

The Saturday Paper

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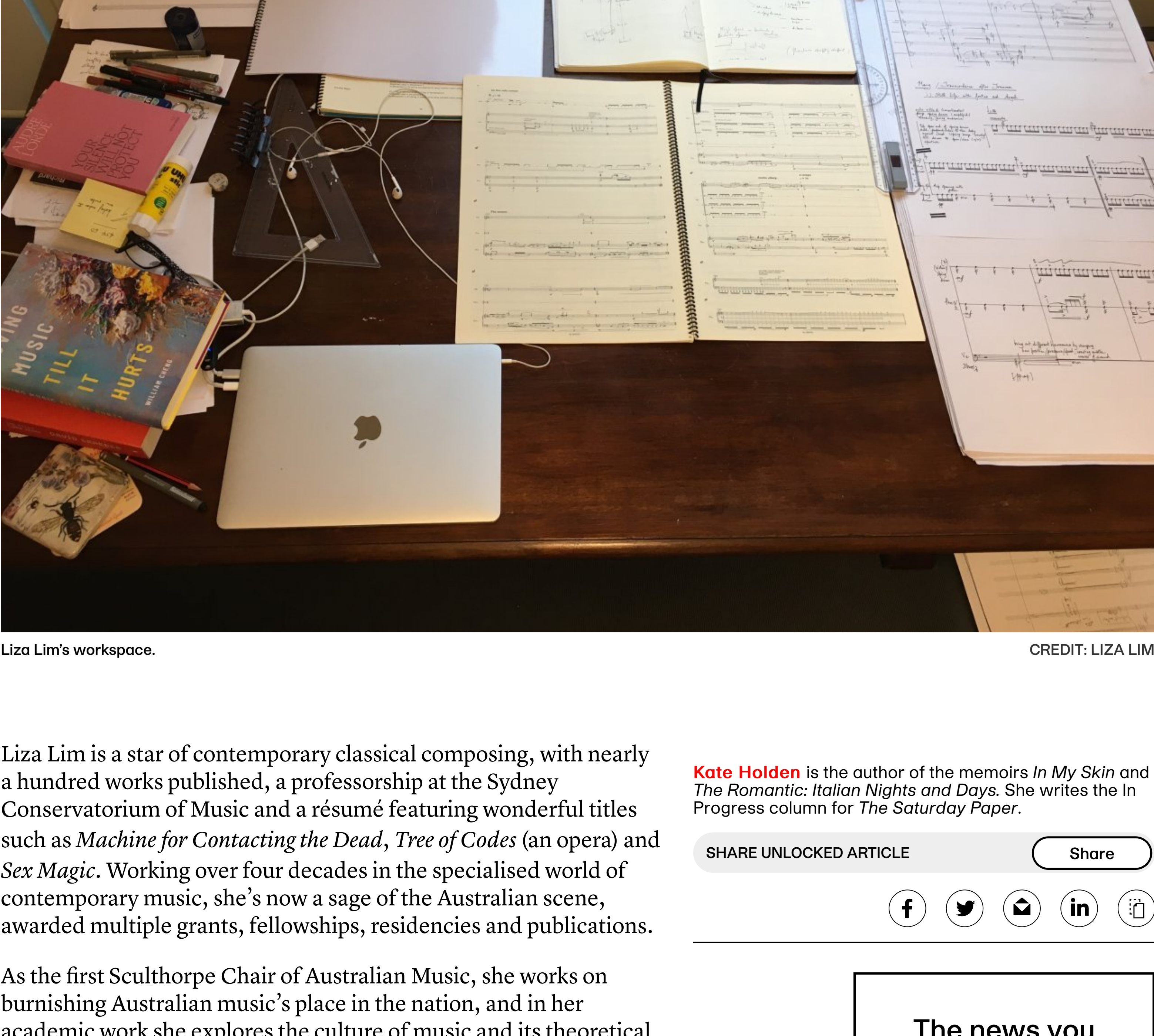
PAST EDITIONS

JANUARY 30 – FEBRUARY 5, 2021 | N° 334

IN PROGRESS

Composer Liza Lim is old-school – she still handwrites her scores, as the tactile act of notation flows into her music-making. By *Kate Holden*.

