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Art as extreme sport for next Biennale

May 14, 2013

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Juliana Engberg reveals a taste of the festival line-up.

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Extreme: Artist Tori Wranes performs concerts in challenging environments. Photo: Eirik Slyngstad

An Egyptian, an Israeli and a Scotsman walk into a biennale ... At first glance, Juliana Engberg's invitation list for the 2014 Sydney Biennale sounds like a story in need of a punchline. The 18 artists, revealed on Tuesday, represent a Benetton ad of nationalities and artistic practices.

But while the international artists selected by Engberg, the 19th biennale's artistic director, may not be household names, they are leading lights in contemporary art.

Engberg says it is her aim to introduce new artists to Australian audiences. "I want the list to look really fresh and provoke curiosity.

"We're a very big biennale - a big juggernaut of a thing that ought to be exploratory and have the energy to bring new people into the limelight."

Egyptian Wael Shawky exhibited his video of marionettes acting out the Crusades at New York's Museum of Modern Art last year.

Israeli artist Yael Bartana's *And Europe Will Be Stunned* imagined a fictional campaign to rebuild the Jewish population of Poland in three videos exhibited at the 2011 Venice Biennale.

Equally accomplished is Scottish artist Douglas Gordon, who won Britain's top contemporary art award, the Turner Prize, in 1996.

The curatorial theme for next year's biennale is "You Imagine What You Desire", a line borrowed from George Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*. But in Engberg's hands it is an "evocation".

"I think the Biennale of Sydney is too big for a theme," she says.

She says her evocation, or feeling, goes in a number of directions - imaginary, psychological and political to name a few.

Another invited artist, Tori Wranes from Norway, performs concerts like an extreme sport. At a Norwegian festival in 2010 she played a grand

piano suspended from the side of a cliff-like bunker, then torched the instrument the next day.

At another festival the artist hung by her hair, singing alongside sword-playing accompanists.

Engberg says the artists are yet to finalise what they will exhibit during the 12-week contemporary arts festival but performance art and feature-length video art will be a highlight.

The advent of high definition has encouraged artists to create video art with a story arc although, she says, these works are not films in the mainstream sense of the word.

"These are artist films, of course, and have a different quality and tolerance for certain types of storytelling," Engberg says.

She adds these art films need to be shown in a cinema space. "If they're put in the middle of an exhibition, it can suck energy away from other things."

Engberg comes to the biennale with an impressive CV, including stints on arts festivals in Melbourne and Christchurch. She is artistic director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne and holds academic posts at RMIT and Monash universities.

The biennale will open on March 21, earlier than its usual start date in late May, and will take place in several venues including the Art Gallery of NSW, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and Cockatoo Island.

A wharf building in Walsh Bay has been used in the past but the biennale clashes with the Sydney Writers' Festival. "We're still grappling with that," Engberg says.

The biennale's chief executive, Marah Braye, says holding the biennale during the warmer autumn months will make it more appealing to international visitors.

However, it gives Engberg less time to put together her program.

"A fast biennale is a good biennale," Engberg says. "You don't want to labour it and spend too much time thinking."

The Biennale of Sydney is on next year, from March 21 to June 9.

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