

## Artist invited to buy back 'stolen' paintings

Photo: Richard Dobson

Celebrity artist Charles Billich and wife Christa at their gallery in The Rocks, Sydney

JAMIE WALKER

Pricey paintings and artworks by celebrity Sydney artist Charles Billich will be sold for a fraction of their claimed worth by the Croatian town accused of stealing them 15 years ago. Adding insult to injury for Billich, municipal officials in Lovran - his birthplace on Croatia's scenic Adriatic coast - have invited him to bid for what he maintains is his own property.

The 32 oil paintings, sketches and illustrations are all that remains of an 87-item cache seized in 2008 in lieu of alleged non-payment of rent and taxes to the Lovran council by Billich, 89. He and socialite wife Christa Billich, 78, who controls legal title to his art through their gallery business, insist no money was owed and the \$2m-plus collection was illegally confiscated.

Last week, Lovran Mayor Bojan Simonovic advised that what was left of it was being exhibited prior to a silent auction opening on November 30. But the council's valuation of the 32 paintings and artworks at €45,577 (\$76,495) was a gross underestimation when Billich's paintings had commanded six-figure sums, his wife said. "I'm not sure I believe anything they say," Ms Billich told The Australian "I mean, they're what legally belongs to us".

In a letter to the Billiches friend and troubleshooter, independent filmmaker Steve Ravic, who spent three months this year pursuing the outstanding artworks, Mr Simonovic indicated the council's strong preference was to sell to the couple. "I would sincerely be happiest if you could purchase them, thus concluding this longstanding relationship," he wrote last week. "I hope you are aware that the public announcement is the only way to change ownership of the paintings. If you are interested, I truly ask you to get in touch."

A sceptical Ms Billich said the couple were unlikely to bid when they had made an offer last year to meet the council's price - again at Mr Simonovic's urging - only to hear nothing back.

Instead, they were seeking legal advice in Croatia on going to court to halt the sale. Under the guidelines forwarded by Mr Simonovic, written offers above the catalogue price would be considered until December 4.

The council wants to sell the collection as a single lot. This included a series of 12 paintings on Croatian innovators especially prized by Billich and valued at €18,581 (\$31,182) by the council.

But his wife said "We don't even know if the paintings are original. From what we have been told, there are six or seven reproductions among them, and we're not prepared to be misled again." However, Mr Ravic said there was a Plan B. He was in touch with a wealthy Croatian businessman who was prepared to purchase the Lovran collection and donate it to a charitable donation set up by the Billiches.

"Our concern is that this offer to sell to the Billiches is just a tick-the-box exercise by the Mayor so that the paintings can go to one of his cronies ... as has happened in the past when they've been scammed." Mr Ravic said on Friday. "I'd like to think this time they're genuine. There is certainly a pressure on the council to do the right thing but let's see."

The case has been raised in federal parliament by Liberal senator Hollie Hughes, who detailed Billich's "shameful treatment" after he returned to his home town to help in the wake of the collapse of communist Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Mr Simonovic was contacted for comment.

# Rinehart's scam dunk on Zuckerberg

JENNA CLARKE  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Australia's richest person, Gina Rinehart, has accused Mark Zuckerberg of doing nothing to stop the promotion of scams and "deceptive content" on his social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram.

Mrs Rinehart has personally written to the Meta chief executive to alert him to the "numerous scammers" falsely using her name and identity online to "fraudulently solicit money from vulner-

able people".

"In the last few weeks, I have had more than 750 scams on Facebook, as opposed to only one on Twitter (the platform now known as X) in the same time period, hence I'd appreciate more efforts taken in attempting to address these issues. Greater action is needed to stop scams and intentionally fraudulent content from being available a nd advertised to," Mrs Rinehart said.

"Meta needs to do more (as) innocent Australians are falling victim to job scams through Facebook."

The letter, dated November 9, is written by the mining magnate on behalf of several other prominent Australians such as entrepreneur Dick Smith and billionaire real estate developer Harry Triguboff, whose AI generated likenesses are being used to encourage people to send money to or invest in dodgy business ventures like crypto currency and diet techniques.

