

THE NEWCASTLE HERALD NOVEMBER 5, 2011

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weekender



SPANISH EYES

Cessnock's world-famous artist
Dani Marti and his intimate art

INSIDE

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KNOWING THE ROPES

Dani Marti's sculptures are supremely textural, and the internationally recognised artist explores life and love below the surface. He enlightens ROSEMARIE MILSOM on a visit to his Aberdare home.

"It's good, ah?" Spanish-born artist Dani Marti is standing at the entrance to his backyard, looking out to a sculptural garden of succulents and an inviting in-ground swimming pool. Bougainvillea gropes the top of the tall brick wall that encloses the corner block, or "compound" as Marti, tongue in cheek, refers to the 100-year-old former general store and storage shed cum studio and modest open-plan home.

It is good, and a delightful surprise. With a bold blue sky overhead and a warm whispering breeze, we could be in Barcelona, Marti's exuberant birth place, or even Los Angeles. Instead, we are incongruously in Aberdare, a small suburb of wide sleepy streets on the edge of Cessnock.

This has been home for Marti and his long-term partner and fellow artist Philip Drummond for nearly two years, though Marti also spends part of the year in Glasgow, where he completed a Master of Fine Arts in 2006. Why Scotland? "I wanted to study in Europe, somewhere small, and become part of an art community," he says, walking ahead. "I visited Glasgow and liked it. It's post-industrial, rough, pretty edgy and severe."

And Cessnock? "It's a little bit like that . . . with more sun. I like it here," Marti continues, his Catalan accent colouring his speech. "For me, here, it's about real people who are getting on with their lives. I couldn't work in Sydney. There was too much noise."

Apart from typical suburban sounds – a distant lawnmower and a squawking myna bird – all is quiet in Aberdare, though the same can't be said for Marti's career. The 48-year-old is internationally renowned for his woven sculptures and revealingly intimate video and installation work. His work is located in sleek corporate offices here and overseas, as well as



chic hotels and numerous gallery collections. The first Australian survey of his work, which includes 19 pieces spanning the past 11 years, has recently been displayed at Newcastle Art Gallery. Confronting, compelling, vibrant, dark, poignant and moody, *TOUCH the portraiture of Dani Marti* has been a significant undertaking for the gallery. Making the most of the building's bunker-like ground floor with its concrete beams, curator Tristan Sharp designed a stunning exhibition.

"There are a lot of layers to his work," Sharp says, showing me into the eerily silent space. The fig battle on the gallery's doorstep has forced the gallery to close, which is unfortunate for all involved in the exhibition. ("I'm pretty disgusted," Marti says after it is later announced that the show's scheduled eight-week run until November 13 has ended five weeks early. "I've been working on it for over two years and spent thousands.")

"There's a real beauty and craftsmanship with the sculpture, which Dani also calls paintings, but then you go deeper and engage with the films," Sharp explains, while guiding me through the beautifully lit exhibition. I am unaware that I will be one of the few privileged people to actually see the show.

"He's peeling back layers, exposing things that are sometimes very uncomfortable for us to engage with."

"We were really determined to hang the show properly and we had to construct a whole new framework for it. It's a show of international quality."

The gallery called on the technological expertise of the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Casula Powerhouse when installing the multichannel video work, one of which requires three screens. Marti is thrilled with the show. "The work looks the best here," he says. "The lighting, the composition, [are] very, very good."

While contemporary art leaves many people cold, Marti's work, while intellectually gutsy, is inspired by emotion and is far more accessible because of it. A 2005 black-and-white video captures his fragile 73-year-old mother Maria Rosa listening to a dramatic Rachmaninov composition. "I went back to Spain to see her because she'd had a heart attack and had to have an operation," Marti remembers. "She was feeling very, very down. She used to be a pianist when she was young. My father left the house and she said, 'I'm going to listen to Rachmaninov', and I knew she was going to be very emotional. I asked if I could film her. She cried and cried."

