



Margaret Worth, **Rain Chasers**, 2009, stainless steel and aluminum, variable heights between 2.5 m and 5 m x 2 m diameter for movement. Photograph by Grant Hancock. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

Sun, Sand, Surf, Sculpture

A sculpture event such as Adelaide Airport Brighton Jetty Classic Sculptures by the Sea is essential in the promotion of sculpture in Australia's visual arts calendar.

By Christine Nicholls

The beach has a special place in the collective Australian psyche and national identity. One reason for this is that the majority of Australians live near the sea. The capital cities of every Australian state are on the seaboard, and therefore within reach of our beaches. And, Australia, being the smallest continent and largest island on earth, has many of them—more than 10,000.

Australian beaches are strongly associated with fair weather, the body beautiful, leisure pursuits, swimming, surfing, and other aquatic sports. In this respect the beach is consonant with Australia's self-image as a sporting nation and as the land of the long weekend.

The beach is, however, sometimes conceptualized as a place of potential danger. Whether the menace originates

in the ocean itself, with its tidal vagaries and the sea creatures that lurk beneath (for example, sharks and jellyfish) or the asylum seekers who arrive in rickety boats in the hope of beginning a new life on these shores, the beach's status as a border zone means that it is not always regarded as benign.

Partly as a result of this ambiguity, there are many allusions to the Australian littoral in the visual arts, literature, dance, and other art forms. As A.D. Hope, one of Australia's most celebrated poets, unflatteringly wrote in his poem *Australia*:

*And her five cities, like five teeming sores,
Each drains her: a vast parasite
robber-state
Where second hand Europeans
pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.*

A fair bit of pullulating takes place on Australia's beaches, too, particularly after dark, and not all of it timid. Australia's extraordinarily beautiful shorelines and beaches have also acted as *mise-en-scènes* for various horrendous crimes, including murders. But for the majority of Australians, life is a beach, with the positives by far outweighing other less salubrious considerations.

It is therefore not surprising that in the past decade or so a number of Australia's major metropolitan beaches have played host to a range of sculptural competitions, mostly in the height of summer. David Handley is credited with having conceived Australia's first *Sculpture by the Sea* exhibition in 1997, along the shoreline joining Sydney's Bondi Beach and Tamarama Beach. From the event's

humble, one-day beginning, it has become a highly organized part of Sydney's annual art calendar, attracting substantial prize money and sculptors of international renown. The idea, which extends the concept of public art in the Australian context, has now spread to other Australian states, including Perth in Western Australia, where the event takes place on Cottesloe Beach.

The most recent such event is *Adelaide Airport Brighton Jetty Classic Sculptures by the Sea*, which was held in January 2009 for only the second time. The exhibition of finalists' works took place in the Brighton Beach Surf Lifesaving Club and nearby, in the outdoor precinct.

Finalists were selected from a large field of entrants in three sections: Indoor Sculpture, Outdoor Sculpture, and Youth (for entrants between 15 and 19 years inclusive.) There was also a People's Choice award that was decided by popular vote.

The deserving winner of the 2009 Best Indoor Sculpture prize was wood sculptor Peter Carrigy, for his carved red gum sculpture entitled *Submerge Emerge*. Carrigy works with materials that he gathers (wood, resins, pigments, and so forth) to



Jane Smeets, *Sea Sponge*, 2009, ceramic, variable dimensions. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist.

make forms that resonate with aspects of the Australian seascape, landscape, and natural world. *Submerge Emerge* takes as its inspiration the sleek, streamlined, shining bodies of a pair of conjoined bottle-nosed dolphins. The artist skillfully incorporates the essential features of these mammals into this work. While dolphins' fusiform

bodies, the distinctive shape of their pectoral flippers, melon-shaped heads, and their well-defined, idiosyncratic, rostra are all recognizable, *Submerge Emerge* could equally be interpreted as an elegant piece of polished driftwood, carved and honed by the weather and waves. In other words, it can be seen as an artifact created by the forces of nature itself. Carrigy's great strength is that he has made an artwork that suggests and evokes mammalian forms of sea life, but does not attempt to render these literally or naturalistically. *Submerge Emerge*'s potency thus derives from its formal ambiguity. This beautiful, glistening work also has a tactile quality, meaning that it was well nigh impossible to deny oneself the pleasure of touching or stroking it.

