



MATTHEW BAX

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN LAURIE



Tax accountant, painter, bar-owner, Grand High Poobah... Matthew Bax was always determined to earn a living as an artist, and when a temporary diversion into tax accounting took him to Munich, he discovered his ability to do so. Or perhaps Munich discovered him. His first show sold out in two days, subsequent shows did the same and his works are now held by collectors throughout Germany and Europe. Upon returning to Melbourne, Matthew was keen to establish a lifestyle which would allow him to pursue his art further. He opened a bar and called it Der Raum, meaning 'The Space' or 'The Room' in German. Despite never having any experience in bars, other than frequenting them occasionally, Matthew's establishment has been an incredible success. What he'd never counted on was how his passion for excellence and his vision for a different approach to cocktail-making would see his bar become a multi, multi, award-winning institution and destination for serious cocktail connoisseurs... As for why he's also the Grand High Poobah, read on... Df

Df So you're having an exhibition this week... When's the opening?

Matthew In 3 days.

Df Nervous?

Matthew Always. I really don't enjoy them to be honest. The shows I have in Germany tend to open on a Saturday morning and are far more casual. Certainly not as many people come through, but instead you tend to get very serious collectors coming in... and that's not a bad thing. Whereas in Australia there are those who are very much coming for the party as well as those who are coming to look at the work.

Df Are you pleased with the work?

Matthew I think as pleased as one can be. It's always fairly frustrating because it takes a certain period of time to create a body of work so, by the time you're finishing your last few pieces, it might be anywhere from six months to a year since the first one. That makes it challenging to tie it all together and I tend to like my later works more than the early ones. But I am happy with this series, it has come along quite well but, to be honest I'm rarely satisfied - I'm always picking holes in it.

Df And the initial inspiration for this series came when you were travelling in Spain?

Matthew Yeah. I've worked on tiled environments before so in one sense it's not a new theme as such. In Cadiz, the little port town down the south of Spain, there's a really nice old fish market right in the centre. We went in there when trading had finished for the day. There was this eerie room full of aprons, religious symbols and a few carcasses lying around. It had a nice sort of religious undertone and this tiled, decaying environment that I like. I started thinking about this notion of fish mongering, and butchering, and the violence going on behind the scenes, and about our comfort factor with the notion of butchering... The works are not some sort of vegetarian outcry, I like my meat, but more about the question of what's going on in these places...

Df ... And I imagine, the extent to which we choose not to think about it. Did you take photos that day?

Matthew Yeah I did actually (*see page 76 *A Market in Cadiz*). I used to always work from photos as reference points, perhaps less so now. I took quite a few photos of the market, not initially with a view to doing a series on it, but it really stuck in my head and expanded from there.

I've always been more interested in the dirtier side of the street than the pristine and new.

I like something which is marked, stained and has an element of life to it.

**A market in Cadiz* Photography Matthew Bax





Df Art is something that runs in your blood isn't it?

Matthew Yes, I probably never had much hope...

Df Although you did try to do something else.

Matthew Exactly. I had a few goes at it actually, but Dad's a painter and an art teacher and I've been dragged around museums for as long as I can remember so it was something I always grew up with.

It was just something we did I guess without having to be pushed or even encouraged.

I just always had a sketchbook in hand.

Df And was your dad a practising artist?

Matthew Yes and still is. He had a show open in Adelaide yesterday actually. His work is quite different to mine, he's technically far better than me and tends to do more landscape and wildlife works.

Df Tell me about trying to do something else, as opposed to being an artist?

Matthew As early as Year 10 I was convinced that I wanted to be an artist. It was always something that I thought I'd do, but probably not exclusively. Then I got interested in art auctioneering and did work experience in a few galleries.

Df Paul Greenway's Gallery?

Matthew Yeah, he's always been a good friend. His gallery was just around the corner from my house and years and years ago I bought a picture from him when he was at BMG. Then, through school, I did a bit of work for Christies [Fine Art Auctioneers]. I thought that would be a good way to go so did a business degree with the aim of becoming an art dealer or auctioneer and ended up being an accountant.

Df Did you try the art dealing route?

Matthew I was probably a bit naive in a sense. I thought I had an understanding with Christies that once I finished my degree they would send me through their traineeship course in London. I wasn't being paid, so I thought that was going to be the payback, but when it came to the crunch they didn't follow through. I had never thought of being an accountant even though I studied Commerce, but when I got to the end of my degree I needed a job so... And to a certain extent,

to have a suit and a job and to feel very important is all very exciting when you're used to being poor.