The accompanying woven triptych, *Shadow after Shadow*, uses mostly black polyester and nylon rope, as well as small stainless steel balls and knitting yarn, capturing the sombre mood and dignity of his mother. "It's a very

"The starting point is always the person. I choose the rope, the material, the weave, based on them to create an emotional surface. The patterns and textures suggest individual identities, like DNA."

demanding work because of the subject," he says. "My experience of that moment with her helped me to create the work."

"Through the whole process of weaving, it's like my grandmother knitting the jumper and thinking about the grandson. I create these emotional relationships with the subject and I'm always trying to capture something."

"I can't approach abstraction for the sake of abstraction; it's not just an intellectual exercise. It's about intimacy, portraiture, disclosure. The starting point is always the person. I choose the rope, the material, the weave, based on them to create an emotional surface. The patterns and textures suggest individual identities, like DNA."

Back in Marti's studio, he shows me his "library" of materials – thick-gauge industrial rope, wire, cord, cotton thread, plastics – which are sourced in Spain, Australia and China and include hot pinks and yellows, citrus hues, black, a spectrum of bold reds, white, silver, gold and purple. Glass beads and leather come from India. He spends a lot of time on the internet sourcing materials and employs his background in business – Marti has an MBA and formerly worked in the Catalonia trade commissioner's office in Sydney – to establish connections with suppliers.

His career change was long in the planning and doing. While working in Sydney in the late '80s and early 1990s, he invested wisely in property and became financially secure while also dabbling at the Julian Ashton Art School at The Rocks and the Art Student's League of New York.

It took a stint in hospital at 32 to give him the courage to leave the business world behind to practise art full time. "I was diagnosed with

VISIONARY: Dani Marti, who has made Aberdare his home with partner and fellow artist Philip Drummond, also spends part of the year in Glasgow. **PICTURE:** RYAN OSLAND

HIV in my mid-20s," Marti explains matter-of-factly, without a hint of awkwardness. "My first reaction, because we're talking about the '80s and everybody around me was dying, was 'don't expect much from life'."

"And then I got pneumonia at the age of 32, and I was in hospital and I thought, 'I have to change something, this is not working' and that's when I worked on my first show with the Gitte Weise Gallery [Sydney] in 1999. Gitte mentioned artist-run spaces and I started showing everywhere I could." (He also completed a master of arts at the University of NSW's College of Fine Arts with majors in sculpture and installation.)

Marti is in fine shape thanks to an ongoing medication regimen and a healthy, active lifestyle – he and Phil regularly work out at the local gym. Renovating houses in Cessnock also keeps them fit. "When I make sales, it's good money. I make maybe two sales a year and we can survive, we're self-sufficient."

"The houses are a way of having security and also gives me time away from making art, which can take over my life. I carry bricks, paint. We can work on the houses and be creative. It feels good."

Charismatic and handsome, Marti exudes charm. He is self-assured but not arrogant. "I don't think about it [HIV]," he continues. "It's not a death sentence any more. I remember back then, in the '80s, '90s, I used to go to ward 42 in St Vincent's Hospital and it used to be full of sick people. It doesn't exist any more."

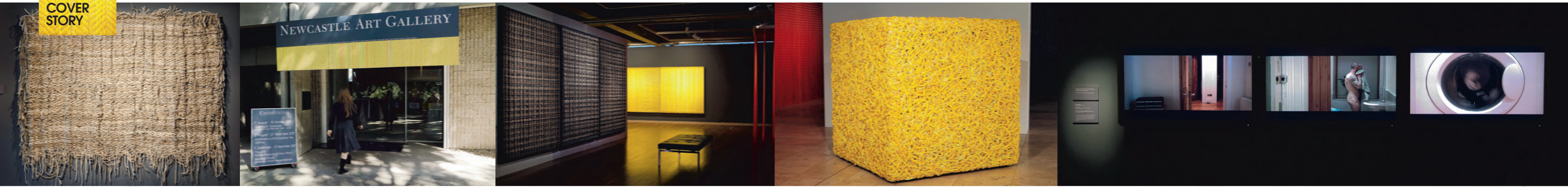
One of Marti's most affecting works is his self-portrait, *Vial Queen 2010*, which consists of hundreds of empty glass vials tied together with linen thread to form a large teardrop-shaped sculpture. The vials were collected by Marti between 2004 and 2006 when he had to inject himself twice a day as part of his medication regimen.