Elucidating on the work's title, Carrigy says: "The name of the sculpture—*Submerge Emerge*—implies and describes the mystical action of a marine mammal form diving and resurfacing in the ocean. So the name is a rhyming metaphor for the poetry of motion representative of a variety of marine mammals, including whales, dolphins, seals, dugong, and stingrays. The abstract form of the sculpture suggests wing shapes that float off the surface and that are not anchored to a flat plain."

Peter Carrigy's artwork is recognized not only in Australia but is becoming



Peter Carrigy, *Submerge Emerge*, 2008, red gum, 24 x 60 x 69 cm, Image: Courtesy of the Artist. Winner of the Indoor Sculpture Prize.



Michele Nootboom, Brighton Babes, 2008, Feeneys raku clay. Image: Courtesy of Nova Smith and the Artist. Winner of the Outdoor Sculpture Prize.

increasingly known in parts of China and Japan, where the poetic vision informing his *oeuvre* is highly valued. In turn this 'Asian connection' exerts a continuing influence on Carrigy's work, both in terms of the materials that he uses and the approach he takes to his subject matter. A defining moment of Carrigy's career has been meeting with the Japanese Living National Treasure Ono Showasai, a cabinetmaker and carver, who presented him with a calligraphy card 'One Enjoyment.' As Carrigy says, Ono's philosophy symbolizes "...the connection between an idea and the creative techniques used to give it form. When you achieve that oneness, there is a natural flow to your work. Time becomes unimportant. I go with the flow, allowing elements... to filter through...I do not impose my will on the wood."

Explicating further on his artistic values and praxis, Peter Carrigy writes, "I utilize wood felled by fire, wind, rain, and old age. I am inspired by random shapes and am prepared to sacrifice preconceived concepts and let forms evolve. My actions are often molded by what the wood itself dictates—meaning that the point of arrival can be quite different from my initial concept."

The prize for the Best Outdoor Sculpture was awarded to Michele Nootboom for her *Brighton Babes*, an installation of five rotund middle-aged-women sculptures that draw their inspiration from the Russian Babushka dolls, but which are more accurately designated as 'Matryoshka' dolls. In Russian 'babushka' means

'grandmother' or 'old lady.' Japanese souvenir dolls are thought to have provided the original inspiration for these. Typically, 'Babushka dolls' are produced in thematic series of five or more of successively

decreasing size, so that they are able to nest inside one another. They usually conform to various conventions, including the wearing of headscarves on their rounded heads, and they have cylindrical bodies. For the most part, they do not have arms or hands except those that are painted on by the artist.

While Michele Nootboom's *Brighton Babes* are by and large modeled on this general template, she brings a decidedly irreverent Australian flair to her chubby 'beach babushkas' by depicting them in colorful swimming costumes and in successive stages of *déshabillé*. Nootboom's ironic, entertaining installation was a popular exhibit, offering a humorously lighthearted but rather incisive commentary on resilient Antipodean myths about the universally slim, perfect, sporting human bodies that supposedly inhabit our beaches. Australians are on the verge of trouncing even super-sized Americans for the unwanted world record of having the highest percentage of obese people. Nowhere, of course, is the prevalence of this phenomenon more visible than on the beach. The *Brighton Babes* are a lot of fun but at the same time they gently nudge us towards acceptance of this unpalatable home truth.