Df How long did you practice as an accountant?

Matthew I'm not sure exactly but I started when I was about 19 and then did it for at least 10 years. I was with Arthur Andersen in Melbourne and then went to KPMG in Munich.

Df Were you practicing your art at the same time?

Matthew Yeah. I didn't do much throughout university or in my first year of working... maybe some sketching... but then when I went to Germany it really kicked off. That was when I figured I was at a high enough standard to be able to attack

the galleries. By the time I got there I had the slides in hand. I'd asked a few galleries in Melbourne how one would go about getting one's work exhibited and most people said, oh you'll have to go to art school... I didn't go through art school so that was a bit daunting. To be honest, I was a bit frightened off. Then I'm not sure what drove me to pluck up the courage when I got to Germany, but when I got there I sent my slides off to a few places and luckily one gallery had a small show which had been cancelled and there was a week-long gap. It was only a few months out from when I spoke to them but

we just put the works in there for a week and they all sold. It just went from there

but there was

a great deal of luck involved.

Df Sure, but you made it happen. Do you think it was easier to do it in Germany because you had less to lose there?

Matthew Perhaps. I definitely had more work by the time I was approaching galleries in Germany, but it was always something I was going to do, I just hadn't put too much thought into how I was going to go about it.

Df Did you generally work on weekends or at nights? How did you manage to switch between an accounting mindset to an art-making one?

Matthew It wasn't easy, but my studio was in my apartment which was a tiny little place so it was nearly impossible to get away. When I first got there I didn't know a heap of people so in a sense it was a good excuse to lock myself away. I was actually really productive, far more so than I have been here. I think because I didn't enjoy what I was doing during the day, I'd rush home and start painting. Although it was a pretty strenuous workload it was very productive.

Df After that first show sold out, did the same gallery keep representing you?

Matthew I continued to show with them for about five years which was good and bad. The owner was great at selling but relatively unreliable and it was really problematic chasing money and all that. It's probably a pretty common whinge by artists. But yes I did and it opened up a few other doors and I had other shows, some directly through her and others with different collectors all around Germany; a few in Hamburg and a couple in Frankfurt.

Df How long were you in Germany all up?

Matthew Over three years. I really loved it. I guess the job was the main problem, but with a work visa you can't go and look for another job – you're anchored to it. That was my biggest issue. Although really, the problem was as much me as the job, I just wasn't a good fit.

Df Do you remember how you felt when that first show sold out?

Matthew Oh yeah, I was pretty happy, pretty emotional. I was happy just to have a show. The notion of rocking up to the gallery and seeing people looking in the windows or seeing people looking at the work was quite bizarre. I think we sold two works on the first day, then a couple of days later, when it was all sold, it was very pleasant. If I'm honest, I used to go out of my way to go past the gallery on my way somewhere at night, just to have a look in the window. That's quite different to how I am now. Now I don't really enjoy looking at my stuff on the walls or thinking about the exhibition once it's up. I think it's just nerves, I'm not sure.

Df Do you get more nervous because it's your home town, well, country, and you've got more of a reputation here?

Matthew I guess so. There's also the commercial pressure – you want to sell and do well. I used to think there was something wrong with me because I didn't enjoy the openings or that process, but I've come to realise it's a pretty common thing. I think the work also becomes more personal to you. It's a little bit easier earlier on when you're more naive to it and maybe your images aren't as strong or you haven't put as much thought into them.



*The Der Raum difference

Mediocrity is easy. Excellence is harder. The rewards are worth it. This is the Der Raum difference.

CLASSIC WITH A TWIST...

*all cocktails are based on time-tested classics from the golden era of drinking.

WHAT YOU PUT IN...

*all juices are pressed daily from premium seasonal fruit, only when it's at its peak.

*all pouring spirits have been blended and infused to improve the overall result. The starting point is always super premium spirits manipulated with the finest produce.

*all mixers come from glass bottles, not post-mix guns.

*several spirits are 'blacklisted' from the bar; Midori, Southern Comfort, Red Bull... you get the idea.

NOWHERE ELSE...

*commercially extinct ingredients are recreated e.g., Boker's Bitters, which hasn't been produced commercially since the 1920s, is handmade to the traditional 1800's recipe.

*many products are imported and are exclusive to Der Raum in Australia.