Liza Lim



Liza Lim's workspace.

CREDIT: LIZA LIM

Liza Lim is a star of contemporary classical composing, with nearly a hundred works published, a professorship at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and a résumé featuring wonderful titles such as *Machine for Contracting the Dead*, *Tree of Codes* (an opera) and *Sex Magic*. Working over four decades in the specialised world of contemporary music, she's now a sage of the Australian scene, awarded multiple grants, fellowships, residencies and publications.

As the first Sculthorpe Chair of Australian Music, she works on burnishing Australian music's place in the nation, and in her academic work she explores the culture of music and its theoretical puzzles. In 2018, she was given the Don Banks Award by the Australia Council for the Arts, its highest music honour, for her composing, teaching and leadership on gender and music.

But it's her composed music – vigorous, complex and evocative – that has cast her across Australian and international stages. With pieces associating ecological consciousness, the sacred female, the exchange of cultural dreamscapes and hidden histories, she makes the world resound. She also enjoys gardening.

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Hi and welcome to... is it Tuesday? I'm losing track. [It's actually Monday.]

I'm just waking up to the year.

Thanks for sending the pictures of your workspace. What I see is paper. Lots of paper!

Yep. Yep, it's absolutely low-tech, it's paper and pencils, that really analogue contact with materials. It's not just writing on paper and the physical traces of thinking and imagining. It flows into the kind of music-making I'm interested in, what I call "contact noise" between bodies and materials, or bodies and instruments, or humans and other entities. There's a temporal aspect of handwriting that for me connects to music-making. Hence what looks like a pretty 19th-century kind of desk!

Fits with what most people imagine when they hear the word "composer"?

I'm really old-school. I'm one of the last ones working with paper. It still needs to be transformed into the electronic medium, but that's a later stage. My first stage is absolutely that artisanal, handmade thing. It also comes out of a Chinese aesthetic world of calligraphy and this idea of alignment through the body, flowing onto the surfaces.

I noticed your gorgeous handwriting. And you're a composer of extremely sophisticated music, getting instruments to make extraordinary sounds. I wouldn't have a clue how you notate that.

A lot of people mystify music and its notation. But the roots of notation are in written language: it's *words*.

I draw upon a wide range of reference points: often they're textual. I read quite a lot. *Mary/Transcendence after trauma* is the most recent work – that's what all that paper is, tacked around the room.

I was reading your program notes about *Mary*, and with all the mentions of cultural works and artefacts like the Fra Angelico *Annunciation*, I wondered how much reading is part of your daily work?