The winner of the Junior Sculpture award was local lad and keen water sportsman Michael Domarecki, with his clay sculpture *Lifesaver*. Domarecki's work depicts an ultra-white, brawny, slim-hipped Aussie male wearing a skimpy pair of 'budgie smugglers' (Australian slang for tight-fitting men's Speedo swimming costumes) and a surf lifesaving



Michael Domarecki, Lifesaver, 2008, clay and mosaic tiles, variable dimensions. Image: Courtesy of the Artist. Winner of the Junior Category (open to 15-19 year olds) Prize.

cap, both fashioned from small rectangles of colored glass. Australians grow up with opportunities to participate in an array of surf lifesaving activities and carnivals. There is a structure through which young Australians can pass, from 'Nippers' to 'Juniors' to contesting 'Ironmen' and 'Ironwomen' competitions. Domarecki's muscular Australian bloke, in the prime of life, epitomizes masculine valor and the heroic elements of such endeavors, thereby providing a counterpoint to Nootboom's deliciously plump, chronologically challenged, out-of-form Babushka 'Babes.'

Roger Hjorleifson won the People's Choice Award for his fetching, life-size ceramic and fiberglass sculpture of a Galapagos Tortoise, entitled *Weight of the World*. Hjorleifson's observational skills, the technical accuracy with which he has represented the large amphibian's searching eyes, and the close attention to detail he has brought to its high-domed carapace and radiating 'growth rings,' drew children and adults alike to this appealing work.

A number of other artists made works meriting critical attention. Among these is respected Adelaide artist and sculptor Margaret Worth, whose stainless-steel and aluminum installation *Rain Chasers* was another exhibition highlight. A beautifully realized



Chris Herrmann, *Climate Change*, 2009, steel mesh, PVC pipe, solar panels, and electrics, height 2.2 m; diameter 1.2 m. Photograph: Courtesy of the Artist.

conceptual work, *Rain Chasers* comprises, as Margaret Worth writes: "...two instruments that respond to the wind. They

have moving 'arms' that turn and dip, as though conducting a performance. The flute and organ pipe 'speak' and the anemometers spin in response to variations in the wind's velocity. The movement at the top is played out in shadow on the ground and the sound fluctuates and radiates breathily in the immediate environment, creating echoes of the sea."

These two tall, non-human, orchestral 'conductors' work to create an eerie, strangely seductive soundscape that is a perfect accompaniment to their android upper bodies and twirling, baton-clutching, metallic 'arms.' *Rain Chasers* is both integrated with and responsive to the Australian environment. "In my three-dimensional works," says Margaret Worth, "I am exploring the aesthetics of energies in wind and sunlight through the designing and making of artworks that interact with them in the environment. The works reveal through movement, sounds, light, and shadow the properties of wind and sunlight and their constantly changing states. Invisible energies are made visible and audible as the works 'sing and dance' a story of the physical environment." In *Rain Chasers* Margaret Worth's individuality as a sculptor emerges beyond dispute.

Similar comments can be made about Chris Herrmann's *Climate Change*, an elaborate outdoor contraption comprising solar panels, steel mesh, PVC piping, and a copper kettle. This intriguing work, cobbled



Above left: Gerry McMahon, *Water Dwellers*, 2009, steel and corten steel, variable dimensions. Image: Courtesy of the Artist. **Above right: Cristina Metelli, *Leafy Seadragon 2*, 2009**, aluminum mesh wire. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.



together from everyday bric-a-brac, was immensely popular.

“Shaped like a traditional rain water tank,” says Herrmann, “the outer construction is the opposite of our expectations, being made from mesh. The Climate Change Tank...hates clouds and responds with water flowing out of the tap only on bright clear sunny days...The objective of The Climate Change Tank is to challenge expectations, to create curiosity and intrigue. On bright sunny days on-lookers were continuously intrigued by water mysteriously flowing from the tap. Was it all just an illusion, or was it really drawing water from thin air via what the web site theclimatechangetank.com ‘technically’ describes as the heart of The Climate Change Tank, its Solar H2O Transducer unit?”

