

Down By The Sea

The Adelaide Airport Brighton Jetty Classic Sculptures is at heart a grassroots event, grounded in a local, tight-knit seaside community. Its runaway success raises the question of how far it should develop beyond its community base—a question that is difficult to answer. While the artworks that are on show span a wide range of technical standards, their diverse themes and visions bring delight and great visual pleasure to viewers.

By Christine Nicholls

Adelaide's *Brighton Jetty Classic Sculptures* is an annual event, which to a considerable extent draws its inspiration from other successful Australian 'Sculptures by the Sea' competitions, particularly the one held annually at Cottesloe Beach in Western Australia, which was modeled in turn on the previously established, celebrated Sydney 'Sculptures by the Sea'. Held in late spring each year, the Sydney event now runs for more than a fortnight, with exhibits staged along the eastern suburbs coastal walk from Bondi Beach to Tamarama Beach, a distance of several kilometers.

Like its interstate counterparts, the Brighton Beach Sculptures exhibition is free of charge and accessible to the public. In 2010, it attracted a record 70 entries, with an increasing number of interstate entrants. *Sculptures* as it has become known, is held in conjunction with other annual events in the Brighton Beach precinct, including a mass swim event that has become South Australia's leading ocean swimming event, in terms of participant numbers.

The beach occupies a special place in the collective Australian psyche and in defining who we are, as Australians. Historically Australians have been preoccupied by questions of who we are, and while, as Donald Horne has written, "Seeking (our) national identity is as much a waste of time as seeking the typical Australian—because Australia is a diverse and changing society" (1994:15), recent research



Gerry McMahon, *The Great Water Explorer (Snorkel Boy)*, 2009, corten steel and steel, 100 x 40 x 40 cm.

indicates that the majority of Australians worship the outdoors, sporting life, but also love cultural and artistic events and competitions. Whether we engage as participants or spectators is, of course, another question, but no longer does there exist, as once may have been the case, a perceived incompatibility or unbridgeable gulf between these activities. While Australians may not bring the same level of religiosity to their pursuit of the arts as they do to sport—for example, some years ago, Australian surfing legend Nat Young tried, unsuccessfully, to register surfing as a religion—sport and art now cohabit relatively easily in the Australian national psyche.

This passion for the sporting life and for the arts is evident in local identity and sculptor Gerry McMahon's charming, quirky, steel-fashioned *The Great Water Explorer (Snorkel Boy)*. McMahon's sculptural practice has evolved from skills he acquired earlier as a sheet metal worker. McMahon demonstrates this ability in his popular, cheeky work depicting a homunculus wearing flippers, board shorts, and decked out with snorkeling gear. As McMahon has written, this work is playful, engaging, and uplifting. *The Great Water Explorer (Snorkel Boy)* exudes whimsical, joyful sentiment. There is no doubt that McMahon's cheerfully confident and optimistic work would hold special appeal for children.

Greg Johns's *Horizon Figure*, deservedly the prizewinning work in the major Outdoor category of the 2010 *Sculptures*,

stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming majority of sculptural works in this competition. *Horizon Figure* appears to be premised on a very different conception of what sculpture can do, or does, or can actually 'be'.

In 1970, in a short essay on stones, the French critic and Surrealist Roger Caillois speculated on whether or not there might exist, inherently in the universe, a language of forms. If such a language does exist, then Greg Johns works with and through that language: his sculptures are underpinned by an apparently universal syntax founded upon an integrated artistic philosophy. At the same time, there is something distinctively Australian about Johns's works, including this one, notwithstanding that what constitutes this 'distinctiveness' is difficult to pinpoint. Nonetheless, Johns's sculptural work seems to encapsulate the unique qualities of the Australian landscape. In this country seemingly inanimate landforms or other natural phenomena can appear to assume an animate, quasi-figurative dimension, and Greg Johns's *Horizon Figure* makes indirect reference to this chameleon quality. According to this vision, Australia is conceptualized as a kind of primordial gateway.

