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Creating a room of his own

Domenico de Clario's installation is so hospitable, his mother feels at home when visiting, writes
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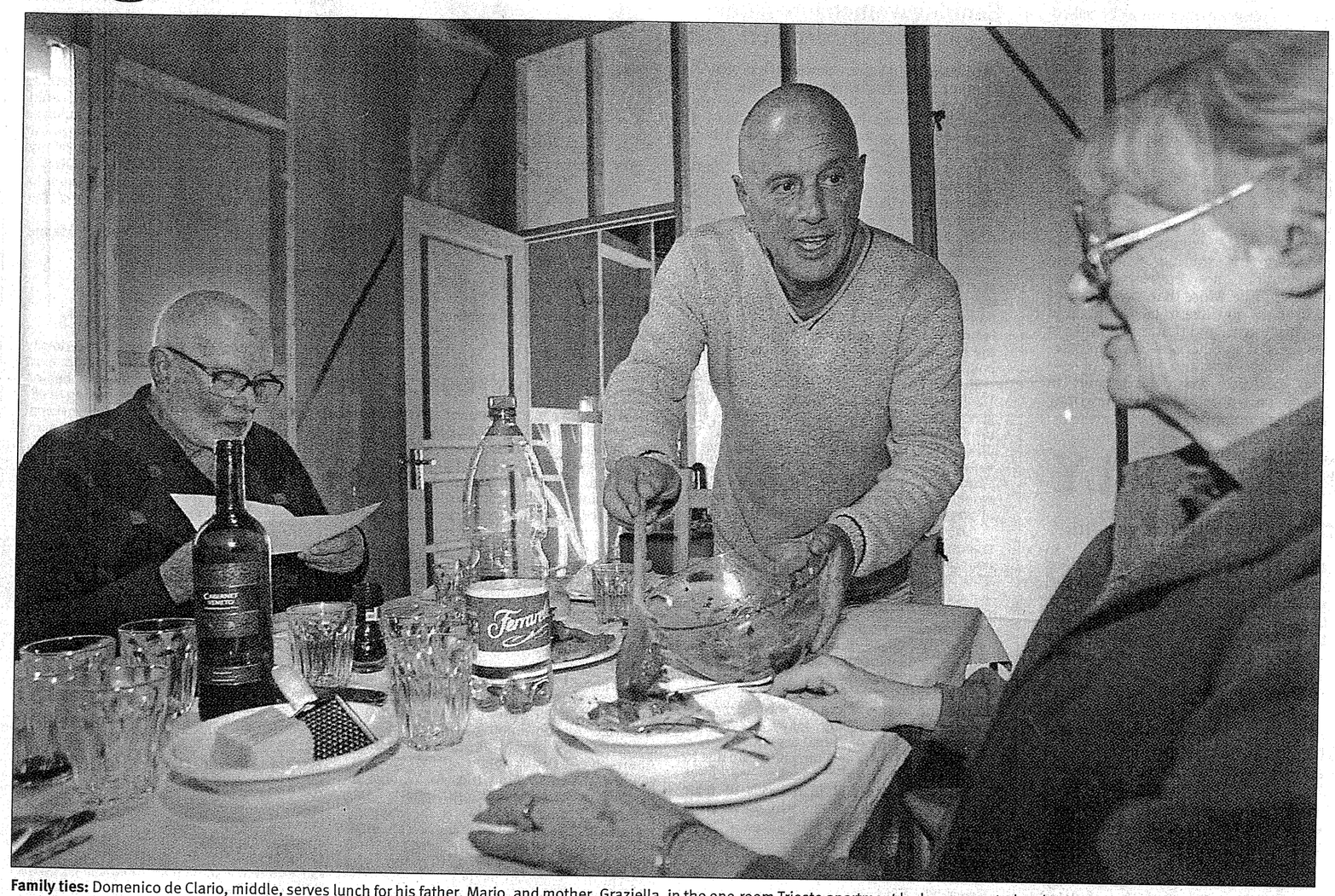

Family ties: Domenico de Clario, middle, serves lunch for his father, Mario, and mother, Graziella, in the one-room Trieste apartment he has re-created at the ACCA **Picture: Richard Cisar-Wright**

IT'S easy to spot a milestone in some careers. Lawyers become partners, a footballer plays 300 games, a chairman of the board is done for insider trading. With an artist, though, points of significance are less tangible and dependent on the kind of artist: for some, a museum acquires a painting; for others, religious zealots barnstorm a gallery and destroy their artwork with a hammer.

