

Saleroom

Niche success in Sydney crowd

Katrina Strickland

Not long after Dominik Mersch opened his expanded gallery at Sydney's Danks Street art complex in March this year, hoonos broke in and stole his computer.

It was a downer in what has otherwise been a good couple of years for Mersch. He only arrived on the overcrowded local art scene in 2007 but has quickly established a niche, showing work by artists from German-speaking cultures as well as emerging local talent.

The German-born gallerist has recently upped the calibre of his local representation by signing three significant names: Marion Borgelt and Philip Wolfhagen, who both showed at Sherman Galleries before it closed its doors as a commercial gallery, and Tim Johnson, who was formerly with Mori Gallery.

Wolfhagen's first Mersch show will be in September, Johnson's in April 2010.

Borgelt's debut show closed on June 6 with more than 75 per cent of works sold, 55 per cent prior to or on opening night, at \$4000 to \$34,000. Two went to a blue-chip investment bank, the rest to private collectors.

Mersch is particularly happy with the sale rate for Borgelt's show. Borgelt's husband, Leo Christie, developed and oversees the Danks Street complex, but that was not going to guarantee a rash of buyers.

"We did much better than I expected given the economic climate," says Mersch.

Aged 43, Mersch was born near Cologne and is an engineer by training; his PhD was in artificial hip joints. He spent 20 years living and working in Düsseldorf and London, as an engineer and management consultant, before a



Dominik Mersch at his Danks Street gallery in Waterloo . . . more than 75 per cent of Marion Borgelt's works sold. Photo: ROB HOME

serious illness forced him to reassess his life, leave his chosen career, and move to Australia in 2006.

He was already a keen collector of contemporary art, mostly European, so opening a gallery was his obvious "what to do when you've escaped death and realise the value of life" move.

The gallery business is rarely a road to riches, but Mersch says his management consultant training forced him to do a very conservative business plan, and thus far, he is ahead of projections.

"I was quite realistic with my expectations — that's what I learned, to assess situations quite realistically," he says.

The economic downturn has of

course hit him, as it has all gallery owners. Mersch says works priced at less than \$5000 and more than \$15,000 sell, but the middle ground has largely disappeared.

He joins another German-born gallerist in Danks Street, Conny Dietzschold, with whom he shared a stand at the recent Hong Kong Art Fair. Sales were scarce, Mersch says, but he set up valuable contacts.

When he first opened, in a smaller space at Danks Street, his gallery was called 37 Degrees. People said the name was too hard to remember and that galleries tended to be named after their dealer. So in mid-2008 he changed the name to the Dominik Mersch Gallery.

"I didn't want it to be about

me, the most important thing is the artists, but I learned the hard way," he says. "It's all about trust, collectors want to know the person who is responsible."

He is introducing Australian collectors to interesting European artists, such as German photographer Elger Esser, who, like Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff, trained at Düsseldorf's Academy of Fine Arts under Bernd Becher; and another German photographer, Thomas Weinberger, whose work he showed at Melbourne Art Fair in last year.

Esser's March-April show sold surprisingly well given his relative obscurity here. Priced in euros at the equivalent of \$20,000 and \$70,000, five of the nine prints sold.