

Spring1883 Art Fair by Amelia Winata

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Install shot of Laila, including Bronte Stolz (centre). Courtesy of Spring1883. Photo: Simon Strong

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● Laila, Murray White Room, Nicholas Thompson Gallery, Arts Project Australia, Michael Lett, THIS IS NO FANTASY 10 Aug - 12 Aug 2023

Pucker up, baby, Spring 1883 is back at the Windsor. As I checked in at the fair's preview on Wednesday afternoon, I was offered a Spring-branded lip balm, no doubt for the kissy-fest ahead. I pocketed a few and applied a thick layer. Close by, a group of wealthy, white women—near identical save for the slight variations of their Golden Geeses—congregated in preparation of their tour with an art advisor. I fizzed with excitement. This was exactly the kind of quiet luxury chic I wanted to be a fly on the wall to and that had been missing from 2021's sad Covid-safe iteration, held at satellite locations away from the hotel.



But like seeing an old crush, the anticipation of the fair was both exhilarating and nerve-racking. Was it really back to business as usual? I can report that a ticket to the vernissage remains a hot commodity (one year, I colour photo-copied a wristband). In the days leading up to the event, plebs like me were clawing for access to a booking link sent through private invitations. Your writer paid it forward—over and over. When organisers finally cottoned on to this underground trade, they selectively cancelled tickets.

Smug for having survived the culling, I ventured towards the Windsor's uppermost floor (the penthouse, if you will) to Murray White Room, where a photo of the Huxleys, nude and completely covered in blue glitter (*Derek 2022*), had been installed in the kitchenette. Wedged in a champagne box was a burning stick of incense that I was informed Murray gets from The Oberoi Beach Resort in Bali. I peered back up at the Huxleys and realised one of their dicks was resting on the other's thigh. It was hard not to imagine the scratchiness of glitter applied to the nether regions. Disturbed, I decided to continue. In many respects, the scene at Murray White perfectly encapsulated the spirit of Spring: the mix of kitsch (the Huxleys and their glittery junk, just chilling in a darkened room) and old-world luxury (incense one can only get at a \$650 per night hotel).





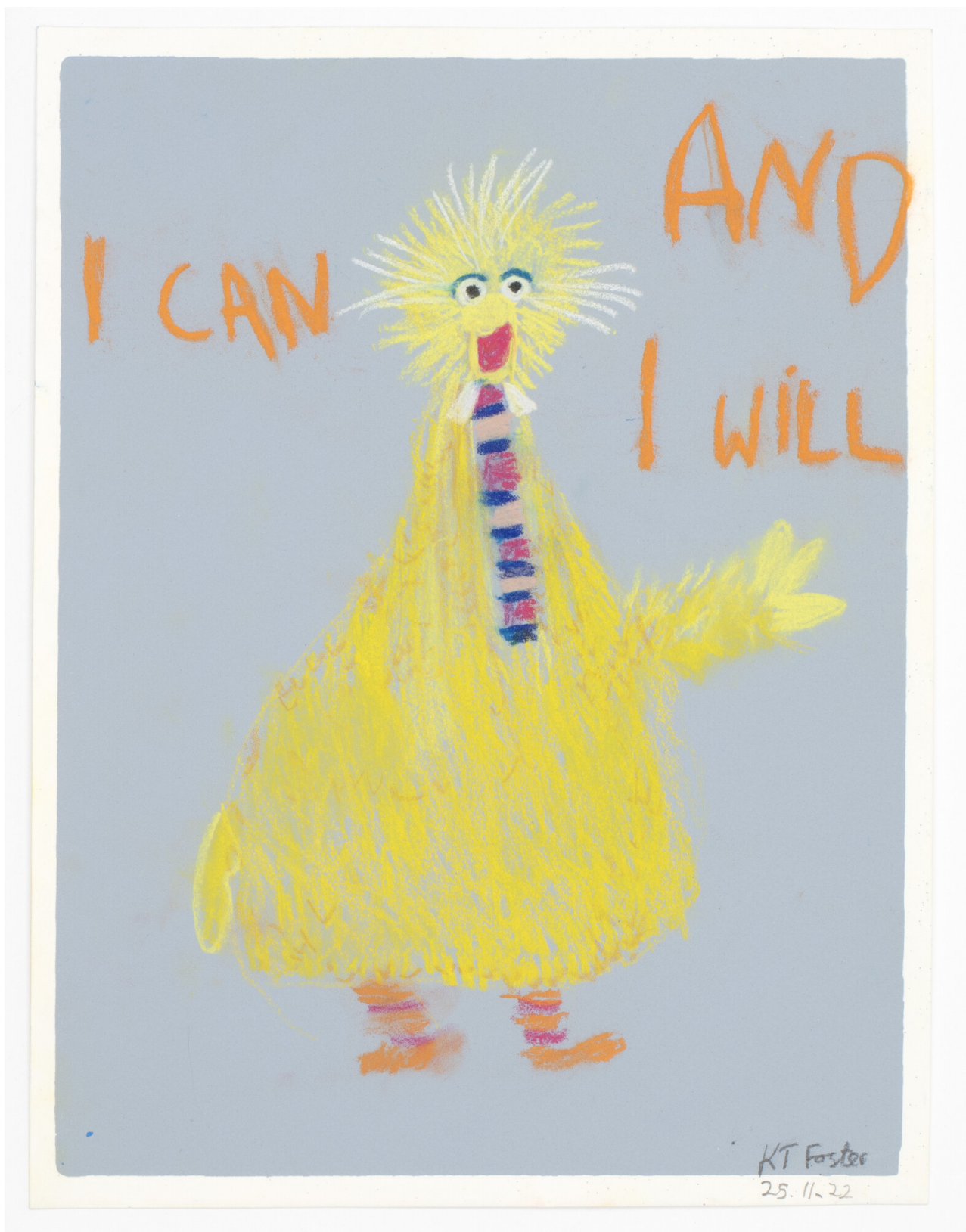
Downstairs at Nicholas Thompson, for example, the suite was excessively crammed with works—to good effect. Heidi Yardley’s sexy lady paintings (*Babylon* and *Design for Scandal*, both 2023) were placed on chairs that had been draped with the room’s silky curtains. Think sleazy boudoir. Rhys Lee’s amazing *Happy Couple on a Windy Day* (2021), with whiffs of German neo-expressionism, balanced happily on a bentwood. This is No Fantasy achieved what any gallery should hope to on the evening—convincing people to visit their main site. For years I have walked past the Gertrude Street gallery without really noticing it. But their hang of Ezz Monem, Phuong Ngo, and Yhonnie Scarce proved the strength and range of their current stable. Michael Lett, on the other hand, was a bit of a ... Lett-down (sorry). The gallery’s chosen artists—including Simon Denny,