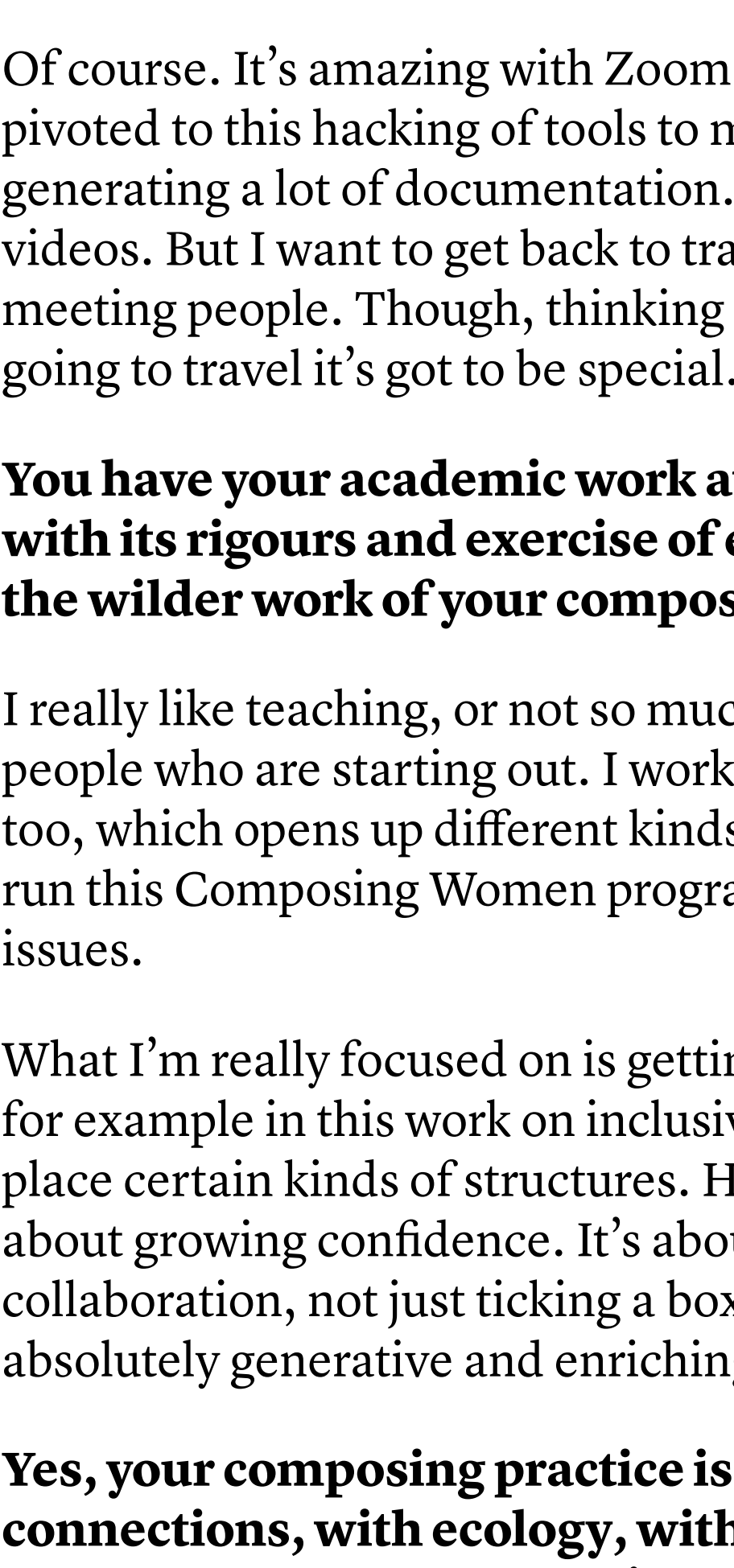
No one's ever asked me that! I have a lot of stuff on the go: I read for inspiration, a kind of sensory inspiration, the pleasure level of reading. I'm thinking about stuff, and I'm working on my music, and then I'll pick up a book and really draw energy by finding things that have resonance. I just noticed recently the importance of books as tools. That's how I think of what I'm doing when I'm reading. Yesterday I was looking again at Audre Lorde's amazing *Uses of the Erotic* and connecting that to the *Mary* work and another piece, *Sex Magic*.

At the moment in the pictures you can see Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, and one I haven't started reading yet, called *Loving Music Till It Hurts*, by William Cheng. He brings queer theory to the idea of music being a sentient companion. And this is my bedtime reading, *Wagnerism*, Alex Ross.

You're reading about Wagner at bedtime? So hardcore!

[Laughs] It's so beautifully written. I also have Nardi Simpson's *Song of the Crocodile*, so that's something different.

I have these books scattered around and I pick them up and put them down. They're like cats! You know – they're sentient, they speak to you and you kind of *stroke* them, then they give you things. I work in academia but this is a very non-academic way of reading. It's a poetic encounter rather than a research exercise.



The past year has been very industrious for you but the opportunities for performance have been limited. What's it like working in that space, where you finish but then nothing happens?

Yeah, the big things have all been postponed. The solo pieces have happened, like *Sex Magic*, which I'm really grateful for. But sure, when something comes into that sonic realisation in a space, even online, it does help you move forward, and puts you in a place where you can see the work. So that's what I'm doing now, taking stock even in the absence of that final step of performance.

