

Arts

Artist Lee Mingwei creates Picasso in sand for the Biennale of Sydney

🕒 March 8, 2016 7:58pm

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Artist Lee Mingwei at Carriageworks

A keystone artwork in the Biennale of Sydney will be literally swept up and disposed of on the last day of the three-month contemporary art event.

But the act of obliteration is essential to *Guernica In Sand*, says the artist Lee Mingwei. It represents the cycle of creation and destruction that affects everything in life.

Guernica In Sand is a reproduction of Pablo Picasso's 1937 mural-sized painting, *Guernica*. Picasso made the picture as a protest against the bombing of defenceless civilians in the Basque township of Guernica in the Spanish Civil War. People and animals in his painting are distorted in pain and anguish.

Lee and eight volunteers are painstakingly recreating the famous painting on the concrete floor of Carriageworks, using locally-sourced black, white and yellow sand. Credit cards are coming in handy as smoothers, and sand is being dribbled out of little teapots to add the finer details.



Volunteers help artist Lee Mingwei create Guernica In Sand for display at the Biennale of Sydney at Carriageworks. Picture: John Appleyard

The precision of Lee's copy of Picasso's image is thanks to his use of gridlines over an image of the original, and 88 custom metal frames into which sand can be poured to create defined sections of colour.

Guernica In Sand has a Buddhist parallel in the sand mandalas which exist only briefly before being ceremonially poured into a river or body of water.

But Lee's idea really came to him in the Bolivian desert in 2006 when a sandstorm almost engulfed his car.

"I quickly understood — emotionally understood — the fragility of life," Lee says.

"So (Guernica In Sand) is sand now, but it was a piece of rock millions of years ago. Maybe millions of years from now it will be a piece of rock again."

Guernica In Sand will remain static and on view until noon on April 23 when Lee will invite audience members to walk on it one by one. Then the artist will sweep the sand into a pile, and on June 5 the sand will be disposed of when the Biennale closes.

Lee was born in Taiwan and lives in Paris. During his Catholic school years in Taiwan, he loved spending summer holidays in a Buddhist temple where the monks taught him to meditate.

"I really believe all of the major religions have this idea or discourse about impermanence," Lee says.

And what of the Buddhist temple where Lee once loved to rise early and walk through the bamboo groves? "It's no longer in existence, because it was burned in a thunder storm," he says.

He has proved his point.

* Biennale of Sydney, March 18 - June 5, various venues including Cockatoo Island, Carriageworks, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Art Gallery of NSW; entry free, biennaleofsydney.com.au