Although Herrmann has a serious environmental agenda, his intention in this work is to provoke viewers into thinking about issues relating to global warming and solar power. What better place to do this than at an Australian beach in the height of summer?

Will Kuiper’s expertly and intricately fabricated cast-bronze *Spider*, suspended near the front entrance of the Brighton Surf Lifesaving Club for the duration of the exhibition, induced shivers of delight, pleasure, and fear in equal measure. Kuiper and his wife, Meliesa Judge, a fellow sculptor, run Adelaide’s Liquid Metal Studios, casting their work in their own foundry using traditional lost-wax, bronze-casting techniques. Both specialize in

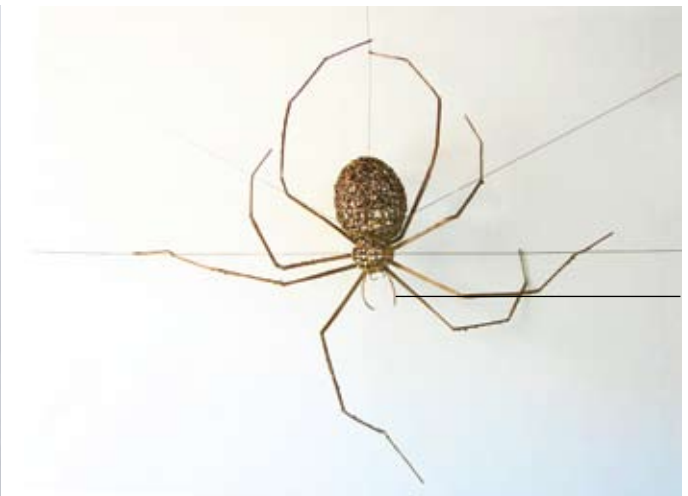


Roger Hjørleifson, *Weight of the World*, 2008, fired clay and fibreglass, 78 x 127 x 73 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist. Winner of the People’s Choice Award.

figurative sculpture. Judge also made a noteworthy contribution to Brighton’s *Sculptures by the Sea* with her evocative bronze, *Glossy Ibis*. Wings outstretched, poised for full flight, its long, sleek neck in characteristically hunched posture, Judge’s *Ibis* is a beautiful winged being.

Jane Smeets’s ceramic sea sponges flawlessly encapsulate the squishy, springy, malleable quality of these aquatic animals as they rise up out of their watery habitat. Smeets has animated her calcareous sponges with the qualities of human hands, thus making it clear that these are living creatures about which we are obliged to care.

Cristina Metelli’s diaphanous *Leafy Seadragon*, fashioned from aluminum mesh wire, is another pleasing work. And her *Big Fish Little Fish* shows us an artist who has instinctive empathy with sea creatures, marine environments, and the natural world. Gerry McMahon’s installation, entitled *Water Dwellers*, of three fish, mouths agape was also admired by many visitors to the exhibition.



Above left: Meliesa Judge, *Glossy Ibis*, 2008, bronze. Above right: Will Kuiper, *Spider*, 2008, cast bronze, variable dimensions. Photograph by Will Kuiper. Images: Courtesy of Meliesa Judge and Will Kuiper.

There is a demonstrable need for the *Adelaide Airport Brighton Jetty Classic Sculptures by the Sea* to be secured as an annual event and to expand in ambition and focus. Currently opportunities for South Australian sculptors are limited. This event provides these local artists with a venue to exhibit their work on a regular basis. Thus the 2007 and 2008 *Brighton Sculptures by the Sea* competitions fulfilled an important social function.

Furthermore, the 2008 event, much to the credit of its organizers, reached many people—beachgoers and other

passersby—who would otherwise encounter very little visual art of any kind. There is no doubt that, as this event grows in the years ahead, it will command ever more favorable critical attention. One hopes that *Adelaide Airport Brighton Jetty Classic Sculptures by the Sea* will establish itself as one of the most important elements in the South Australia’s visual arts calendar. Δ

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