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High Tide: Fremantle's inaugural biennale set to reawaken port city

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The interminable strum of the southwesterly may be muted by the drone of the cherry pickers, but there is no escaping its briny breath, as Swiss artist Felice Varini is discovering. “Merde!” he barks, his grey mane thrashing about in the gust — endearingly known in these parts as the Fremantle doctor.

“Yes, it can be a challenge,” he chimes with convivial understatement, peering down the street to where a fragment of his anamorphic installation lies mauled by the wind, “but at least there is no snow.”

Varini has become an idiosyncratic fixture in Fremantle during the past four weeks, scaling walls and rooftops as he painstakingly rolls out his immense temporal artwork, *Arcs d’Ellipses*: the percolating centrepiece of Fremantle’s inaugural art biennale High Tide, which kicks off in the historic West Australian port city this weekend. *Arcs d’Ellipses* is a composite of seemingly nondescript fragments affixed to buildings, structures and roads that, viewed from one singular vantage point, forms geometric shapes Varini refers to as “my artwork”.

“I am a formal painter and the landscape is my canvas,” he explains, ordering another espresso. “But my shapes and colours are simple, very elemental. It is the terrain that is complex. It’s the terrain that defines the work. It’s a conversation between myself and this landscape.”

Born out of the mid-20th century Swiss school of structuralism — where polymaths such as Max Bill scythed out new aesthetic topography between visual art,

architecture, graphic design and industrial application — the 65-year-old has spent the past four decades paring back his already minimalist artistic tool kit.

His commanding optical illusions — fabricated from painted foil affixed to building exteriors, transforming and temporarily altering the natural terrain — have adorned churches, supermarkets, castles and villages the world over. The Fremantle work took four weeks, three full-time workers and a battalion of volunteers to realise.

“I don’t really care for the optical illusion,” Varini says. “The point of view is simply the starting point — it’s the alphabet to decode and understand the entire anthology of different fragments from which it’s made up. It’s the poetic terrain: each fragment is its own self-referential interpretation.”

Arcs d’Ellipses stretches almost 1km from the Indian Ocean at Arthur Head Reserve to the newly rendered Town Hall. As you traverse the straight march down High Street through Fremantle’s heritage-listed West End, random shapes emerge that create a new sense of tension in the buildings, diverting attention from the natural contours of the structure.

“That itself is a single work of art,” Varini says. “If people only take in the entire work they are missing something — they are missing the pieces of the whole, and therein lies the real beauty.”

“Western Australia has often struggled to accept itself beyond its ‘larrikin lens’,” High Tide artistic director Tom Muller says, taking a moment of respite from plying foil for *Arcs d’Ellipses* at a cafe beneath the Round House.

Built using convict labour in 1830, the Round House is Fremantle’s oldest structure and is a focus of the festival, and an ever-present reminder of the barbarous origins of a city that is widely recognised (and sometimes chided by its neighbours in nearby Perth) for its countercultural leanings.

“A biennale is about maturing,” Muller adds. “It’s about coming out and saying ‘this is who we are’. These events help us explore a deeper sense of identity, a deeper sense of

self. It's all about growing up, and yes, there is a sense of aligning ourselves with other great capitals. You have Sydney [Biennale], you have Adelaide. Now you have Fremantle."

While corporeally betrothed to its bigger cousin Perth, just 20km north, Fremantle has always maintained a fiercely independent resolve: a place at the frontier of land and imagination, and home turf to provocateurs such as Tim Winton, Scott Ludlam, Ben Elton, and Kevin Parker of the band Tame Impala. While the city's maritime and working-class pedigrees are long tested and eulogised, its heritage as a juncture of profound symbolism and ceremony go back millennia: to when the Whadjuk people gathered here beside the limestone bound river-mouth to trade, feast and weep for the dead.

The weeping, it's said, is what cleaved Fremantle from the sacred Wadjemup peninsula (Rottnest Island), as a great tide of tears inundated the lands between. Fremantle's Noongar name, Walyalup, translates to "place of crying". Today the city is as defined as it is demarcated by water, bound by the Swan River to the north and the capricious Indian Ocean beyond, with its tidal coiling.

"Whether we talk about tides of water or tides of migration or tides of ideas, High Tide is about reconnecting with those very real fluctuations, whether environmental or historical," Muller says. "It's about re-mythologising this place and reinvestigating a folklore that seems to have been lost, as it has across much of Australia."

Not surprisingly, much of the site-responsive two-week program has a distinctly marine feel, including local artist Jo Darbyshire's lyrical miscellany *Ships in the Night*, which weaves the monikers of visiting ships in one abstract lyrical work to be projected on to the Port Authority building: "Maha Jacqueline, African Lark ... Radiance of the Sea, Viking Ocean".

A significant swath of the program draws directly on Fremantle's often uncomfortable historical narrative, such as a multifarious re-reading of Laurel Nannup's *Ghost Ship* painting (2013), which depicts the arrival of white folk to what would come to be known as the Swan River Colony in 1829.

Similarly, underground globalist agitator Tim Burns stages an intervention on what he calls “the invasion” in *Resident Alien*, a multimedia work that promises to unsettle. And Cologne-based sound artist Johannes S. Sistermanns’s *Trans-Tide* gets deep into the bowels of Fremantle, in an aural installation composed from sounds sampled from the city’s drains and wastewater treatment plant.

“Art can sometimes be uncomfortable or confronting, but it is unique in that it can uncover the layers, if only temporarily,” Muller says. “The 21st century is all about individuation — what I want and the choices I have. A biennale is the antithesis of that. High Tide invites people to come to a place and just to be with it, to listen to it, to contemplate it, to take time. We then return the city to its natural state, but something’s changed — if only our own perceptions.”

Muller was born in Basel, Switzerland, before relocating to Western Australia in his latter teenage years, and his own creative practice has seen him develop from an urban graffiti artist into a leading voice in Australian conceptual art, with his exploratory works held in galleries and collections around the country. His installation for High Tide, *Uprising*, furthers his intrigue with fata morganas and optical apparitions, enveloping the Round House — where countless indigenous prisoners were interred before being sent to a brutal fate on Rottnest Island — in smoke.

“I’m interested in exploring these temporary hyper-realities, where people get immersed or lost or forgotten,” he says. “Much in the way a watercolour painter creates fades or impression, we can do this in real time and in real space. Blur the boundaries and all spatial markers are thrown. They become useless and we are forced to use instinct.”

While Varini’s central installation remains the biennale’s most evident coup, High Tide also has managed to attract several notable international practitioners, including Berlin-based light artist Zora Kreuzer — who will transform the 1881 facade of the Liebler Building. And Mildura-based performance artist Domenico de Clario brings his work *To Love: Breathing for Biagio Walking* to Fremantle: a 12-hour durational performance piece to take place at the crescendo of the tidal patterns in the Indian Ocean, under full moon on November 4.

High Tide comes at an existential juncture for Fremantle: a city that made nationwide headlines late last year with its polarising decision to axe its January 26 Australia Day celebrations for a “cultural inclusive alternative”, celebrated two days later with a large public concert headed by Fremantle local John Butler. Two Melbourne councils — Darebin and Yarra — would soon follow suit.

“It feels a little like Fremantle has been lying dormant, waiting to be reawaken,” Muller suggests. “We are in an exciting time.”

High Tide runs in Fremantle until November 12.