

Artist shifts sands in tribute to Picasso's Guernica

Rosemary Sorensen | May 02, 2008

Article from: The Australian

NEW York-based artist Lee Mingwei yesterday put the finishing touches on his 14m long reproduction in sand of Picasso's gut-wrenching response to the Spanish Civil War, Guernica.

Called Gernika (using the Basque spelling), the work took him and a small team of assistants 750 hours to create on the floor at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, using 14 tonnes of natural sand in a range of colours.

The work will be on show for six weeks, after which Lee will return to Brisbane and, on the opening day of the Picasso and His Collection exhibition on June 9, invite gallery-goers to assist him in the work's destruction. First, Lee will walk slowly on to the work. The two previous times he has installed it, in London in 2006 and Chicago last year, he has found himself involuntarily sobbing. Patrons will then be invited on to the sand.

Lee describes the reaction of people as they trample his work as tentative, emotional or sometimes thoughtless, depending on how much they understand the story behind Picasso's anguished depiction of the massacre of the Basque people.

"The tension is extreme," the artist said, "because it is destruction and creation juxtaposed."

Picasso painted Guernica in Paris in 1937 in response to the bombing of the town of the same name, which killed hundreds of civilians. The painting was entrusted to New York's Museum of Modern Art during World War II before being returned to Madrid in 1981.

Lee, 42, was born in Taipei. Guernica was the first Western painting he encountered after he and his family left Taiwan when he was 14 years old.

"I didn't know what to make of it," Lee said. "Growing up in Taiwan, the art was traditional, Song and Tang dynasty, so to see this was shocking. I thought, how can art be so charged with emotion?"

Known for his experiential art, such as a project where he invited a stranger each night to share a bed with him inside a gallery and another which simulated male pregnancy and birthing, Lee said it took him many years to find the right way to respond to that initial impression of Picasso's great painting. "My work is not commercially viable", he said.

"Who is going to buy something like this and put it in a room?"

Queensland Art Gallery director Tony Ellwood said: "Mingwei's Gernika in sand cites this iconic image as a means of encouraging audiences to consider the way we respond to destructive events such as war."