

Collective energy

A Sydney artist and curator finally reveals his private collection to the public as part of Art Month

Jacqui Taffel

The first painting Potts Point artist and curator Daniel Mudie Cunningham ever bought was from a Woollahra gallery on Queen Street 20 years ago.

His Head is Her Ashtray by Andrew Sullivan cost \$165 and took Cunningham, who had just finished an arts degree, weeks to pay off. He gave it to his boyfriend, but when they split, he got to keep the painting. It now hangs in his home studio.

These days, Cunningham owns about 350 artworks. The public can see a few of them during Art Month at the annual *Collectors' Space* exhibition, which shows work from the private collections of five Sydney artists and curators.

Cunningham has been asked before to participate in this kind of show, but it didn't feel right during the seven years he was senior then head curator at Art-

bank, the national government initiative that buys and leases contemporary Australian art.

"It seemed like a weird conflict of interest to promote my private tastes when I'm a buyer for the federal government," he said.

But he left that job in December and is now senior visual arts curator at Eveleigh's Carriageworks.

When he was asked by Art Month's artistic director, Kate Britton to participate, he jumped at the chance.

Britton came over to browse his collection and selected seven works to appear in the show.

"I was really thrilled to see what she zoned in on," Cunningham said.

One was *Nest 2* by Kathy Cavaliere, who was a friend and died of ovarian cancer in 2012. Cun-

ningham curated a retrospective of her work in 2015 at Carriageworks and MONA in Hobart, and *Nest 2* came into his collection soon after. One of the last works Cavaliere created, it shows the artist gazing out to sea, sitting on a pile of her mother's clothes, with a pair of her mother's stockings on her head. Her mother died of the same cancer in 2008.

Cunningham never feels he owns the works in his collection and has too many pieces to fit on his walls, so he regularly gives pieces to friends and family on long-term loans, or to art institutions like the Art Gallery of NSW.

"My mum has a really beautiful Teo Treloar drawing in her bedroom," he said.

"I don't expect I'll ever get that back, she adores it." The most recent works



Daniel Mudie Cunningham with *Nest 2* one of Kathy Cavaliere's last works.

Man picture: John Aplyard



added to Cunningham's collection are a drawing by Peter Sharp, bought at a group show, and a drawing of a koala by Sydney artist Phillip Sidney.

Commissioned by Cunningham's colleagues at Artbank as a leaving gift, it's an affectionate reference to his prematurely grey hair.

His works on show at *Collectors' Space*, which occupies May Space at Waterloo, include collages, paintings, photos and a soft sculpture.

"Much of the kind of work I do, curating or writing on art, is a much more formal, conventional way of talking about art," he said.

"With something like this exhibition, you can weave in a personal response. Increasingly I'm more interested in those stories and how art can have an impact on people's lives."

Collectors' Space until March 17, May Space, 409B George St, Waterloo, artmonthsydney.com.au



Above: *His Head is Her Ashtray*; (right) Phillip Sidney's koala.