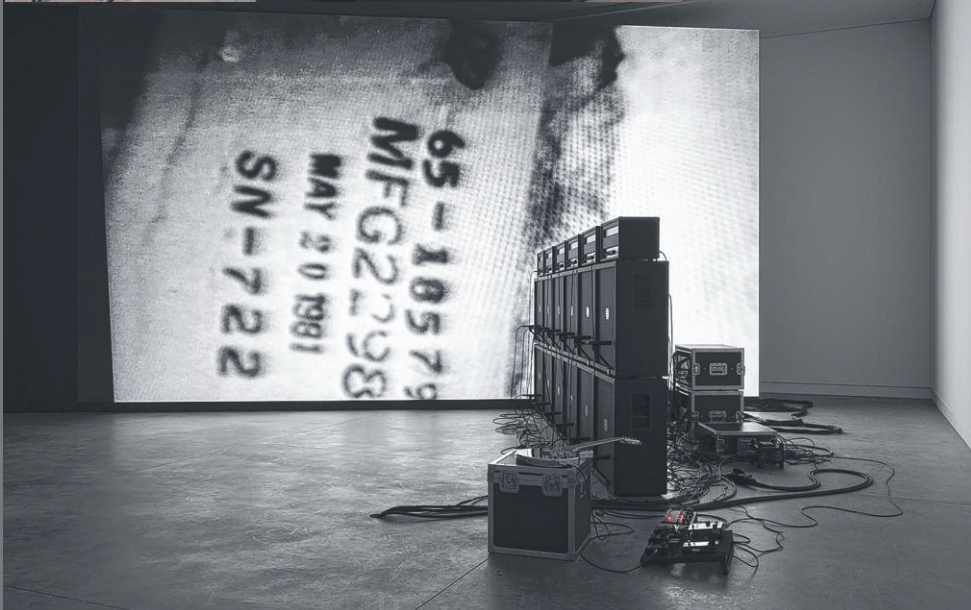




A white box within a black box is how Australia's pavilion at the Biennale has been described, where inside Marco Fusinato performs against a backdrop of LED screens throwing up grim images



Pictures: Andrea Rossett

"Marco feels things deeply," says Glass-Kantor of Fusinato, whom she met in Sydney in 2000 after attending TM/MF, his double act with guitarist Thurston Moore, late of the achingly hip New York band Sonic Youth, which presented a series of improvised guitar solos (Moore) with paintings created live, in red, on masonite (Fusinato).

"He's witty. He has a shrewd eye. The images he uses are bleak but they're also funny. Humour is important in these dark times. Like the head on a book," she continues brightly. "It's a 16th century memento mori painted to address human mortality and frailty at a time of plagues, contamination and disease, and a motif for the work."

"It is part of the ephemera that will come in and out of the pavilion as the piece evolves. Marco might use his phone as a plectrum. Or he might bring in a dead bird."

"Maybe it is how he will be at the end of 200 straight days of performing."

To understand Fusinato and Desastres, Desastres and Fusinato (all one and the same, insists Glass-Kantor), let's go back to Melbourne, to Fusinato's studio in a former industrial factory in the inner west, which he shares with artists including his sculptor/installationist/set designer brother-in-law Callum Morton (who represented Australia at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007 and, like Fusinato, is represented by the influential Anna Schwartz Gallery).

It's a laboratory-ish space with office walls covered in a handwritten slew of passwords, dates, reminders and ideas for titles. Where books with libertarian leanings ram shelves (Oswald Stack's Pasolini on Pasolini is his favourite) and CDs by the likes of Napalm Death and avant-garde Greek composer Iannis Xenakis are stacked alongside vinyl by artists including Fusinato – whose LP design template features an image from art history on one side and a mass media image on the other.

"I find those juxtapositions interesting," he told me when I visited.

Let's go across town, to the seaside suburb of St Kilda, where Fusinato, his wife and their two children share a dual

townhouse property with Morton and his family. It was here, holed up at home during the world's longest lockdown, staring down an internet portal for a marathon 262 days, that Fusinato's thoughts turned to Goya.