Michael Stevenson, and Kate Newby—were all exemplary, but the choice of works, mostly tiny and grey, looked drab next to the room’s floral carpet and plaid armchairs. I watched in pain as a visitor manhandled the NZD25,000 Stevenson beanbag into shape.



It’s hard not to be nostalgic. Though Spring is arguably still in its infancy—it was established in 2014—the fair of days gone past saw gallerists hosting wild parties until late in their hotel rooms, Pommery flowing freely. There was a sense of debauchery. Now, it’s impossible not to feel that everyone is doing it tough. Whether or not a recession is coming, austerity measures have certainly set in—most notably, there is now an admission fee for the general public. In 2016, a prominent Melbourne gallerist removed a platter of cheese from my grasp. I had, perhaps perversely, looked forward to reliving a similarly Regina George-ish experience again. But the suites were barely catered, and that gallery had opted out of this year’s fair.

Gloomy economic predictions aside, there were many redeeming factors. Most importantly, the banter was still there. At Futures, a collector was detailing the ordeal she endured to “finally” obtain a work by Del Kathryn Barton or, as she called her “DKB.” The hallways became sites of loud, affectionate interactions. The lip balm was reapplied, and I kissed the ring of Queen Alexie Glass-Kantor, who with characteristic stamina, asked for an 8am viewing at the gallery I work at. I then entered the best scene of the evening in Laila. Here, a crowd, yelling and gesticulating, had gathered around the bed where Bronte Stolz’s bitumen painting, *Untitled (Industrial Hole Complex)* (2023), had fallen from its 3M hooks. The young Sydney bro gallerists, dressed in ill-fitting suits, positioned the painting on the pillows as Mikala Dwyer helped them to level it. Chic art consultant Amanda Love looked on, as did hip architect Pascale Gomes-McNabb. This was the place to be.



I ended my evening at Arts Project Australia, where, now drunk on pink sparkling wine I viewed a pastel drawing of Big Bird by Katherine Foster with the words “I can and I will” scrawled in capital letters (*Untitled (I can and I will, 2022)*). Big Bird seemed to be performing the phrase, faking it till he could make it. One might say that Foster’s Big Bird was a visual representation of Spring. Kind of frazzled but still showing up, continuing to charm the crowds—certainly at the expense of mental and physical well-being. Thank you, Spring, for your service.