Greg Johns offers insight into his unique vision in the following exegetical statement: "The *Horizon Figure* series arose from a number of sources. I was a passenger in a car approaching Port Augusta in the north of South Australia when I remarked to the driver that it felt as if we were driving into the large horizon line ahead of us. When we reached the Motel that we were staying in that night, I did a series of drawings that brought together this large horizon swoop as a head-like element with a body form—that came from the many ovoid rock forms that I had observed in various parts of the Australian landscape..."

"I'm interested in producing sculpture that comes out of this place (Australia) rather than arising from the unidentifiable international style that dominates so much contemporary art production. The *Horizon Figure*



Greg Johns, *Horizon Figure*, 2002, corten steel, 240 x 464 x 100 cm.



Greg Johns, *Run Aground*, 2001, mild steel, ironstone, 270 x 82 x 46 cm. Photograph: Ashley Starkey.

at Brighton has been set up on a visual level to reflect and engage with the distant horizon line. The work also suggests—at a conceptual level—that this horizon line is the place from which the incoming (migrant) culture has come. I remain very interested in notions of hybridity in the sculpture that I make; the forms that I construct are influenced by the culture and landforms that were here in this country before European arrival, and by the incoming influences too. I feel that this approach reflects contemporary Australia."

Greg Johns's marvelous *Run Aground*, also on display in the 2010 *Brighton Jetty Classic Sculptures*, has a shape that could be described in different ways: boat-like; somewhat pod-like; possibly a form that is undergoing metamorphosis before our eyes. This upright structure inclines to one side, lending it a 'primitive', totemic quality. At the same time, its visual combinations and hybrid components (mild steel, ironstone, and a spindly piece of wood akin to a masthead) speak of evolution and of change, of passage, and of incident. Essentially, the work, as is

the case with all of Johns's works, is about relationship to place—this place, Australia. Except that Johns examines his overarching question, about the possible range of meanings of *place*, from multiple perspectives. In *Run Aground* it is as if the sculptor has distilled the notion of 'Australia' into an essence. The very materials that Johns uses to create his sculptures, especially his use of steel, are evocative of rural Australia where old machinery is routinely left to rust outdoors in the extreme weather conditions.

"My *Run Aground* series began in 1998," writes Johns, "and it is a series that has gradually evolved. The series has changed over the last 12 years, with the boat forms increasingly and deliberately referencing the Australian landscape. In a late version the bottom of the boat is sucked back inside the hull of the boat revealing itself as a hill-like, concave form coming up from the inside bottom of the boat."

While there are numerous references in *Run Aground*, for example, to the migrants who have come to



Stephen Skillitizi, *Organic Growth 2*, glass on plastic tube with rusted steel, 163 x 85 x 30 cm.

Australia by boat and who continue to arrive on these shores in the hope of building new lives, to the seedpods that are vital for the regeneration of our native flora, to the rusted, patinated steel that Australians find so curiously evocative, ultimately *Run Aground* defies precise analysis or description. It is a mysterious and captivating work.

There are strong resonances between the philosophy that underlies Johns's sculptures and that of Japanese woodcut printmaker Shiko Munakata who has been quoted as saying, "I want to strip my work of 'effects' until it stands monolithic, based on reality and yet transcending it. It must flow naturally from my materials It is the ultimate ideal."

The German-born Australian sculptor Kon Heyer's *Radial*, comprising jarrah (a rich reddish-brown Australian hardwood) and metal is another powerful work that also speaks to 'this place', Australia, especially in terms of the materials used, while reflecting

