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- Grim ways.

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Abstract:

- The art world has long had its share of leeches but mostly of the human variety. The actual bloodsucking worm is more rare. That will change this week, however, when five leeches take centre stage in Barbara Campbell's performance art piece The Grimwade Effect at Melbourne, Victoria's Ian Potter Museum of Art. Campbell's performance and exhibition are not a kind of freak show. It is a provocative act of historical analysis and interpretation.

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Grim ways

ART Medicine's bloody past is recalled by performance art in Melbourne.

The art world has long had its share of leeches but mostly of the human variety. The actual bloodsucking worm is more rare. That will change this week, however, when five leeches take centre stage in Barbara Campbell's performance art piece The Grimwade Effect at Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum of Art.

"The leeches are like my co-performers," says Campbell. The renowned Queanbeyan-based artist will attach the leeches to her body and let them suck until they drop. "It could take hours," she says, not the least bit squeamish about her November 8 performance. "I will stay there until the leeches are fed."

Not that Campbell will be idle. With a stethoscope in hand, she will monitor her blood flow, tapping out — via a speaker system — the rhythm of her heartbeat. The afternoon will wear on, and gallery visitors will amble by, like blood slowly coursing through a vein.

Despite the leeches and blood, Campbell's performance and exhibition are not a kind of freak show. It is a provocative act of historical analysis and interpretation, with Campbell at the centre of her own experiment: "I like approaching the past in a fresh way, wondering why the past still exerts its influence over us, often in quite strange ways."

Strange ways indeed. Some 133 years ago, Melbourne businessman Frederick Grimwade signed a contract for the delivery of a million leeches from Echuca at 10 shillings per thousand. As story has it, the leeches were caught by local Aborigines, who would wade into the Murray and allow the leeches to, well, leech onto them. From there, the leeches were transported to Felton, Grimwade's Leech Aquarium in South Melbourne, where they were packed and shipped off abroad for use in a range of medical procedures. Yes, it's funny and quaint, and the leech aquarium no longer exists ("it's probably an apartment block now," jokes Campbell). But the past is never completely severed from the present. Grimwade is still a fine and proud name in Melbourne's business and cultural life. Leeches are once again being employed in medical procedures, mainly microsurgery. And at St Vincent's Hospital in Fitzroy, where Campbell conducted some of her research, the resident leeches began life in the Murray near Echuca.

CARTOON

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By Simon Castles