She also cites "high profile media personalities" such as former A Current Affair host Tracy Grimshaw and Today host Karl Stefanovic, whose images are



Rinehart Zuckerberg

being used for fraudulent online activities on Meta's platforms.

Her personal letter is a last-straw act and comes after Meta – the owner of Facebook, Instagram, Threads and messaging app WhatsApp – has failed to respond

or act on any of the official complaints lodged with the tech company by her staff over a number of months.

She called Meta's failure to act on the numerous complaints of the "huge surge in scams and fraudulent content proliferating across your social media platforms" an "all too common trend" where "real Australians are losing their hard-earned money".

"According to the National Anti Scams Centre, Australians reported a record \$3.1bn lost to scams in 2022. This represents an 80 per cent increase from the year

before. The NASC also estimates that about 80 per cent of all scams reported include some form of impersonation of a legitimate entity. This has happened using me hundreds of times, and my staff can't keep up, there are so many," Mrs Rinehart said.

"Beyond the tangible losses of billions of dollars, the emotional and psychological toll is huge. Despite our staff's concerted efforts to report such content, there remains an alarming persistence of scams, and new ones increasingly emerge."

Last year, fellow billionaire Andrew Forrest commenced legal

proceedings against Facebook's parent company after alleging the social media company was criminally reckless in allowing bogus advertisements using his image to appear on its site.

Former Sunrise host David Koch is seeking legal action against social media platforms over several fake ads he understands have swindled his fans out of tens of thousands of dollars over several years.

"These (social media) platforms have to be held accountable," he said in September. "If these digital platforms can stop

people from posting because they put a rude picture up or the content is offensive, why can't they do the same thing with these ads?"

Mrs Rinehart is yet to receive any response from Meta and wouldn't be drawn on her next step. "We will wait for a response from Mr Zuckerberg," she said.

The Australian understands the social media giant is moving to disband its Australian news partnership team, with the last executive being moved into a role focused on music partnerships.

MEDIA P23

## ChatGPT investors talk of CEO's return

KEACH HAGEY  
BERBER JIN  
DEEPA SEETHARAMAN

Investors behind the AI company behind ChatGPT are making efforts to bring back chief executive Sam Altman, who was ousted on Friday.

Mr Altman is considering returning but has told investors if he does return, he wants a new board and governance structure at OpenAI's sources say.

He has separately discussed starting a company that would bring on former OpenAI employees, including several who quit in protest of his ouster.

Leading shareholders in OpenAI including Microsoft and venture firm Thrive Capital, are helping to orchestrate the efforts



Altman

to reinstate Mr Altman. Microsoft invested \$US13bn into OpenAI and is its primary financial backer. Thrive Capital is the second-largest shareholder in the company.

Other investors in the company are supportive of these efforts, the sources say.

The talks come as the company was thrown into chaos after OpenAI's board abruptly decided to part ways with Mr Altman, citing his alleged lack of candour in communications, and demoted its president and co-founder Greg Brockman, leading him to quit.

Several high-level researchers resigned, some of OpenAI's corporate customers are looking for alternatives; and a high-stakes financing with venture capitalists is now in jeopardy.

The exact reason for Mr Altman's firing remains unclear but for weeks tensions had boiled around the rapid expansion of OpenAI's commercial offerings, which some board members felt violated the company's initial charter to develop safe AI.

Under Mr Altman, OpenAI went from a small non-profit to a multibillion-dollar company at near-record speed, thanks in part to the launch of a for-profit arm

that enabled it to raise billions from Microsoft.

The whirlwind of the past three days reflects tension between the research non-profit Mr Altman co-founded eight years ago, whose board just fired him, and the commercial arm that released ChatGPT a year ago, which became one of the most viral products in the history of technology.

Behind the turmoil is the odd governance structure that Mr Altman helped create for OpenAI, which he often noted had the power to fire him.

Most tech founder CEOs own equity in their companies and report to a board filled with representatives of their investors to help ensure decisions are made in the best interests of shareholders.

Mr Altman and his co-founders purposely created a structure in which neither of these things was true.