For internationally renowned Domenico de Clario, an artist of 40 years and with more than 120 installations behind him, his milestone is more abstract. De Clario's work has always been intimately twined with family, being a migrant and his Italian upbringing. His present installation, *A Second Simplicity*, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, is the first time he has brought together all of the forces and ideas that have shaped him as an artist.

"This particular project hits it right on the head: the articulation of my birth space has pretty much been at the core of most of my other projects," says de Clario, who migrated from Trieste, Italy, to Melbourne as a nine-year-old in 1956. He was born and grew up in one small room with his parents, his sister and his grandparents, a state of incredible physical proximity he describes as "the first simplicity" and one that vanished forever on the 43-day sea voyage to Melbourne.

"That journey, the intensity of the dislocation, constituted to me a kind of death," says de Clario, who is head of contemporary arts at Edith Cowan University in Perth. "The child [who] walked up the gangplank never came down. I sat on a plank of wood on the outside of the boat, suspended over the huge sea, and gripped myself there.

"My father could not pull me away. Being an artist, for me it became almost an archeological dig of those 43 days and whatever happened to my soul or psyche."

A Second Simplicity is a literal and symbolic re-creation of the room and apartment building in Trieste where de Clario was born. The entire two-storey building has been rebuilt inside the ACCA gallery, but in a skeletal, representational form, with the family's first-floor room re-created to the centimetre. The bed in which he slept between his grandparents, the wardrobe and the couch his parents slept on are simply volumes of wood, but the dining table and chairs are functional, as is the stove on the landing outside.

Every lunchtime until August 21, de Clario and his parents and sister cook a traditional Italian one-pot dish on the stove and share lunch and conversation with a guest.

"The fact that these dimensions are the correct dimensions means something is engaged with very powerfully when the people who lived there are here and food is cooked," he says. "The physical memory comes back. It's only been three days but my mother talks of coming home when she comes here, and she can walk around here blindfolded already. I find I am reluctant to leave at the end of the day."

The list of lunch guests includes author Helen Garner, performance artist Stelarc, family members, friends from university when de Clario studied architecture, composer Jonathan Mills and chef Stefano de Pieri.

The lunchtime conversations are broadcast throughout the gallery; visitors cannot see the gathering (this is the only time the apartment building doors are closed) but they can smell the cooking and hear the clink of cutlery and snatches of conversation (I heard mention of jam, cheese and hardship when Garner was being lunched).

'The work is a kind of portal through which the viewer can go inside of themselves'
Artist Domenico de Clario

For the gallery visitor it is a strange, intangible experience: evocative but giving nothing solid to grasp. But being inside someone else's living memory propels you on your own interior, reflexive, journey.

"My work demands an immense amount of stillness and engagement on the part of the viewer," de Clario says.

"I set it up that way because I believe that unless that happens, nothing can happen to anyone. The work is a transmutation machine. It's a kind of portal through which the viewer can go inside of themselves, not inside the work. Instead of the art being a consumable, it's more of a collaboration."

In today's culture of speed and instant gratification, de Clario's work is confronting because there is nothing instant about it. Nonetheless, the massiveness of the structure alerts you that something significant is transpiring, which is an invitation to slow down and pay attention. Scale is important to all of de Clario's installation work, much of which involves him improvising at the piano, blindfolded, for 15 hours, 24 hours or several days straight.

"I need for people to see that I'm utterly committed to what I'm doing," he says. "That's why it had to be the whole building, not just the room. That's why it's 36 hours playing blindfolded without moving. People can just wander in and out, but if they understand the commitment, there is the potential for them to have an experience."

De Clario is present for the entire opening hours of the exhibition, making coffee for visitors and essentially providing the soul of his building. As part of *A Second Simplicity* he has rented the original room in Trieste, placed a blue light in the window and is keeping it vacant for the duration of the exhibition, thus creating a metaphysical twinning of the two spaces.

"I believe it does make a difference," he says. "It all relates to a key experience I had as a child, seeing the tabernacle open up and the priest reach inside the body of the church and pull out the wine and bread. Through mass they become the body and blood of Christ. How do you accept that? It can't be and yet you believe it. That's the key; through the power of belief and faith something transmutes and changes."

A Second Simplicity is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, until September 25.