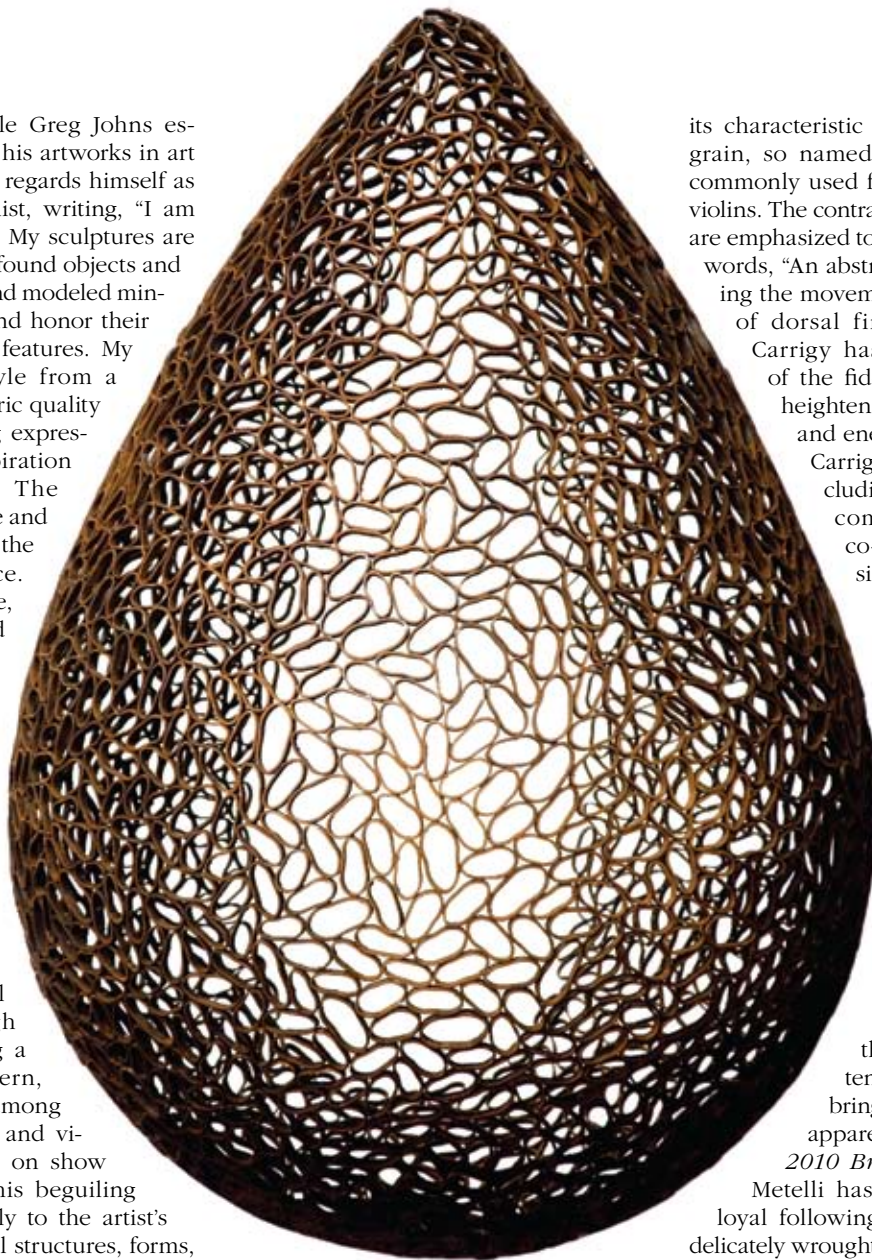


Kon Heyer with Barry Featherston (right), chief executive of the Hills, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island Regional Development, South Australia, in front of Heyer's *Radial*, 2009, jarrah and metal, H: 52 x D: 250 cm. Photograph by Joan Clayton.

universal values. While Greg Johns eschews classification of his artworks in art historical terms, Heyer regards himself as an abstract expressionist, writing, "I am a totally abstract artist. My sculptures are most often made from found objects and materials, positioned and modeled minimally to emphasize and honor their existing qualities and features. My paintings vary in style from a structured and geometric quality to a more free-flowing expressionist kind. My inspiration comes from within. The process is both intuitive and rational. I do not know the end result in advance. The elements of chance, accident, incident, and surprise all play integral roles in my work. For me, it's like taking a dive into the unknown, to see what you come up with."

Another accomplished sculpture in this exhibition was Astra Parker's *Cell Formation*. Suspended from the ceiling, which allowed the natural light to flow through its interstices, creating a beautiful lattice pattern, *Cell Formation* was among the most aesthetically and visually pleasing works on show at *Sculptures 2010*. This beguiling work speaks eloquently to the artist's fascination with natural structures, forms, and processes and the interplay and points of interconnection, at a structural level, of visual art, science, and human social systems. *Cell Formation* evinces Parker's reflective method of working. This sculptor's sheer technical ability augurs well for her future.