I work in a highly collaborative way, particularly with small numbers of performers, with little videos and sketches and tryouts: it's not the image of the lonely composer! The workshop aspect is really important. The work is co-created in that process; it doesn't stand alone from the moment in which it's played and touched by other people.

Can you do that collaboration online during Covid then?

Of course. It's amazing with Zoom, how musicians and artists pivoted to this hacking of tools to make them useful. And it's generating a lot of documentation. People are putting out all sorts of videos. But I want to get back to travelling and moving around and meeting people. Though, thinking anew about emissions, if you're going to travel it's got to be special.

You have your academic work at Sydney Conservatorium with its rigours and exercise of expertise, and then you have the wilder work of your composition. How do they relate?

I really like teaching, or not so much "teaching": learning next to people who are starting out. I work with very accomplished artists too, which opens up different kinds of connections. One thing I do is run this Composing Women program, looking at gender equity issues.

What I'm really focused on is getting a self-sustaining engine going, for example in this work on inclusivity: here's a program that puts in place certain kinds of structures. How to make it sustainable? That's about growing confidence. It's about relationships, it's about collaboration, not just ticking a box but doing it because it's absolutely generative and enriching.

Yes, your composing practice is obviously invested in connections, with ecology, with art and Indigenous cultures and the sacred and women's bodies... It's the opposite of abstruse; it's present and engaged with the now, and applied.

There's a really strong isolationist myth that classical music is separate, but it's part of the story of what music does and what it's for. Last year was so full on. What I'm doing is just really breathing out. There are times I'm more fallow. I'm not afraid of not being productive, though the last year has been about bringing a lot of works to completion. But I don't think of that as "work". It's just what I do!

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Jan 30, 2021 as "Liza Lim".

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THIS WEEK

WORLD

Exclusive: Scott Morrison misrepresents China advice

Rick Morton As the prime minister tries to calm concerns about tensions with China, Kevin Rudd says the idea Morrison is taking a consultative approach is 'nonsense'. If Mr Morrison is inferring that the current direction of Australia's China strategy has been based on any substantive consultation with me, let alone any support on my behalf, that is a patent falsehood.

NEWS

2050 net zero: Australia left behind as Asia goes green

Mike Secombe While the Coalition continues to stall on a net zero emissions target, the biggest buyers of our coal are rapidly shifting to renewables.

NEWS

Fight to free refugees in hotel detention

Elle Marsh While dozens of refugees brought to Australia under medevac were unexpectedly released into the community on temporary visas this week, grave fears remain for the men left behind in detention.

