

Dani Marti

New York, Sydney, Cessnock

Kit Messham-Muir



Above:
Dani Marti, Cessnock, 2016.
Photo: Danielle Minette Natural Lights Photography.
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Left:
Work in progress on the *Armour* series,
inspired by the Samurai armour in the collection
of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2012.
Photo: Kit Messham-Muir



Opposite:
Dani Marti on the fire escape of the Australia
Council Greene Street Studio, Soho.
Photo: Kit Messham-Muir

Dani Marti has a residency at the Australia Council Greene Street Studio, and I'm here to interview him for my StudioCrasher project. It's a classic New York loft. And it's *big*—134 square metres—with bright daylight diffused throughout the space from skylight windows high above. In front of me, there's a living room area with a large couch and a coffee table next to an open window leading onto the typical Manhattan fire escape. To the right is an office or workshop area and in the far corner is a small kitchen. At the centre of the cavernous space is the main work area. As a failed artist turned theorist, I'm impressed. This loft in Soho ticks all the boxes about what an artist's studio should be—large, semi-industrial, with high ceilings, at the heart of a major metropolitan centre.

Marti tells me that his home base is Cessnock, a country town at the edge of the vineyards of the Hunter Valley in New South Wales. The Barcelona-born artist forged a career in contemporary art relatively late, giving up a lucrative position as a Trade Representative for the Spanish region of Catalonia. After taking some years to come to terms with his HIV-positive status, Marti began to practice art in 1997, at the age of 34. Now in his 50s, Marti enjoys considerable commercial and critical success. He was included in the 2014 Adelaide Biennial, the Perth International Arts Festival earlier this year with a major solo show, *Black Sun*, at the Fremantle Arts Centre¹ and most recently in *Immerse* at the Kinokino Kunstal in Norway, curated by Roberto Ekholm from the Museum of Contemporary Art, London. He is often commissioned to create works for corporate and government clients throughout Australia and maintains a significant international exhibition profile.

So, what is it like working from a base in a small town in regional Australia? What are the advantages, and what are the trade-offs?

Two years after our first interview in New York, I'm in Marti's Cessnock studio for a follow-up interview, and he's contemplating these very questions: "Cessnock, how do you describe it? It's a very low-income, working-class town ... it's got a sense of country life still."² Cessnock



is well off the arts and culture map for most Australians. Dealers sell crystal meth from their cars in nearby laneways and the local teenagers do burnouts at the intersection on the corner; yet, despite this, Marti loves Cessnock precisely because of the absence of the "artworld". He's joined a local cycling group and says, "I like the people here. I'm hanging around with tradies and miners, and I much prefer their company to a lot of the people I meet in Sydney."

Marti talks while he is working simultaneously on two of his large "necklace" pieces, which are coming together slowly on large aluminium frames, leaning against a wall and propped up on milk crates. His large three-dimensional works often belie their process-heavy and labour-intensive creation. As with many of Marti's works, you can get buzzed out on the eye-candy coming together on the frames—a web of hundreds, maybe thousands, of beaded necklaces. Marti weaves them chaotically into a mesh

stretched across the frames, building up a thick painting-like plane; it is “a surface that is overcharged, and sickening to some degree ... there is something frenetic about it”, Marti says. All his materials are sourced locally. The necklaces are from a second-hand store on the NSW Central Coast, north of Sydney. Marti says, “I’ve been collecting them for the last two and a half years ... they know me well. They say “oh, it’s the necklace man, come in, come in Dani, we love you!” A Cessnock tradie fabricates the aluminium frames and the mesh is manufactured for farming oysters.

Marti’s studio in Cessnock is also his home. The property occupies one end of a suburban block, between an old general store and a former butcher’s shop. Marti calls it “The compound”, because it is hidden behind a high wall topped with thorny bougainvillea, like a natural barbed wire fence. You would never suspect from the street, but inside is an oasis of towering cacti, palm trees, a swimming pool and two studios. Marti works in the larger space, while his long-time partner, Phil Drummond, works in the old butcher’s shop building. Drummond, like Marti, is also a successful artist, represented by Maunsell Wickes in Sydney. He paints the most incredible delicate and dark still lifes. In person, Drummond is a complete contrast to the work he creates. He looks and talks like a nineteenth-century bushranger, beard and all. He’s provocatively and hilariously brash. In the space between their studios, in what used to be a car park, Drummond has created an impressive succulent garden next to a swimming pool. Drummond’s obvious passion for horticulture is evident in his still-life paintings, often of plants. The time invested in this incredible oasis shows that both artists have set down their roots in Cessnock.

