

When what's left is more

The Great Eraser is on his way to the Venice Biennale, writes Megan Backhouse.

THE first thing you notice are the mountains of finely shredded erasers rising up from almost every flat surface in Christian Capurro's studio. Rolling hills of soft, curving shards of rubber. They are all that's left of the thousands of words and images that Capurro has resolutely eradicated from glossy magazine pages over several years now.

For the Melbourne artist, one of three Australians selected by 2007 Venice Biennale artistic director Robert Storr for his curated section, is a big one for clearing things away.

Often he "clears" with correction fluid and, just as frequently, with an eraser, but he's also been known to use sticky tape (by laying it down and then pulling it away) and other times (as in the piece he is taking to Venice) the rubbing-out is done by about 260 others.

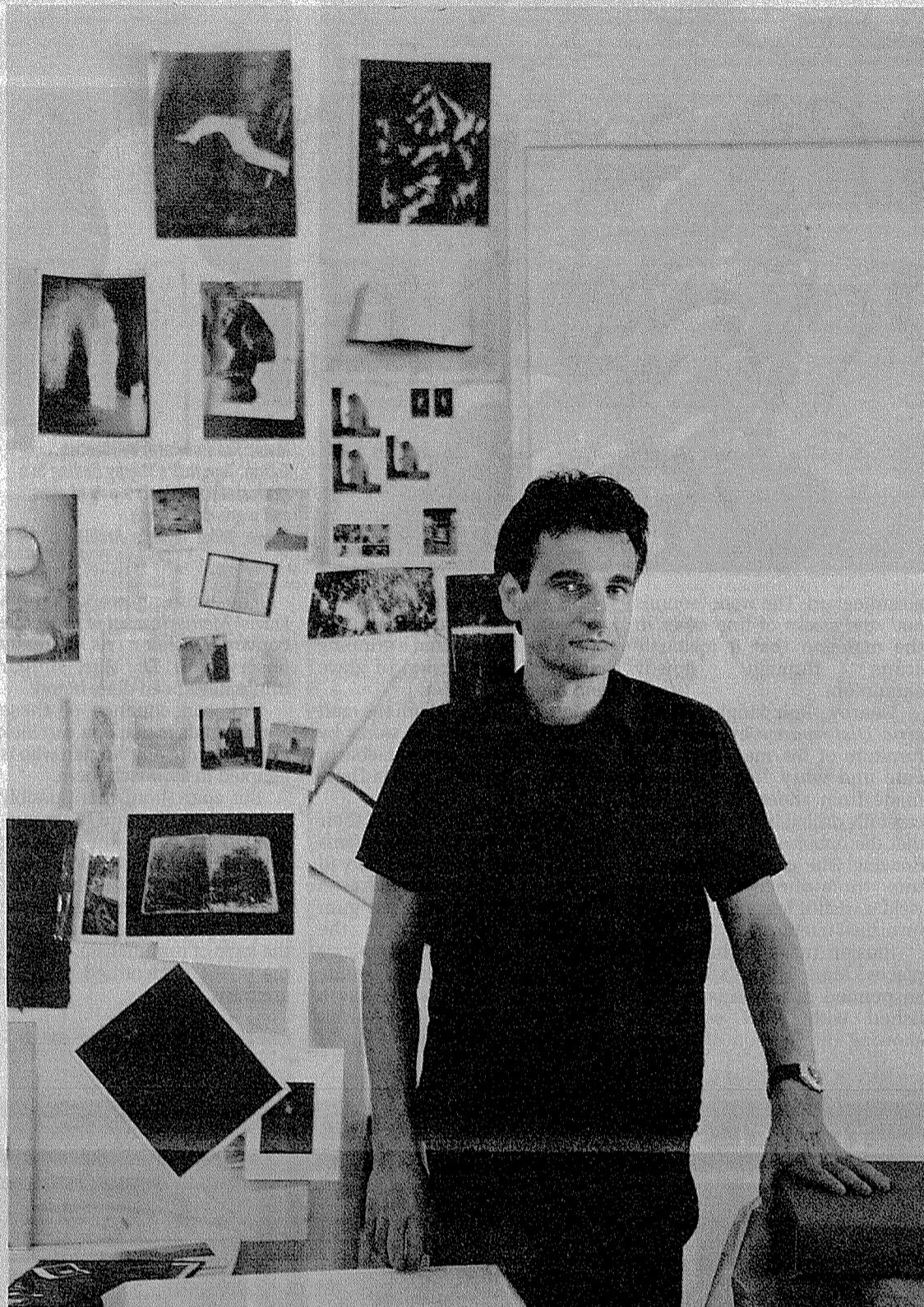
It's not the sort of purge that leaves him with nothing, though. In fact, you could say he ends up with much more than what he started with. Take the discarded issue of *Vogue Hommes* that has now assumed a nominal value of \$11,349.18 because of the 267 hours, 49 minutes and five seconds that people devoted to erasing every one of its 246-odd pages. The dollar figure stems from what these people would have earned in the time they spent rubbing-out if they had been engaged in their regular line of work.

That piece, *Another Misspent Portrait of Etienne de Silhouette*, was shown at various sites (including the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art) in Melbourne in 2004-2005 and will be the central component of his Venice show, opening in June.