"Working predominantly in steel", says Parker, "I start with a whole form and take it through a process of separation into many parts, reshaping and reconfiguring those parts before joining them again to create a new whole. My current work focuses on the structure of cell formations. I am interested in how cells form groups according to a natural order and how this order changes according to processes that seem separate, but are in fact connected. Cells interest me because not only are they what we have in common with all other living things, but the same movement that we see in cell formation also exists on a larger scale in



Astra Parker, *Cell Formation*, 2009, mild steel, 140 x 100 x 100 cm, 60 kg.

the societies in which we live. In this way my work relates to social structures as well as to the microcosm of cell biology."

Another standout work in the 2010 *Brighton Sculptures* was Peter Carrigy's lovingly carved *Coastal Rhythm*, fashioned from the Adelaide Hills red gum, with



Peter Carrigy, *Coastal Rhythm*, 2009, red gum 37 x 89 x 35 cm.

its characteristic wavy fiddleback wood grain, so named because it is a wood commonly used for making the backs of violins. The contrasts in the wood's texture are emphasized to create, in Carrigy's own words, "An abstract flowing form implying the movement of wind and waves, of dorsal fins and vessel forms."

Carrigy has made deliberate use of the fiddleback wood grain to heighten the sense of movement and energy in his fine work. In Carrigy's wood sculptures, including *Coastal Rhythm*, rich complexes of movement co-exist with refreshingly simple motives.

Cristina Metelli's diaphanous aluminum-and-bronze wire mesh, pastel-colored *Leafy Sea Dragon* and *Male and Female Cowfish* were real crowd pleasers. The accuracy of representation of the cowfish in terms of their coloration, and their little horns atop their eyes, rounded bellies, dorsal spines, and oddly pouting little mouths indicate the high skill level and attention to detail that Metelli brings to her work. It became apparent at the opening of the 2010 *Brighton Sculptures* that Metelli has garnered a huge and loyal following among locals for her delicately wrought sea creatures. Likewise, Glen Shuttleworth brought a high level of accuracy and skill to his rendition of the leafy sea dragon (also titled *Leafy Sea Dragon*). The seahorse is a member of the sea dragon family, and Shuttleworth's exquisite depiction of the sea dragon's seaweed-like floating tendrils, which no doubt act as a form of underwater camouflage, was particularly striking.

Quite clearly both Metelli and Shuttleworth like their work to be accessible. This is also so with Ty Manning, whose *Horse* (an outdoor installation actually comprising two wire-fashioned horses, one large and one small, presumably a mare with her foal) was judged to be the winner of the 2010 *Brighton Sculptures People's Choice Award*. Jojo Spook's *Nurture*, a large-scale sculpture of a female dog suckling her young, comprising a hand-formed welded frame, layered with 40 metres of sewn, overlapping chicken wire to

give the creature a 'woolly look', a fine and relatively subtle piece of work, would have been an equally worthy winner of the *People's Choice Award*. Roger Horleifson, last year's winner of the *People's Choice Award*, also entered an engaging work this year, *Giganteus*.

Nadja Gustafson won the 2010 *Indoors Sculpture Prize* for her triptych *What's with all this Water?*, a highly skilled work fabricated from hammered copper. The central element of the triptych, *Octopus*, in which Gustafson represented an elaborately coiled, evil-eyed octopus, was key to the success of this work.

Dominique Keeley's *Gomez*, the winner of the *Youth or Junior Prize* for sculptors 20 years or younger, was, sadly, an mediocre work, little more than an unimaginative, popular culture-inspired fairground bauble with little or no artistic, conceptual, or aesthetic value. This is unfortunate because Keeley clearly has technical skills that can be built upon. This young artist needs to expand her knowledge about visual art via greater exposure to contemporary art. Through such a process I feel that she will eventually be able to find her own unique 'voice' as an artist. The 2008 winner of the Junior Section, Michael Domarecki also submitted engaging, though unsophisticated, work to this section.

