



AiA Art News-service

The Sydney Morning Herald

Whiteley on Trial review: Gabriella Coslovich and the saga of truth in art

- Felicity Strong

ART

Whiteley on Trial

Gabriella Coslovich

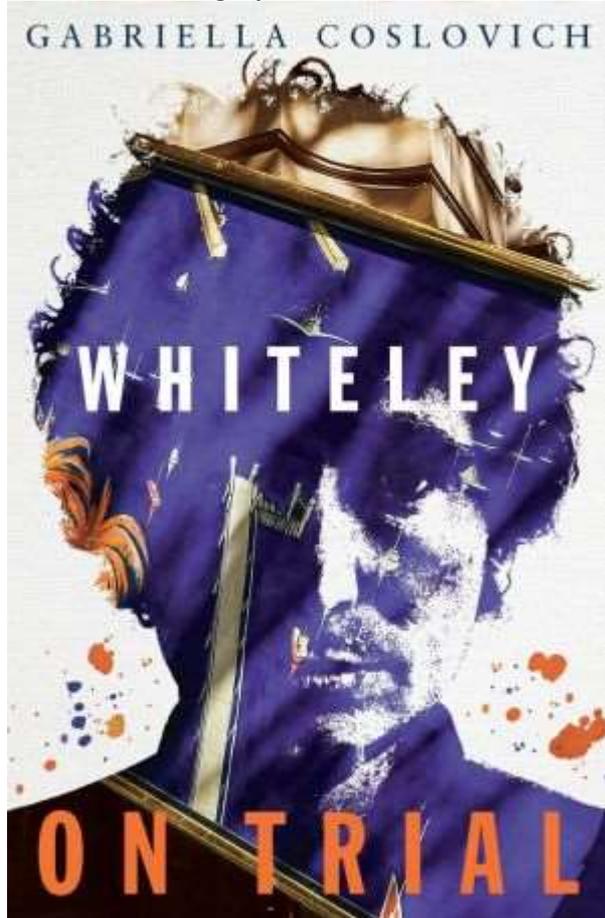
Melbourne University Press, \$32.99

An "Elmyr de Hory" has been emailing Gabriella Coslovich. Not the deceased Hungarian art forger, but a whistleblower interested in the book Coslovich is writing about Australia's largest-ever criminal trial for art fraud.



Author Gabriella Coslovich writes about Australia's largest-ever criminal trial for art fraud. Photo: Simon Schluter

That book, *Whiteley on Trial*, begins well before the sensational court case that unfolded in the Supreme Court of Victoria in early 2016. It traces the three paintings from their alleged creation in a Collingwood studio some 10 years earlier, through a criminal investigation and committal hearing, before reaching the apex, the six-week trial and then the aftermath of an appeal. The dramatis personae span some 60 people, from lawyers to art dealers to collectors. Coslovich is not an entirely disinterested observer; her articles published on the civil action in 2011, were subject to a defamation case brought against *The Age* by one of the two men at the centre of the forgery accusations, Melbourne art dealer Peter Gant.



Whiteley on Trial, by Gabriella Coslovich. Photo: Supplied

In April 2016, Gant and his colleague, art restorer Aman Siddique, faced five charges between them of undertaking a joint criminal enterprise to create and sell paintings as by the hand of iconic Sydney artist Brett Whiteley. There is a lot of money at stake. Two large paintings were sold for a combined value of \$3.6 million, with a third still at large.

The book traverses the murky Australian art market. It is revelatory, as nearly all the key players in this farce worthy of Shakespeare gave interviews, notable in an art world notorious for silence. But there a few central voices missing – Siddique declined to be interviewed, as did Sydney Swans chairman Andrew Pridham, the businessman left humiliated and \$2.5 million out of pocket.

Coslovich begins by questioning why the police would pursue an investigation in an area notoriously difficult to prosecute. Unfortunately for the art world, this trial, and her revelations may only compound this situation.

The book does air the evidence that was deemed inadmissible at trial: Gant's long list of brushes with the law and multiple bankruptcies, and Siddique's alleged remark that wooden doors delivered to his studio would become "million-dollar paintings".

There are two sides in this story: those who believe the paintings are forgeries, created with the sole intention of passing them off as paintings from the Lavender Bay series by Whiteley, and the defendants, who claim to have done no wrong – painting a copy of another artist's work is not illegal.

Coslovich is clearly on the side of the prosecution. Her partiality becomes more palpable as the trial gets under way, voicing her frustrations with the clash between the seemingly incompatible language of art and legal rules of evidence. She also reverts to the habits of an investigative journalist, digging into files at the State Library to test the veracity of defence claims.

The defendants pit themselves against the experts from the University of Melbourne's Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation. Siddique disparages them, and his hatred of the people he perceives as trying to destroy his career is unmistakable.

There is a common mythology evident in many depictions of the art forger of a talented artist unfairly rejected by the mainstream, elitist art world, who then exacts revenge. In Coslovich's story, both defendants assume this character and are firmly placed within this context.

Despite the construction of an "us versus them" scenario, the defendants are hardly downtrodden anti-establishment characters. Gant undertook honours in art history at the very university he perceives to be hell-bent on their downfall, and Siddique studied at some of the most highly regarded art colleges in London.

Moreover, as Coslovich reminds us, they are also not the victims in this narrative. Whiteley and his studio assistant, Chris Quintas, passed away many years ago, so were unable to confirm the authenticity of the paintings they allegedly sold at the studio door. Nor able to defend allegations of drug use. Likewise, Wendy Whiteley, the formidable protector of the artist's output, was probed on her ability to authenticate the paintings by her then estranged ex-husband. Others wound up seriously out of pocket – Pridham never recovered his money and former Gant associate, Guy Angwin, ended up losing his house.

Coslovich never manages to unravel the identity of Elmyr de Hory and at her most paranoid, suspects it to be Gant himself. Nor does the art world get the redemption it has sought and remains, in the aftermath, more vulnerable and secretive than ever.

Felicity Strong has a PhD in art forgery.