*to avoid imitation, dark, non-descript bottles conceal their contents.

WELL-EQUIPPED...

*the finest cocktail ice machine in the world which makes 'magnificent, filtered blocks' that not only look grand but chill your drink for longer.

*all tools, from bar spoons to shakers, are sourced in Europe which makes for 'better drink construction'.

As it says in Der Raum's cocktail list, 'this naturally demands more time, love and money, but we are sure you will appreciate the difference'. We do.

Der Raum. 438 Church St, Richmond, VIC, Australia.

www.derraum.com.au

Df So what made you leave Germany eventually?

Matthew I just knew that I didn't want to be a tax consultant any more. Then

*it was really
about engineering a way that I could paint and,
regardless of sales, feed myself.*

I've always been interested in hospitality and bars, even more so in Germany because I saw certain styles of bars that interested me. So I thought that could be a good way of supplementing my income. The grand plan was to open a bar and within a year leave it under management and be swanning around Europe painting and not worrying about money.

Df It hasn't quite worked out like that?

Matthew No, no. What I didn't contemplate was how much I'd enjoy the bar and how distracting that would be, let alone the sheer work involved in it.

Df So after coming back from Germany, an ex-tax accountant and artist, you found a site for your bar, kitted it out and thought, I can be a bartender?

Matthew I don't think I ever really set out to be a bartender as such. I started the bar with a friend, but that went terribly and dissolved within a few months. I was left with a lot of debt and very few staff. I didn't have the know-how, but I knew where I wanted to take the bar. It was a case of stupidly taking over the reins and saying, this is how I think it should be done. So I was pretty much self-taught, but I was lucky because as time went on we attracted some really great bartenders who I did learn a lot from... But yeah, I guess it was a pretty crazy notion.

Df Have you been surprised at how well it's gone?

Matthew I guess so. Yes and no. Sometimes I'm surprised that some of the more obscure things I do – that maybe not all the staff here necessarily agree with – a lot of people out there do get, or at least see what I'm trying to do (*see page 781*The Der Raum difference*). It's still frustrating that cocktails certainly are very much not the mainstream. For most cocktail bars in Australia it's a fight against the pubs and clubs based on price wars. But I do put a lot of time into it, so in a sense if Der Raum didn't do well I'd be wasting a lot of time.

Df You probably would have left it a while ago...

Matthew Or gone bankrupt. To be honest, when I bought the other partner out

*we were in dire
straits, we owed lots of money and it was a case of
having no alternative but to work really hard*

to make it work,

as opposed to being driven by any notion of success.

Df What were you trying to accomplish with the bar in the way that you set it up?

Matthew I was trying to bring something new to Melbourne. In Europe, and especially in Munich, I'd seen the notion of a classic cocktail bar a lot. In Melbourne we didn't, and maybe still don't, have an older style of serving drinks and recreating classic recipes. At Der Raum we interpret the older recipes and classic ways of doing things.





Df But your starting point is always to go back to a classic?

Matthew Very much so. You realise that what you think is your most original idea, you'll always find in some old book where, even if the recipe's not exact, someone's had the same thought processes. So generally, from what I can tell, there are not a lot of new recipes out there. So to interpret cocktails is a more honest way of approaching the making of new drinks.

Df Where do you find the old recipes?

Matthew We've got a pretty extensive library here and I'm always searching for old books... Occasionally you'll find something on the net, but in all sorts of odd places you'll find a recipe or at least a reference to a drink..

Df What's one of the more interesting examples?

Matthew I'm not even really sure how I tracked down the book, but it's called *The Gentleman's Companion*. It was written by Charles Bacon and is almost like a *Gourmet Traveller* of the '20s in which he tells these terribly elaborate stories, probably bullshit, of travelling throughout the world... Like, they might be on a ship and run into trouble so have to come into some port.

The day will be saved by some little barkeep in a tiny bar somewhere exotic.

Bacon explains the drink they were served and gives you the recipe. A lot of those drinks are not well known, and a lot of them, although they sound fantastic, taste terrible. But you can add in little bits or if they use a molasses so you can use a pomegranate molasses instead, you know, build on them. That book's probably my favourite out of all the cocktail books. There are good drinks in a lot of Hemingway books. In *Islands in the Stream* he's always talking about drinking this gin, coconut juice and bitters – it sounded fantastic – but when we actually made the thing it was bloody terrible. We look for references anywhere and everywhere. Some really old books are becoming more readily available, like the most famous cocktail book written in the 1880s by Gerry Thomas who was one of the first celebrity bartenders. Up until not long ago a lot of these books were only available in first edition and cost thousands, but a few publishers are now recreating them. A lot of bartenders like myself are very interested in going back and finding the very first of something.

