

The company curator

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It's out with the old, in with the new. Corporate curators are changing the look and feel of the CBD foyer, adding a new dimension to the workplace. As Brad Hatch discovered, the big winners are up-and-coming young artists.

Art should be challenging, but sometimes it can all be a bit much - especially in a corporate environment. When curator Barbara Flynn included a photograph by indigenous artist Destiny Deacon in an exhibition for one of her corporate clients, the dismembered black doll was placed a little too close to one worker's desk and had to be moved. It's this kind of confronting experience that Flynn wants to achieve in her work with CBD companies.

A freelance curator and former New York art dealer, Flynn plies her craft with clients such as business services firm Deloitte, property developer Austcorp Group, financial firm UBS, and many others. A Yale graduate, she says office art can present whatever image a company is trying to convey - for example, showing it as new, strong and connected. "A company generous enough to provide art for their workers doesn't go unnoticed," says Flynn.

Corporate art is nothing new, but the resurgence of contemporary exhibitions has occurred following the sale of a number of major company collections - from Coles Myer, Foster's, BHP Billiton and Fairfax. A new generation of art is taking the place of the Arthur Boyds and Sidney Nolans. In part, that's because it is relatively cheap - between \$5000 and \$10,000 can get you something colourful. But some companies also feel contemporary art to be a more appropriate adornment for their walls.

The work of emerging artists is popular. "It tends to fit better with company profiles," says Flynn. "My role is to be extremely provocative without being offensive. Art stimulates conversation and thinking. Clients don't want to stare at stark walls in waiting areas." She says every company wants a different funky twist, and the role of a corporate curator is to source new art and run exhibition shows for clients and employees.

At Deloitte, Flynn co-ordinates three shows a year in its foyer space, each running for four months. She has a free hand to select the works and favours young, emerging artists such as Daniel von Sturmer, one of three artists who will represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in June 2007. The Melbourne artist creates multimedia projections of miniature environments in which an everyday object behaves in unexpected ways. Girl Band is the latest exhibit at Deloitte, on show until the end of February. An all-female line-up (see images, [this page](#)), it has as its theme the depiction of women. Deloitte NSW's managing partner, John Meacock, views this sort of arts patronage as part of the firm's corporate responsibility. "It also gives our staff a chance to be exposed to something different," he says.

Says Flynn: "Corporate exhibits are a way of giving opportunities to young artists. They gain exposure and confidence. Many find gallery representations afterwards."

Flynn says that in general there is strong interest in paintings, sculptures and photography, but the work of video artists is also popular. Shaun Gladwell is one of them. Based in Sydney, Gladwell recently had a two-minute video, *Double Linework*, showing at Deloitte, running on a continuous loop spread across six plasma screens in the reception area.

Westpac has a dedicated art exhibition studio space for staff and clients, on level 15 of its new Sydney office building. Multi-media videos chosen by the bank's in-house curator are screened there.

Companies are also increasingly integrating art into architecture. UBS recently commissioned two local artists in their early 30s to paint ceiling panels in two breakout rooms of its Melbourne office. "The building has more glass than plaster walls, but they still wanted art in the office," Flynn says. James Lynch's *We Were Flying, Again*, is an evocative portrait of the artist and his girlfriend floating in a black night sky. Michelle Ussher's *Over Growth* depicts a lush, green garden in graphite watercolour pencil.

Philip Coleman, chief operating officer at UBS, says non-traditional and contemporary art speaks to the younger generation in the workplace: "Our average age is late 20s, but at the same time we are choosing art that best fits with our brand."

In the next few months, UBS will move into its new office at Chifley Tower in Sydney, and the architecture of the building is such that "ceiling art isn't really an option", says Coleman. Instead, the Sydney art collection will be reinvigorated with contemporary displays that include feature walls and semi-permanent installations.

Contemporary art can bring architecture to life, and "promotes innovation and thinking", says Coleman. He adds that a workplace without art would be "like a hospital".