

## entertainment

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**Absent artist:** Barbara Kruger's exhibition impresses Matt Hinckley, who was helping to set up the lighting. Picture: DARRYL GREGORY

# A way with words

## ■ VISUAL ART

Alison Barclay

**S**HE can post her headlines many metres high, but whatever people might say about "what's black and white and read all over?" is more than a riddle to Barbara Kruger.

"I'm a big newspaper junkie," the Californian artist says, fixing me with her calm azure gaze.

"I have read all the newspapers, including yours."

Kruger also knows almost every slogan ever printed in English and has added to the canon a lot more of her own, mostly of a satirical variety. And, like the mega-multi-media campaigns that become cultural wallpaper, you know them when you see them.

About 1996, the time of her last major show in Melbourne, *I Shop, Therefore I Am* (translated by one wag as "concurso circum tabernas, ergo sum") became the pin-up for a society suddenly wondering if it was consuming too much, but far too exhilarated to stop.

This time, in her fly-by at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and just in time for

Christmas, Kruger is giving conspicuous consumption another thoroughly good thumping.

"You want it, you buy it, you forget it," one wall says.

"We are the slaves of objects," the floor says.

And, on four televisions in an installation titled *12*, people chat loudly about money, love and sex.

Kruger, however, is not so bold in person. A former magazine employee who is sensitive to the way bodies are depicted, she refuses to pose for photographs, including this one, despite a very appealing head of blonde ringlets.

"Now comes the question of why!" she laughs.

Is it because she would rather not be celebritised into a fake sort of fame?

"Exactly. That's one of the advantages of being a visual artist. You're not a movie star," she says.

"So much of my recent work is about the body and the figure, and how gossip becomes history. As long as they have a picture for the obituary, that is enough."

Born in Newark, New Jersey ("a very poor city") in 1945, Kruger decamped as a teenager to New York. It was here that she worked

for magazine publishers Conde Nast. Today she lives in Los Angeles, where she teaches at the University of California.

"New York and LA are very similar, though they look different," she says.

"If every other city in the US is a consumer of culture, New York and LA are the producers of culture. They have power."

**T**HAT said, Kruger humbly gives thanks to the many other cities that appreciate her additions to the culture. Venice gave her a lifetime achievement award at this year's biennale. Singapore wants her at its first biennale next year. And there's always Melbourne.

"I really like the city a lot. I always walk down the street and think I could live here," she says.

"I always tell people, it seems so strange to travel so far to end up in a place that seems so familiar."

Melbourne has allowed her to have "a number of firsts", including the chance for this deeply self-critical artist to mount her latest work, *12*, exactly as she wants it.

"The reason it is called *12* is that

each is 12 minutes long and there are 12 conversations," she says.

"There are groups of guys sitting together in a luncheonette talking about what cars they drive. There are young women in a high school cafeteria. Politicians talking about spinning the news. Art critics. Some photographers. Two women talking about why one f---ed the other's boyfriend."

"It's sort of little slices of life. They have all come out of my imagination; I wrote them all. I like the way people talk."

"Under each image there is a scrolling line, like on CNN. We are of a generation, especially the younger kids, for whom multi-tasking is second nature, and after 9/11 the use of the scroll became a convention," she says.

"I like using convention because it is something we all understand, and to give it a little twist."

## ■ BARBARA KRUGER

**Where:** ACCA, 111 Sturt St, Southbank, Tues-Sun until February 26  
**Entry:** Free