

Best-ever Biennale as record audiences engage with the unexpected

By Adam Fulton

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THE appeal of interactive artworks beckoning viewers to make them move, light up, trigger sounds or even take them home for redecoration has helped propel the Biennale of Sydney to its biggest attendance in its 39-year history.

Visits to Australia's largest contemporary art festival have topped 550,000, outshining the 2010 biennale's attendance of 517,000. With a week to go before it finishes, on September 16, the expectation of a late rush has fuelled predictions that the final number could pass 650,000.

The biennale's chief executive, Marah Braye, said she was delighted with how well it has gone and that audiences have really engaged with the works and enjoyed the venues. Its rising attendance continues the trend of recent biennales.



Connecting people: Pinaree Sanpitak's stormcloud-like installation, *Anything Can Break*, at the recently revamped MCA, triggered sounds as viewers moved underneath it. Photo: Wolter Peeters

“We’re attracting a broader audience each time, which is good,” Braye said. “I think that says a lot about word of mouth and how the biennale is coming to be regarded on its home turf. It’s always had a really important profile internationally.”

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Cockatoo Island’s peculiar offering of industrial landscape dotted with art and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia’s twin appeal of biennale and a recently revamped building helped the two venues lead the way in drawing audiences, with more than 370,000 between them. All venues recorded rises.

“I think the general public are really loving it,” the MCA curator Glenn Barkley said.

After a damp summer, the dry winter was a boon for the exhibition, which has more than 220 works in five venues. Titled *All our relations*, its theme is the connectedness of people and their world.

Favourite pieces include Philip Beesley’s touch-sensitive *Hylozoic Series: Sibyl*, akin to a glowing alien garden, on Cockatoo Island; Pinaree Sanpitak’s stormcloud-like installation at the MCA, triggering sounds as viewers move underneath; and Tiffany Singh’s bamboo wind chimes on Pier 2/3, which hundreds of people took, redecorated and installed on the island.

At the Art Gallery of NSW, there was interactivity even where it was a no-no. Many people could not resist blowing Nipan Oranniwesna’s room-sized map made of talcum powder. It has needed restoring regularly with templates.

“It has actually survived incredibly well,” the gallery’s curatorial director, Tony Bond, said.

But more than interactivity, “what biennales also do which audiences respond to is they present unusual works and in unusual situations”, Braye said. “They walk into the unexpected.”

Next week, CarriageWorks has its highlight: the Belgian dance company Rosas in the 18th festival’s first dance show.