemporary art through sensory experience] for children with special needs. Another example is Janet Laurence’s 2019 [MCA] show, which did so much to bring [awareness] to climate change. We have to try to have people outside the usual [scientists, politicians, activists] telling us what’s happening in the world. And artists have to be in this mix.”

Macgregor has also led the MCA’s deep-seated commitment to Australia’s first people and been a tireless champion for Australian artists both here and overseas. “We only buy Australian work. We show international artists, but we invest the small money we have into Australians,” says Macgregor. “We’ve developed an incredible partnership with the Tate [Modern, in London] over the past three years, thanks to Qantas, to co-acquire work. Now you see Australian artists in the hang there like [the late] Gordon Bennett—a fabulous Indigenous artist, one of our greatest—



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RIGHT:  
Gordon Bennett’s  
“Possession Island  
(Abstraction)” 1991  
BELOW:  
Kenan Namunjaja’s  
“Marladj Djang  
(Orphan Dreaming)”  
2019 (left), and  
“Kunkurra (spiral  
wind) and Kalawan  
(goanna tracks)” 2019.  
OPPOSITE: Nell’s  
“Mother of the Dry  
Tree” (detail) 2017



Still, it’s not always been easy for Macgregor to work her magic. “The biggest frustration at work for me, certainly in the beginning, was what I call the double whammy: being a woman and being in the arts,” she says. “We have to deal with the misogynist elements in politics and in business...I once had a woman take me aside and say, ‘Now, when you’re dealing with X, Y, Z politicians, why don’t you try a different strategy’ [suggesting Macgregor use feminine wiles for a better outcome]. I was horrified.”

Despite all the fanfare, it’s the quiet pinch-me moments she’s experienced in the past 20 years that have paid off. “When people tell me stories about their child who’s autistic, or teenager who doesn’t have any friends because they have a disability, who comes to the learning centre and feels like they’re part of the MCA family... those are the moments that matter,” she says. “We have a program for people with Alzheimer’s and their carers, showing what art can do for them, and how it helps them feel better in the world when they’re losing their memory. We run a program with the refugee kids and Syrian families, who come here and learn what it means to be Australian through art. That’s the great thing about art: it can make people feel part of society. It can make them feel empowered and confident. It’s not just a nice thing that people who’ve got money or spare time can enjoy on a Sunday. I really believe that art can change lives—and that means difficult art, art that makes people think, not just nice pretty landscapes. It’s fundamental to who we are as human beings and who we’re going to be going forward. That’s what I saw very simply on that bus in Scotland all those years ago.” ■

Elizabeth Ann Macgregor has been an *InStyle* and *Audi Women of Style* Awards judge for more than 10 years.