To the late life Goya, deaf from illness and self-isolated in a rural Madrid farmhouse, creating his horrifying Black Paintings (most famously, a bug-eyed Saturn bloodily devouring his human son.) To the Goya whose 82-strong etchings series *Los Desastres de la Guerra/The Disasters of War* (1810-1820) conveyed the tragic results of violent conflict. It was while thinking on Goya, and listening to the Spanish-language bellows of *Corrupted*, that – boom – Fusinato came up with a title, *Desastres*.

"The project originally started five years ago as a performance with drummer Max Kohane of the Melbourne bands Faceless Burial and Internal Rot," says Fusinato good-naturedly. "He has these amazing pneumatic legs which we wanted to use to trigger images. We rehearsed a lot. But the pandemic changed things around."

Let's go back, way back, to Noble Park, 25km southwest of Melbourne's CBD and the working-class suburb in which Fusinato was born and raised.

His parents were poor contadini peasants from Italy's war-ravaged Veneto region, a couple of hours' drive north of Venice, who emigrated in 1960 with their eldest son Luigi. They never assimilated, says Fusinato, not without pride.

While the toddler Marco was learning to speak English at kindergarten, waking early to the sounds of cars being crushed at the scrapyard at the end of the street and later, bashing away at a guitar in the back yard with the chickens and rabbits, his parents spoke only in Bellunese, a nuanced Venetian dialect that is all but dead in Italy. They worked in factories, on "hard-core assembly lines", and quickly paid off their house.

Anglo-Saxon Australia, vicious then, still vicious now, scorned the different, dismissing the Fusinatos and their migrant factory worker friends as "wogs". Marco and Luigi, picked on, kept their heads down. Little wonder, perhaps, that

when Marco discovered punk, with its raw power, DIY aesthetic and hatred for mainstream normalcy, he knew he'd found his metier.

"I've always had empathy for communities who sit outside the mainstream," says Fusinato, who prefaced his Venice speech by acknowledging the First Nations people on whose unceded land he lives and works – and continues to identify with the marginalised contadini and their vanishing dialect, in which he is fluent.

"Punk spoke about social change, Marxism, terrorism, situationism and so on."

"Bands like Crass, The Clash and Wretched were anti-fascist, anti-racist, pro-community. This was the basis of my appetite for exploratory music."

Well, that and his hatred of the piped popular muzak of the era, which made hanging around shopping malls anathema: "It's a form of torture that makes me want to create the most unsympathetic music possible."

His mindset transformed by punk, if not his clothes ("My mother patched my ripped jeans and told me that I didn't know what poverty was"), Fusinato found like minds in the radicals and dreamers who frequented Store 5, an artist-run post-conceptual gallery down a laneway in the city. When that same space became a record store selling experimental music, Fusinato's projects began weaving together.

He played in clubs, galleries, festivals, museums, and performance spaces. He exhibited solo, in groups. He disturbed, intrigued, pushed back comfort zones; he navigated bureaucracy and elitism, negotiated power and control.

"The life of an artist involves impoverishment, constantly pick pocketing to get to the next thing, mixing with every strata of society and cultural backgrounds and class. That's the world as well," he says.

Now here he is at the Venice Biennale, knowing all the right people, and representing Australia with Desastres – a work of which the title he launched in *Il Globo*, Melbourne's Italian language newspaper, so that his mother, 87, got to read about it first.

"I'm collapsing time," he says, while downstairs at the pavilion. "I'm back in exactly the same place my parents migrated from, to represent the country I migrated to."

With that, Fusinato picks up his guitar and sets off for another round of live improvisation, of sculpting the air, vibrating the space, his very own feedback loop.

**The Venice Biennale runs until November 27.**

**“The life of an artist involves impoverishment, constantly pick pocketing to get to the next thing**

**MARCO FUSINATO**