OPINION

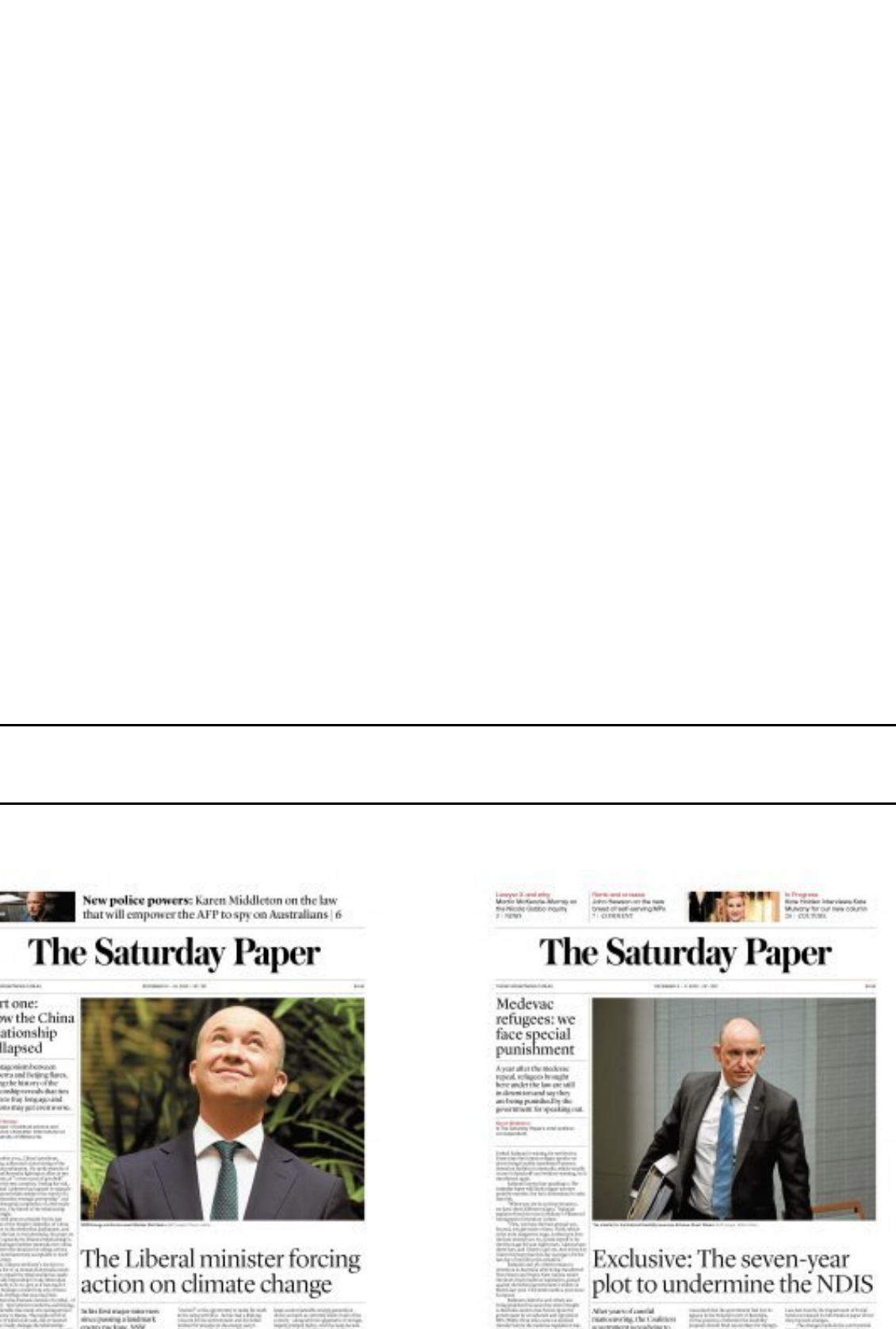
Challenging the casualisation of academia

Ellen Smith Last year, as the tertiary education sector reeled from the impacts of Covid-19, the University of Melbourne quietly agreed to pay millions in unpaid wages to casual teaching staff. Despite the size of the payout, the case received little attention ... And, to the detriment of casuals in other universities around Australia, it did not set a legal precedent.

DIARY

Gadfly: A long line of thieves

Sami Shah In August 1786, William Roberts of Cornwall was arrested for stealing a little more than two kilograms of yarn. No one knows what he wanted with that much yarn. Whatever the case, the justice system was taking no risks with this yarn aficionado, and sent him to Sydney – a fitting punishment for anyone, even to this day. A few years later, Roberts married Kezia Brown, originally from Gloucester, who had been convicted of stealing clothing. Perhaps the two bonded over their love of fabrics.



NEWS

The challenges of the vaccine rollout

Karen Middleton Australia's ambitious coronavirus vaccination schedule has already been met with scepticism by some health professionals, while others say the real priority must be keeping the public informed and confident.

CULTURE

Singer-songwriter Sarah Mary Chadwick

Shaad D'Souza The bleak and brilliant Australian singer-songwriter Sarah Mary Chadwick's singular repertoire draw on psychoanalysis and her Catholic childhood.

OPINION

Has Albanese lost Labor's love?

Rachel Withers The more certain a 2021 election becomes, the less certain the leadership of the Labor Party appears. Though the next poll may be any time from August 2021 to May 2022, there's a distinct election-year feeling in the air – and an open-season vibe in the opposition.

Spit into a milkshake

Sometimes people end up where they belong. This is not how Tony Abbott became prime minister but it is how he found himself working at the Institute of Public Affairs. That a man can go from leading the country to making Facebook videos for a right-wing think tank is evidence of the great lack in our politics.

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