Df And do you have any more plans for the bar or is it business as usual?

Matthew I'm always wasting my accountant's time with ideas for other bars and whether or not we'd ever look at relocating. Some of the ideas I'd set aside for other bars I'm tending to bring through Der Raum. Little things like the new menu we've just released has a very old style of drink classification. We've gone back to the very original ways of explaining and categorising drinks. Back in the day, 'cocktail' was a classification for a certain type of mixed drink, it wasn't the whole genre. We'll continue to change the presentation techniques and the ways we deliver the flavours, but I'm always flirting with the idea of doing new things. Right now I'm just going to get this exhibition out of the way, do some travel, and see what happens.

Df Bars can be pretty fickle things – heaving one week and deserted the next.

Matthew It's very easy to sit back when you're doing well but there are lots of times that we work really hard and it doesn't come off or we're really quiet... It's very frustrating.

Df Does your core 'drinkership' tend to be made up of people also in the industry?

Matthew It certainly used to be, but it's encouraging that it's being diluted by other people who are also becoming quite fanatical about cocktails. We do tend to get really quite fanatical support which is lovely. As customers they're just as demanding as industry people.



Df Which is sort of what happened to coffee a while ago now... Gradually people started to take their coffee-drinking far more seriously and now look at that industry.

Matthew That's quite true.

Df You're also the self-appointed 'Grand Poohbah' of The Melbourne Temperance Society. What's the Society in aid of?

Matthew We've never gone in any cocktail competitions, in fact the bartenders here are banned from going in them because I don't really enjoy that element of the industry and think it's detrimental to what we're trying to do. But, one thing you do get out of competitions are ideas and seeing what other bartenders are producing. So forming The Temperance Society was a way of giving back to the industry because otherwise we'd never open our books and show people what we do. It's a more informal approach to sharing information.

The Society has pretty lofty goals of raising the standard of cocktails

in Melbourne

and I hope to a certain extent we do that, but it's become more of an educational society. In each session we focus on different spirits or different cocktails. It used to be a closed cocktail fraternity of the better bartenders, chefs and restaurant owners, but now we've opened it up and encourage those who are interested in learning more about drinks or making them at home to come along.

Df Tell me about your cocktail menus. I hear they have such a habit of going walkabout that you've had to wire them to the bar.

Matthew *We haven't had any robberies lately, but for a while there they were even getting cut away from the bar.*

We actually caught people with pliers and thought it was a joke at first. We do get our fair share of emails from people saying they love the place, but that it's terrible what we do with the menus and blah, blah, blah. It's probably got to a point now where it's good marketing to continue to do it. It tends to build more interest around it, but it's quite bizarre.

Df I also noticed on your website that Der Raum is now climate neutral.

Matthew We are. It's been a goal for a while. I guess it's on everyone's mind at the moment, getting annoyed at politicians but then thinking, well what am I personally doing about it. We looked at ways of doing things a little bit differently and were actually surprised at how easy it is to minimise a lot of our waste and change to green energy... Sure it's a little bit more expensive, but nowhere near as difficult or as expensive as I thought. A lot of it was just things that we could or should have been doing from the start. Then anything else that we can't encompass, we offset.

Df You started winning awards pretty early on. Did you know that was going to be important and put yourself forward for them?

Matthew I can't even remember how it worked the first time that we were nominated. There's a magazine, *Bartender Magazine*, which has awards and, in certain circles, tends to be the yardstick of how bars are going. In the first year when we got nominated for that I was very surprised and I can't remember if the next year we... I'm not sure if you got nominated or how it worked but certainly, the first time we won, we were completely surprised and certainly didn't go to the





Generally

This is my studio in Richmond. It's where I paint and generally make lots of mess... and do my most important work. I'm in here every day.

Surfaces

It's full of finished and unfinished works, photos, working materials acrylic paint, binders, mediums, my iPod, brushes, wire brushes. There are paint-scrapers because I like to build and remove the surfaces of my work, spray bottles because I often spray thin coats of water over the work to bleed the paint, and lots of plastic squeeze bottles because I mix a great deal of

my own colours and drip them onto the surfaces. There are newspapers, magazines, tickets and general records of my daily life because I like to incorporate foreign objects into my work... Sometimes an interesting old scrap of paper might lie around on my studio floor for years before it ends up in a painting.