Opening in Melbourne on March 17, however, is a group exhibition at ACCA containing a series of Capurro's small, tea-coloured stains (on paper) in the shape of coupling figures. Again, they stem from erasing magazine pages but what we see here is not the page that has been rubbed out but the image that has been transferred from one page to another as a result of Capurro's rubbing, up to 10 pages away.

Capurro has used correction fluid to mask the image that would have been on the page otherwise. The pale silhouettes that have resulted from the pressure of his eraser are so subtle that you can't see them from a distance, indeed it's conceivable that you could walk past them and notice nothing at all.

Capurro likes the fact they're not "declarative" and "demand a certain type of attention". But for all their quiet, effacing presence, the actual making of them can be a sweaty test of endurance.



Christian Capurro works standing up as he can apply greater pressure. Above right: Capurro's *Vogue Hommes*. PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

Since 1998, Capurro has swam every second day "just to stop the headaches", that otherwise start in his stomach and work their way up his arm to his neck and head, while he manually removes every scrap of ink from magazine pages.

"Yesterday, people were in here changing the lights and I was making that picture and all of a sudden the page slipped and scrunpled and I just yelled out, 'f---', and they went dead quiet for about 10 minutes," he says. "If Tom (Nicholson, who works out of the same studio) and I are in here together sometimes, it can be a bit odd. Rubbing out in the heat, you're sweating."

He erases standing up because he can't get enough pressure while seated, and grips the page with one arm while rubbing with the other. "You

can't do more than a couple of hours a day; it's not physically possible without the next day being bedridden."

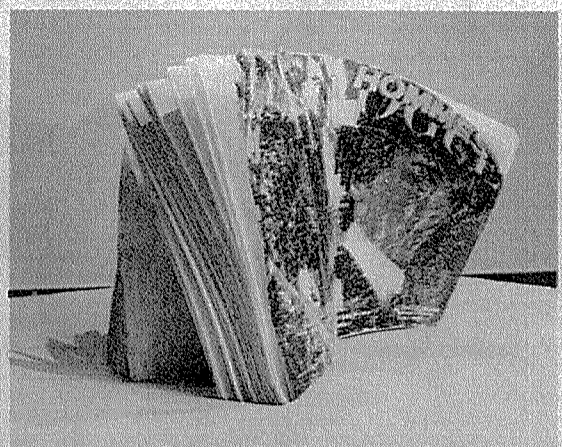
The action itself, though, is an important part of the work and Capurro speaks of a "deep-seated need" to remove an image in order to bring forth another. "I have always had a morbid fear of being overwhelmed by things and people assume I have a minimal, little set-up. But that's not so much the case; it's more about the psychological," he says. "It's about creating a space or a proposition to yourself about the world: that maybe certain things need to be erased. Maybe a clearing away, whatever form it takes, is a necessary thing."

Capurro, himself, is 38 and, on leaving school "with very little idea" of what he wanted to do,

studied photography. Born in Western Australia, he grew up in Queensland and Melbourne. He says he was not the "drawing since I was five years old" type. "No, I came to art late, in a sense, though I was always a visually influenced person."

He has photographs in his Northcote studio dating from the late 1980s and even then he was destroying — as well as making — images by deliberately exposing his film.

By the late 1990s though — after three years of study at the Victorian College of the Arts — the clearing-way had taken a new turn and he was making works by pressing removable sticky tape to pieces of junk mail, rubbing the tape and then peeling it off with the ink attached. It was the tape that then comprised the final works (exhibited at both



Linden and the since-closed Stripp).

A few years later, for an exhibition at West Space, he painted two huge wardrobe mirrors in a monochromatic, textured Allan Mitelman-sort of vein. Only Capurro didn't use paint but tiny bottle upon tiny bottle of correction fluid; which meant he had to don a fume mask for the task. The result is both alluring and hideous.

At present there are more eraser and correction-fluid works (dating from 1999 to 2006) included in a group exhibition at the Monash University Museum of Art. But, despite his regular exhibitions at public institutions and artist-run spaces, Capurro is not represented by a commercial gallery and, aside from his art, works as a professional photographer.

While he has received some funding from Arts Victoria and the Australia Council to stage his Venice Biennale work, which will include a large off-site component, Capurro is also raising funds privately (and people can make a fully tax deductible donation through the Australia Cultural Fund of the Australia Business Arts Foundation).

Capurro suspects he is drawn to make the work he does because there is a "void in what one sees in the world as much as anything."

"For a lot of artists, that's really their reason for existing, that they don't recognise in the world something which they think should be there," he says.

But the process is also critical. "How an image is brought forth matters to me, how it comes into being and how it impresses itself upon you."

New07, which includes work by Capurro as well as Anastasia Klose, Brendan Lee, Nick Devlin, Damiano Bertoli, and Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro opens at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (111 Sturt Street, Southbank) on March 17 and runs until May 20.

Before the Body - Matter, which includes works by Capurro and 15 other artists, is at MUMA (Building 55, Wellington Road, Clayton) until March 24.

For more information about making a tax deductible donation for Capurro's Venice Biennale project, visit www.christiancapurro.com