With the rise of digital and post-studio practices, the semi-industrial studio space may seem like a cliché today. Yet many artists still need relatively large physical spaces to create work. Chris McAuliffe, writing about the studio of John Cattapan says, “Like any good work area, the factory is a simple model of the artist’s mind space; somewhere that can accommodate old and new work alike, somewhere that shuts out the world without

entirely isolating the artist”.³ Similarly, Marti’s Cessnock studio is essentially a small factory. The ceiling is high, allowing him to rig-up and create some of his heaviest three-dimensional works, such as the *Armour* series, four black woven rope works created for the 2014 Adelaide Biennial, each nearly 3.5 metres high and 1.5 wide. But maintaining a factory-scale studio space amongst the real estate markets of the world’s major metropolitan art centres is increasingly unsustainable, with today’s property values. Few New York artists can afford studio space on the scale of the Greene Street Studio, and Australia’s capital cities can be even more difficult. The latest Demographia international housing affordability survey shows Sydney’s median house price at 12.2 times the median annual income,⁴ much less affordable than New York at 5.9 and Los Angeles at 8.1.⁵

An artist’s professional networks often demand proximity to major cities, yet the affordability of studio space can seriously constrain the options available to an artist like Marti. His *Armour* works could only be made in a large indoor space with a high ceiling that could support an industrial pulley: “I couldn’t have done that in my previous studio space.” Marti says, “When I worked in Sydney I used to work from the second bedroom, so there’s a limit to what you can do, to experiment with the size of the works.” But in Cessnock, “I have space, big high ceilings, so I can engage in making big works, no problem whatsoever.” Open space opens up the imagination.

Before moving to Cessnock, Marti had lived in a small apartment in Surry Hills, where his studio was a spare bedroom. In the 1990s, Surry Hills was one of Sydney’s low-rent inner city suburbs, where artists and students could easily survive on a miniscule income. A decade or so later, Marti’s two-bedroom apartment sold for \$1.1 million and Marti moved out of Sydney in search of greater physical space—and a better head space. In 2009, he and Drummond bought “the compound” in Cessnock outright for only \$250,000. Now the floor space of Marti’s studio alone is 300 metres (including the mezzanine level); “it’s a big place, plus storage space. To have a space like that in Sydney, it would be *so* expensive.” Living in Cessnock means that



both Marti and Drummond can practice full time, in their own separate studios, without the pressure to sell work to pay city rent or a mortgage: “that would affect in a very negative way your creativity, because you would have the pressure to produce work that can sell. And that’s the last thing you want on your mind when you’re making work.”

With the pressure gone to produce saleable work, and somewhat detached from the artistic trends in Sydney, Marti is less driven by a sense of building his career and more by the impulse to experiment. The greatest disadvantage is the logistics of transporting work. The studio base in Cessnock is perfect for creating large-scale works, but then they need to be transported to Melbourne, Sydney or overseas. The compromise is worth it for Marti: “I’m happy to sacrifice price, some of the benefit or profit, and pay that in transport,” Marti says.

Stripped down to fundamentals, art practice is a mode of externalised thinking where ideas are negotiated with the inherent properties of materials and through the physical processes of making. Practical factors determine the space in which this happens, and the physical attributes of that space (location, scale, access, storage, etc.), all of which in turn impact artistic outcomes. But for Marti, the core function of a studio transcends all of this: “I think a

studio is, more than anything, a head space—more a mental space than a physical space. I can set up a studio in a tiny little space, a bedroom, and then I can make work that’s accommodated to that space, it could be a video work or small sculpture. It’s more about a frame of mind—to be there, contained, to think and produce the work.”

__1 Dani Marti: Black Sun, Fremantle Art Centre, 7 February – 28 March 2016. Reviewed for Artlink by Gemma Weston at <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4447/dani-marti-black-sun/> __2 This and subsequent quotations from Dani Marti are from interviews with the author conducted between 2014 and 2015 __3 Chris McAuliffe, Chris McAuliffe, ‘What artists listen to in their studios’, 29 May 2014: <http://chrismcauliffe.com.au/what-artists-listen-to-in-their-studios/> __4 Wendell Cox and Hugh Pavletich, ‘12th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey: 2016’, Belleville, Illinois: Demographia (Wendell Cox Consultancy), 2016, 2 __5 Wendell Cox and Hugh Pavletich ‘11th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey: 2015: Ratings for Metropolitan Markets.’ Belleville, Illinois: Demographia (Wendell Cox Consultancy), 2016, 24, 2.

Kit Messham-Muir is author of *Double War: Shaun Gladwell, Visual Culture and the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, published by Thames and Hudson in 2015, and has recently been appointed as Associate Professor in Art at Curtin University, Perth.

Above:
Dani Marti in his studio, Cessnock, 2016.
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