Worthwhile

Sometimes it's a real struggle to be productive but every now and again it's really rewarding and I can turn the lights off and go home knowing I have achieved something worthwhile that day.

*Foodology

EL BULLI RESTAURANT: ROSES, SPAIN

www.elbulli.com

El Bulli, perched on the Costa Brava coastline, has recently been voted by *Restaurant Magazine* as the best restaurant in the world, for the second time. Only open from April to September, El Bulli is said to be booked out a year in advance. During the other half of the year, Ferran Adrià and his chefs take to their laboratory in Barcelona concocting their cutting-edge recipes. Adrià is considered by many to be the most influential and gifted man in the culinary realm.



MUGARITZ: SAN SEBASTIAN, SPAIN

www.mugaritz.com

At Mugaritz you're encouraged to let yourself relax into the atmosphere of the Basque farmhouse and be smitten by Andoni Luis Aduriz, the 34 year-old head chef's, award-winning creations. His ideas around cuisine and the elaboration of dishes create a philosophy where new creations and techniques are used to constantly discover new flavours. Different combinations of herbs and spices are used in all of the dishes which rely on immaculate technical precision.



FAT DUCK RESTAURANT: BERKSHIRE, UK.

www.fatduck.co.uk

Similarly Heston Blumenthal, Chef Patron of The Fat Duck in Bray, Berkshire has been described as a culinary alchemist for his innovative style of cuisine. His research into the molecular compounds of dishes has seen him awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science by The University of Reading, and an OBE by Her Majesty the Queen. The Fat Duck was awarded its third Michelin star in January 2004.



awards ceremony. I've never actually been when we've won, I've only been when we've lost... Although awards are nice it can drive you a little crazy worrying too much about what the judges are going to like. So I'm less and less interested in awards, although they're good for business.

Df Is there something that does drive you in general, across everything that you do?

Matthew I think, definitely with the bar, I'm trying to emulate what's been happening in the food scene over the last 10 -15 years. In a sense I'm trying to drive the notion that a cocktail is up there with food.

*I'm also
driven by a desire to change drinking habits so
that a cocktail's something to be respected and
enjoyed,*

rather than being a case of downing it. I cringe sometimes at some of the connotations of cocktails as being there just to get you drunk – they're a lot more than that to me. As for painting, it tends to drive me in a sense. It's not something that I tend to have a lot of control over. It's just something I feel I need to do as opposed to want to do sometimes. The art side of me is a lot harder to keep satisfied. With the bar and the business in general, there are so many yardsticks out there, it's easier to do something and get instant recognition – whether that's customers or awards or nice press.

Df You mentioned before that you're trying to emulate what's going on in the food scene. Is there something or someone in particular there that you admire?

Matthew I'm fascinated by the reputations of some of the great restaurants of Europe where it seems in some sense to be bigger than food. It's fascinating how excited people are to just get into some of these places and enjoying or experiencing their food. Harry's Bar in Venice is one example. You're just excited to go there because it's surrounded by so much tradition. One day I'd hope to get to where we can generate that sort of enthusiasm with just a single visit.

*It's above and beyond reviews or awards, it's bigger
and more personal than that.*

Regardless of what's said about Harry's Bar, it's still Harry's Bar, and love it or hate it, it is what it is and its reputation will always be maintained. In terms of inspiration and drive, a lot of my ideas for a different way of presenting drinks and flavours come from El Bulli, and Fat Duck, and Mugaritz and those sorts of places (*see page 91 *Foodolgy*).

Df Do you get back to Europe very often? It sounds like it's a great source of inspiration for you?

Matthew My girlfriend lives in Munich so I do try to get back as much as I can.

Df Have you chosen to call Melbourne home because it has that strong European feel?

Matthew Most people get out of Adelaide for one reason or another and it tends to be Melbourne or Sydney. I ended up in Melbourne because the company I started working for offered me a transfer here, but it does have that nice mix of culture and sport. I tend to be a bit of a sports buff and Melbourne draws a lot of those sorts of people to it. I'd love to live in Sydney at some stage, but at the moment it's Melbourne. I do like the idea of living in quite a few places, even if the experience doesn't turn out to be the most pleasurable, from that you tend to appreciate what you have more. 🍷