Chris Herrmann's witty and provocative offering to this year's *Sculptures* was his outdoor sculpture *Climate Change Fan Farm*, comprising various found objects and a purposely ill-matching assemblage of fans that were plugged into an electrical source. All of the fans whirred around in futile fashion outside as the merciless Australian summer sun (40 degrees centigrade plus, in the shade) beat down upon Herrmann's installation.

Herrmann has a serious environmental agenda, coupled with the strong desire to jolt viewers out of their apathy or complacency and into thinking about issues relating to global warming and solar power. Through the weapon of his wicked sense of humor, rather than proselytizing,



Nadja S. Gustafson, *Octopus*, 2008, hand-hammered copper, 48 x 35.5 x 10 cm. Photograph by Grant Hancock. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.



Cristina Metelli, *Leafy Seadragon*, 2010, aluminum, bronze wire mesh, and gold leaf, 65 x 80 x 30 cm (incl. base).



Cristina Metelli, *Male and Female Cowfish*, 2010, aluminum and bronze wire mesh, variable dimensions, each fish approx. 50 x 45 x 20 cm (incl. base).

Herrmann demonstrates just how ridiculously ineffectual many of our current approaches to combatting climate change are. Most Australians genuinely want strong action on climate change, but individuals and successive governments have fallen short when it comes to implementing effective measures: we are not prepared to give up any of our present comforts. Chris Herrmann is like the little boy in the Hans Christian Anderson story about the Emperor's new clothes: a truth teller in a society governed by half-truths and self-deception. While it was a child who unequivocally pointed out what no adult would accept, that the Emperor was in fact stark naked and that there were no new clothes, with his *The Climate Change Fan Farm* Chris Herrmann assumes the age-old role of artist-as-jester in order to call attention to an unpalatable truth, a truth that we do not wish to see.

Andrew Parish's three outdoor, abstract, heavy metal sculptures, *Spartacus*, *Integrity*, and *Fibonacci*, created from a fusion of recycled steel, were also memorable works, as was Stephen Skillitzi's *Organic Growth 2 (Unknown Species)*, a strange, brightly hued flower-like ex-crescence created from glass



Chris Herrmann, *The Climate Change Fan Farm*, 2010, installation comprising painted PVC plastics stormwater pipes, plastic flower pot bases, wood, metal, second hand electric fans, electrical wiring, timber, metal star droppers, electrical cabling, 1.5 m height x 3 m diameter, variable dimensions.

on plastic tube, together with rusted steel.

Other works in the 2010 meriting recognition include Matt Goodluck's *Head over Heels*, Stephen Johnson's *Welcome to Point Lowly*, a life-size glass mosaic wall-hanging of two giant cuttlefish, and Rod Manning's *Armillary Sphere* and *Fiddle Stix Sphere*, spherical astrolabe-like metal objects constructed from interlocking rings. Appropriately for this beachside setting, both of Manning's works have the additional capacity to function as sundials. Equally well received were works by Makram Iskander and Dorothy Vertue. Alex Swanson's *Unification* and Evelyn Wallace-Carter's cast-metal *Swan of Tyre* and *Cone-Shell Dancer* also drew admiration.

The *Adelaide Airport Brighton Jetty Classic Sculptures* exhibition and competition has come to something of a crossroads. How the small but dedicated committee who work year-round on this event handles this will undoubtedly determine the event's future. The questions that need to be asked are: to what extent should this

remain (mostly) a grass-roots, community-based event, strongly embedded in the closely-knit Brighton Beach community, and largely but not exclusively focused on amateur sculptors exhibiting their work? Alternatively, should *Sculptures* continue to professionalize and develop into an A-list sculpture competition, with a view to attracting increasing numbers of Australian and international high-fliers? If the latter course of action is taken—and a process has already partially been put in place for this to happen—it may well have the unfortunate side-effect of excluding many of the *Brighton Sculptures'* most loyal, community-based supporters, who are closely connected with the local Surf Life Saving Club. Are these two goals—of retaining *Sculptures* unique, Brighton Beach community-based focus and further professionalizing this expanding event—mutually compatible? The committee faces an unenviable dilemma to which there can be no easy answer. Δ

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