

# A contented life

After a quarter-century in the business, art dealer Philip Bacon remains passionately committed to what he does, reports Louise Martin-Chew

**P**RIVATE support for the visual arts is one of Brisbane's best-kept secrets. Although cultural commentators make Brisbane the whipping boy of Australia's capital cities, the evidence disputes that runt-of-the-litter status.

The Johnstone Gallery, operational in Brisbane from 1950 to 1972, was among Australia's most successful commercial galleries in its time. Before that, the Moreton Gallery gave artists such as Sidney Nolan their first solo exhibitions. And, since 1974, Philip Bacon has continued this tradition and garnered a coterie of artists and clients that has elevated him to the top of a notoriously unstable business tree.

The Philip Bacon Galleries, known throughout the visual arts profession as one of Australia's most successful dealers, is in its 25th year and the momentum of his business shows no sign of faltering. Indeed, his gallery has allowed him to extend his experience and enthusiasm into other areas of the arts in a way rarely viewed publicly and acknowledged this year with an AM.

Bacon has had a broad spectrum of interests since the early years of his gallery. His appointments include the Council of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and the board of Opera Australia. He is a member of the Brisbane Institute and previously served on the boards of the Brisbane Biennial and the Brisbane Festival.

In an industry that attracts all sorts, and in which loose talk is common, Bacon is a classy operator. "I've been in more bedrooms in Brisbane than Don Juan in Seville," he says, but his dealings with artworks in the upper echelons are never a subject of conversation. "You really do become very involved with the family of your clients. I know how people live and I know what people are reading. You wander into their room because you have to look at that wall, and it puts you in a unique position and that's where it gets back to trust and being discreet. It's just part of the service."

The secret of his success, he says, is in the strength of his relationships with artists and clients. It is not, of course, that simple. A person must have the skill, personality and integrity to tie such relationships together. But, he says, "I can't imagine being involved in any other business. It's just so multifaceted in terms of the people you meet and the level at which you meet them. From the beginning, I wanted to have the best gallery I could have. It was what I was going to do and that's it."

Bacon was an early collector and had several paintings by the time he was 18 years old. Although preparing for a career in the law or finance, he was instantly attracted to the arts. "I really liked the smell of galleries. And I hung



Totally devoted to art: 'I really liked the smell of galleries,' says Philip Bacon. Picture: Brian Condron

around a lot." He tried his hand, attending art classes with Caroline Barker, a well-known Brisbane teacher, but his residual memories are of the afternoon teas and the company, not his creative impulses. "I could copy things," he says, "but I wasn't inventive."

A job with Grand Central Galleries followed, part time while he was studying law, then full time. The holistic nature of life for the gallery owners he knew — John Cooper (who started the Moreton Gallery) and the Johnstones — he found seductive. "It seemed to me at the time that for both the artists and the dealers I admired, it

going off on an overseas trip and he's confronted at every turn with hostesses and temptations but, in the main, he doesn't stray. He comes home to his wife. And it's true of a dealer and a client, I think. Particularly if they're collectors."

Bacon deals in paintings as well as acting as an artists' agent. "I started with my own collection, things I'd bought because I believed in them and loved them. In the first couple of years after I opened I had to sell them, but at least I had them to sell. I've had a stock of paintings over the years that I replenish all the time. And I've never been of a mind that I had to sell something to get the turnover up.

"Paintings are not like other stock. The longer you hold something, the better off you are. I've had some pictures for five, even 10 years... I've been in the business long enough to know that there is a person out there for that painting and they'll be together eventually."

Bacon's collecting interests include his gallery artists, but also French and English salon painters of the turn of the century. Bacon's remaining objectives are to follow his second-generation artists, and the younger group that includes Cressida Campbell and Peter Churcher. "The people I've built my business with are all 70-plus and dead in the main. I'm really fascinated to see what will happen with the next tier, like Storrier and Shead, Michael Johnston and Davida Allen. And I want to see who else is coming along and do what I can to make it work. And to do more, to continue helping with the visual and performing arts, which I've found really fulfilling."

After 25 years, it would be natural enough for the constant demands to become tiring. But, for Bacon, the gallery and its tentacles are "absolutely my life, my whole identification. The name on the door is an indication that it's just me. If the gallery wasn't here I don't know what I'd be. Dead probably."

## I can't imagine being in any other business

was their life. It wasn't just a job. That seemed to me to be a great thing, that total immersion in what they were doing."

When he opened his doors in 1974, it was at the request of artists such as Lawrence Daws, Margaret Olley, Charles Blackman and Robert Dickerson, who had their first successes in Brisbane with the Johnstone Gallery. The strength of these relationships shows in that they remain part of his stable. To that he has added mid-generation artists — Garry Shead, Gordon Shepherdson and Tim Storrier are examples.

Long-term relationships with clients have also been integral and Bacon has never been limited to his Brisbane base. "Some of my best clients are interstate, and they're remarkably loyal considering the temptations. It's like a husband