

## The Man Who Walks

“I’ll have a double-shot, three-quarter latte; well it’s actually a seven–eighths but just ask for a ‘Gary’. They’ll know what you mean.” Gary Deirmendjian laughs at the absurdity of his coffee order. Silver-bearded, with more scalp than hair, his giggling fills our corner of Tropicana Cafe. Deirmendjian deals with much of life’s absurdities by giggling. Dressed in black with the hulking figure of a shot-putter past his prime, he closes his laptop and explains a morning ritual.

“I start the day about 3.30-4 (am) and go wandering. Call it meditation or prayer but somehow that motion means I can face the day. This joint opens at five o’clock and I’m here doing work, typing away, hiding in the noise. It’s one of my many watering holes. I don’t have a studio, my last one was ten years ago and was starting to define my work. I was originally carving stone so if I still had one I’d be locked into that.”



Deirmendjian’s current life is the result of a transformation that began with the publication of his book, ‘Sydney Sandstone’ in 2002. Since then he’s pursued a sculptor’s life, working nationally and internationally on public art installations, private commissions, and teaching at the National Art School. His art takes many forms: the ‘Hollow Promise’ shipping containers: lying deserted on Cottesloe Beach or, at Casula its contents spewing out to shame our wastefulness; the scary ‘Warehouse Mutant’ creature born out of found objects on a Balaclava industrial site; his YouTube *microvid*, ‘Nureyev, I see you,’ showing a plastic wrapper dancing solo in the breeze.

“Those *microvids* are the free-est I am. Most of my work requires negotiating with a lot of people to make happen but nothing gets in the way of those.”

His current project is a large multi-media installation for a new CBD transport interchange, confidential until it opens later in the year.

“What came out of an initial concept has bubbled and bubbled....I can’t wait. The idea of having a serious humanoid presence, on the other side of that glazing became a palatable idea that just grew and grew. It’s consistent with my own thinking, having come to Australia, the idea of first encounter. It’s no different to my initial arrival as a twelve-year old.”

There are early memories from his native Soviet Union, the family’s door bashed down, his father taken away and returned days later. Still, as his Motherland, there was a loyalty, a connection.

“I wore the same military-style uniform with the same red scarf that every kid wore. You were part of something huge and we were conditioned to hate the West. I can trace back to what I’m doing now to those initial happenings. “

Bribing their way out and escaping in 1979, his parents took his brother and he, on what the boys thought was a holiday.

“Suddenly I’m being enrolled in school in Marrickville and it’s like, what the hell is this about? I’m in the lap of the enemy and what my parents did was absolute treason. As an Armenian in the Soviet Union we had a particular history, and my grandmother’s a genocide survivor so I’d been filled with stories of these horrible Turks. I had no notion of English, this was just Mars basically, and the only guy I could communicate with was a Turkish boy, but he didn’t have the horns and wasn’t the monster that I imagined a Turk would be. He just wanted to play marbles and we became very good friends.”

“Everything I’d known up to that point was being rattled and shaken. I can’t regard myself as an Armenian; I don’t know what that means. It’s been the central question of my life with the punch line being that we’re essentially the same species beyond the surface differences.”



Before art there was another life. With a degree in Aeronautical Engineering, Deirmendjian was handpicked for the Department of Defence’s Science and Technology Group in Melbourne. Working on the FA-18 program he started a PhD scholarship in Sydney, travelling between both cities.

“We were working with international agencies and it was quite exciting stuff. But there’s no escaping the fact that I was contributing towards sharpening a weapon, and that began to eat me until I had to leave. There were a few more fuckups and

another phase began. I went back to the big management consulting companies that had courted me at university, but two years down the line they didn't want to know me."

"The job offers were diminishing and the last interview I went for was at this bloody roller door company in Fairfield, and I just couldn't get out of the car. It was a massive comedown, like Icarus, with my ego just flat on the ground."

Eventually picking himself up, Deirmendjian lectured in industrial design at UWS while, desperate for financial security, he built a start-up in product design and development.