OpenAI was founded as a non-profit in 2015. Mr Altman created a commercial arm for OpenAI four years later – shortly after he became CEO – to allow the company to raise the billions of dollars it needed to fund the training of its AI models. However, that commercial arm was still governed by a non-profit parent.

The nearly \$US30bn for-profit arm is 49 per cent owned by Microsoft and includes a bevy of top venture capitalists as backers who were promised a share of OpenAI's profits. None ultimately had any control over running the company.

OpenAI is governed by a non-profit board. Mr Altman himself had no equity in the company, further diminishing his influence with the board.

This allowed the board to essentially oust Mr Altman without the consent of some of OpenAI's largest investors and despite the fact that he delivered rapid financial success for the company and sent its valuation soaring.

His ouster came as a shock to OpenAI's investors, employees and customers. Microsoft, Thrive and other investors were told of the news minutes before it was announced. Most employees and customers found out when the blog post was published on Friday afternoon.

Mr Altman was enraged by the board's decision.

He told friends last week it was ridiculous that the major shareholders had no say in the company's governance, some sources said.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



RICHARD DOBSON

Celebrity artist Charles Billich and wife Christa at their gallery in The Rocks, Sydney

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## Akubra caps off Forrests' foray into Aussie fashion

PERRY WILLIAMS

Billionaires Andrew and Nicola Forrest have bought Australian hat maker Akubra, adding to a string of high-profile brands owned by the mining magnate including RM Williams and a stake in Camilla.

The deal by the Forrests' private investment group Tattarang, covers the handmade hats business in Kempsey NSW which employs 120 staff.

"We are humbled to be entrusted with a company which is so important to Australia's national identity," Andrew Forrest said. "Tattarang invests to ensure companies like Akubra remain Australian-owned and we're proud to be able to ensure the growth of Australian manufacturing, both protecting and creating new jobs, particularly in our regions."

Nicola Forrest said: "Growing up in regional NSW, my parents taught me lifelong lessons about hard work and resilience. The

image of my father's tireless energy and perseverance, measured by the sweat on his Akubra, remains etched in my memory.

"An Akubra has always been part of my life, and as a new custodian I am excited to help new generations discover this treasured Australian icon."

Three years ago the Forrests bought bootmaker and bush outfitter R.M. Williams from French fashion giant Louis Vuitton in a deal believed to be worth almost \$200m. In January, Tattarang reportedly outlaid \$42.5m for a 25 per cent stake in the Camilla resort wear brand.

Andrew and Nicola Forrest split as a couple in July this year.

Dr Forrest had been ranked as Australia's second-richest person behind West Australian iron ore magnate Gina Rinehart.

While the Fortescue shareholding is by far their largest asset, they also own a diverse suite of businesses and assets including numerous agriculture assets, commercial buildings, and boutique hospitality properties.

## Coldplay runs hot in eco-friendly bizarro world coup

GEORDIE GRAY  
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

The Tourism WA cheque must have been one handsome payday for Coldplay – near the end of the first night of the British rock quartet's two Perth-exclusive shows, frontman Chris Martin performed a "one-time-only" ode for the state.

"If it's shitty, please don't put it on YouTube," he warned the crowd before launching into a song that referenced everything from snakes in parks, hardcore surfers who fear no sharks, Perth musical heroes Bon Scott and Tame Impala, and cricket legends Justin Langer and Dennis Lillee.

"My life would have been a total failure if I hadn't seen Western Australia," Martin warbled to a swooning crowd of 60,000.

ter part of their career yet this moment was breathtaking in its ramshackle intimacy and weirdness.

In retrospect, the whole show was weird. Stepping into the stadium felt like touching down in an eco-friendly bizarro world.

The schtick for the band's Music of the Spheres shows is that they are eco-conscious – a point driven home via QR codes that lead you to its online manifesto.

Energy is harnessed from stationary bikes and a kinetic dance floor; a backstage generator hums on cooking oil; the audience is decked out in LED wristbands made from 100 per cent compostable, plant-based materials.