But it is Marti's video work that is the most confronting and compelling.

David 2007, one of his earliest, centres on a young homeless man whom the artist filmed one icy night in Argyle Street in the centre of Glasgow. David sits holding an empty takeaway cup, silently begging while drifting in and out of a drug-induced haze.

Marti spent 90 minutes filming David in close-up, offering him his black Adidas beanie and "10 quid" as payment. Passers-by abuse him for filming, others heckle David, while a young couple begged Marti to turn his lense on them. "They started snogging in front of me," he laughs.

It's a simple, slow-moving video: the noise of inner-city traffic on wet roads forms the soundtrack and David's face, which is dominated by his rolling, glazed eyes and long lashes, conveys hopelessness and



loneliness. The accompanying weaving is made from thick, beige nylon rope, frayed from being dragged behind Marti's four-wheel drive over dusty rural roads.

Bacon's Dog divides viewers. Featuring the well-known Sydney art collector Peter Fay, the video captures physically intimate moments between Fay and Marti. The artist had approached Fay about creating a portrait and they struck up an arrangement over dinner.

"I wanted to incorporate [in the sculpture] all the plastic objects he'd been collecting for years," Marti says. "He told me to stop using ropes, they were too boring, and start using plastics. For me to know what to do with the plastics, I wanted to film him and learn more about how to represent him.

"When I'm making the video, sometimes I feel like the caring person, and also a monster."

"We did some filming and then went out. Peter said, 'Look I'm 65 and I've never been intimate with anyone', and I said, 'I'm happy to be intimate with you, but I want everything documented on video'."

Marti spent five months filming their interactions. At one point, a naked Fay speaks to Marti, who is filming, conveying his new sense of identity. "I've never seen myself as worthy. There's been no life [until now]."

"Peter went through a whole spectrum of emotions," Marti remembers, "from falling in

love with me, hoping that I was going to leave Phil, to hating me. He'd never experienced affection, or strong emotions before. He'd only read about them. He had a lot of self-loathing but it's been very cathartic for him. He has a partner now."

Says Sharp of *Bacon's Dog*: "Dani's prepared to take the risk. It's a sustained engagement, there's a lot of discipline and commitment from him. The film creates a lot of questions about the ethics; he admits he is walking a fine line, but it's with the full acknowledgement of

the people he's with."

All of Marti's video subjects, which include his teenage niece Andrea, who introduces him to her online world, sign release forms. There are those who decide not to, and Marti respects that. Still, isn't having sexual, or even just physical contact with a subject entering murky waters?

"I think it's powerful because it's so challenging on a number of levels, particularly to do with ethics in relation to documentary and portraiture conventions," says Daniel Mudie Cunningham, senior curator at Sydney's Artbank. "Dani's videos are interesting because they're about an exchange, they're about encounters, they're about intimacy. There's always this trade-off, some kind of

negotiation. He is interested in the formation of a relationship."

Marti captures the lonely and marginalised, exposing confronting aspects about how we live, often cut off from others. As immersed in social media as we are, Marti shatters the veneer of validation and belonging that having 400 Facebook friends provides.

He meets subjects online or through his eclectic network of friends. It is true reality TV. It isn't comfortable to watch, but his video work is compelling. He is unflinching in his aim to make public the personal.

After 90 minutes alone, absorbed in his exhibition, I feel as though I have been jolted into a new awareness. It is impossible not to be affected by his videos and the accompanying

woven portraits. They possess pathos, pain, joy, risk and drudgery.

"Art is a platform to question things," Marti says. "YouTube has changed everything; in that forum there's no reflection, no grappling with issues. I explore these issues, how we connect with each other, what intimacy means.

"When I'm making the video, sometimes I feel like the caring person, and also a monster."



BOLD VENTURES: Spanish-born Dani Marti at work in his Aberdare studio. Top, a selection of pieces by the internationally renowned artist who had been exhibiting at Newcastle Art Gallery before the council closed the space until further notice.

MAIN PICTURE: RYAN OSLAND