"I could then devote the rest of my life to sussing this stuff out. These nagging questions, about life, and existence, these voices were there and I couldn't drown them out no matter how busy I stayed, they kept coming. But the person you're becoming inside and the person you're becoming outside are two different people. You're carrying on with the suit and tie shit during the day and you can't live with yourself."

"The work essentially bounces out of my worldview. It builds up enough intensity to spit itself out. I can't sing or dance about these things but at the core of it I was good with my hands, expressing myself through making. Art was never part of the thinking but it became a necessary step forward once I had given this monster inside time to fester." What do his family make of this? "I'm a complete failure in their eyes, it was all looking so good but there's a massive divide on the understandings of the world... around here there's a common understanding, irrespective of background, there's a respect for leaving you alone, and at the same time wondering how you are."



For someone who likes solitude, Deirmendjian is a social magnet, greeting numerous punters who pass our table: his extended family. He fears the wave of gentrification coming through Kings Cross, a blandness stripping its character.

"I was in a back lane one morning photographing a dead rat and I was really still. I felt this hand on my shoulder and got the shock of my life. It was this junkie, John wondering if I'm all right. We sat there and talked, he was just John and I was just Gary, it didn't matter what our backgrounds were. That's what I love about this place, that's what we're losing."



Consumption is a recurring theme in Deirmendjian's work. His large-scale installation for the Sculpture by the Sea exhibition in Denmark contained hard rubbish sourced from the residents of Aarhus. Cutting an excavation through a pristine grass square he revealed a pile of discarded electronics, dolls, shopping carts and assorted whitegoods: a subterranean underbelly bulging and reflecting our 'collective behaviour as obedient mass consumers'.

"I point out lots of our failings, this is just one of them. Everything is geared towards creating opportunities to buy and throw. As soon as you have children, the amount of crap that pours into your house in the form of gifts, a constant chain of disposable stuff that comes in and comes out."

Communist sparseness meets Western materialism? "In the Soviet Union there was a scarcity of things, so if there was an alarm clock, everyone had that one same clock. And the ticking was so loud you didn't need the alarm. It was a fucking tractor. Here, there's nonchalance about having things. Everything is ushering us towards purchase, and the whole economy, the language of government, media and business is growth. We play these silly games, where we have Earth Hour for instance. Sure, switch off the lights for an hour, what a brilliant idea, but then, right around the corner is Vivid."



"I'm a conservative at heart, I like to conserve what Sydney had." This is in response to the selling of public buildings on Bridge Street. "When you have merchant bankers for a Premier and a Prime Minister, it's hard for them to imagine otherwise, so why are we surprised? You can't touch a backyard dunny in East Sydney but these amazing, crisp examples of Victorian architecture are sold off. I can't stand these discrepancies."

"And they're trying to squeeze the National Art School out of its campus because the property's what they want. The school is fighting back and while I can't put on an orange t-shirt and march to Macquarie Street, I had an idea to do something."

The 'idea' involved Gary in an antsy mood, a box of white plastic cups, and a fence on South Dowling Street, "Someone had tried to ram a regular coffee cup in the mesh fence. It hadn't quite fitted but it gave me the idea." He arranged the cups to make the sign, 'Mike Baird Realty PUBLIC PROPERTY'. "It was there for a week and then someone decided to be more subtle and rearranged it to say, 'Mike Baird: Fuck You.'"



Tropicana is filling up with the morning crowd. I point out that I once saw him outside, finger-painting in the caked-on dirt of a parked Corolla.

“It helps with my own sanity to be absurd, the absurd is the only truth there is, Camus was absolutely right. The fat Greek dentist here calls me an Armenian scumbag and that’s fantastic because he’s got good reason: I’ve been pretty playful with him. I parked his car back to front and he didn’t know it until his cousin said, who’s that dickhead that’s parked their car that way and he’s like, fuck, fuck, fuck. You know, when you leave your keys and go to the toilet, things can happen, particularly if you’ve been calling people names.”