In between support acts, the screens flitted between Coldplay's philanthropic work with ClientEarth, The Ocean Cleanup and One Tree Planted and advertisements for their \$75 T-shirts. Yet whatever thoughts you may have about the environmental buy my merch hulla-balloo immediately exit your brain once the band takes the stage and launches into an unrelenting barrage of hits.



DUNCAN BARNES

Coldplay does Perth at the Optus Stadium on Saturday

It almost goes without saying that Coldplay is an epic live band. They are impressively tight; Martin bounces around stage with all the vigour you'd expect from someone married to Gwyneth Paltrow for more than a decade and likely has a healthy reserve of Lion's Mane adaptogens coursing through their veins.

They are maestros at coaxing emotions out of the crowd. And their melodies – even on limper, new songs like Human Heart – sound positively gargantuan in the stadium setting.

If you hadn't already fulfilled your biological destiny by shedding a tear to The Scientist, you were reduced to a blubbing mess

when Martin invited a young fan who had beaten cancer on to the stage to sit with him by the piano and sing Everglow. Even the iciest heart stood no chance against the thawing power of witnessing Yellow live, the entire stadium aglow with golden beams twinkling from the wristbands.

The strength of the hits alone would have sustained this show but Coldplay is committed to the spectacle. It was a sensory overload attacking at every angle: pyrotechnics, confetti cannons firing off, beach balls bouncing around the audience, Martin on a hoverboard, the entire band performing in alien robot masks, and a bizarre bit of puppetry with the Jim Henson studio-designed Angel Moon ... which felt a lot like a scene from the Leos Carax Cannes-winner Annette.

There were three Australian support acts. Local opener Adrian Dzvuke was up first and had the sauce in spades. Dressed in a twee Wes Andersonish burnt orange dux, he dripped with charisma as he powered through 20 minutes of

liquid smooth Afro Pop. Brisbane indie-pop artist Thelma Plum was nervous (one suspects there were issues with her in-ear monitors) but her dosing song, the glorious Better in Blak, was immense.

It seems like Amy Shark, the last to go on before Coldplay, crawled out of the womb primed for a stadium show. She was all swagger and seasoned professionalism, making her way through hits like Adore and I Said Hi and crowd-pleaser covers of Bic Runga's Sway and Kylie Minogue's Can't Get You Out of My Head.

With chutzpah, she playfully imagined the conversation within the Coldplay camp about her selection as the support act, impersonating Martin in what can only be described as a drunk-Cockney accent: "Now there's this Amy Shark bird ... bloody hell, she's amazing let's go, baby!"

The two Coldplay concerts at Perth's Optus Stadium were the only Australian dates for the band.

Geordie Gray was a guest of Live Nation.

## Search for missing in jet trainer collision

TRICIA RIVERA

A collision between two former military planes triggered a multi-agency search in Victoria's Mornington Peninsula late on Sunday.

It's understood the Italian military aircraft, two Viper S-211 Marchetti planes used as jet trainers, were conducting a formation flight over Port Phillip Bay when they collided and one crashed into the ocean.

It is understood the other plane successfully made its way back to Essendon Airport.

Police and air ambulance helicopters, along with water vessels, were scouring the waters in Mount Martha, about 50km southeast of Melbourne, for the two people believed to have been in the missing plane.

Crash debris had been spotted floating on the water near where the emergency vessels were searching.

Police confirmed they arrived at The Esplanade at 145pm and Ambulance Victoria had been called shortly before then.

Victoria Police said more information would be released "when it was appropriate".

John Mullen from Ambulance Victoria said ambulances were called at 1.43pm and "We're involved in the search along with other emergency services".

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority confirmed each plane had two people on it. "AMSA understands there were two people on board each aircraft: one aircraft landed safely at Essendon airfield, while the other crashed into the water in Port Phillip," it said.

"At 1.42pm, Air Traffic Services advised the AMSA of a mid-air collision involving two light aircraft, about 12km west of Mornington in Victoria," the AMSA said.

The agency is co-ordinating the response to the incident and has tasked three rescue helicopters at the scene.

Australian Transport Safety Bureau chief commissioner Angus Mitchell said an investigation would be launched into the incident.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING:  
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