

4 arts

That brightly
painted
water fountain

is actually an
art installation.

With millions of
dollars of public
money invested,
our streets are
crowded with
culture



Words Don Petersen

STREETS AHEAD

IN SYDNEY, \$3 million has been spent on 20 contemporary artworks for sites around the city. Melbourne's so awash with public art that they recently gave some the flick.

Adelaide, with a rich collection of time-frozen foreign memorabilia, forgotten city fathers and mud-footed heroes, has spent \$750,000 on a plinth on which four life-size bronze pigs stand.

For fun value, they'll have to compete with Brisbane's legging family of scrap metal kangaroos in George Street. Reclaiming their ancient habitat, the roos are far from courtesy populist. They might even be introducing young people to the role of art in society — and to the traditions. Christopher Trotter, their talented creator, works in the tradition of welded art forms pioneered by Spain's Pablo Ocarillo and Julio Gonzalez, and their famous pupil, Pablo Picasso.

If you were cynical, you'd say the rush to art is the result of politicians discovering there are votes in it. There are certainly lashings of money behind the current surge in public art.

The Basile Government is honouring an election promise to earmark 2 percent of the outlay on capital works projects — from busways to buildings — for integrated art and design. Already that amounts to about \$10 million, only a fraction of it so far committed.

Not to be outdone, Brisbane City Council is allocating \$5 million a year to its Suburban Centre Improvement Projects programme, to date about 130 individual artworks, from park benches to bike racks and scrap-metal ducks in a line, in 20 suburbs, most are by local artists.

The decisions to put their weight behind public art shows considerable

courtesy for both the Government and the Council. They have to contend with the fact that no two opinions are the same when it comes to what's a good artwork.

John Stafford is the head of the Public Art Agency, which has been running for just a year. With a budget of \$500,000 a year, he coordinates the State Government's commissioning and procurement programme, which he sees as "the most accountable form of arts practice" because of its accessibility.

What public art isn't about, according to Lindsay Johnson, who is now senior adviser to Arts Minister Matt Foley, is "many metal sculptures in forecourts". That, she says, is "a really outdated notion, very intimidating".

Or David Hinchcliffe, head of the City Hall's Community Policy Committee, says: "Public art is meant to stimulate." But it's a nice euphemism which doesn't stop him arguing when a New Farm bus shelter that features a frieze of immigrants in a boat is mentioned. Large numbers of the community demand that it be relocated.

A good example of how artworks can add aesthetic value to a cityspace is Barbara Heath's *Net* on the Myddle Benner Building in Brisbane's

William Street. A series of interlocking metal hoops, *Net* suggests the fishing nets used by indigenous Australians. Heath describes it as "jewellery for the building".

Some of the newer additions, however, could do with a sign attached, saying "This is art". You could walk along the riverside terrace outside the Powerhouse art centre in New Farm, for instance, without realising that what appears to be some leftover steel ducting is actually an artwork by "senior interventionist" sculptor and poet, Richard Tipping.

Stafford and Hinchcliffe emphasise their role is not to commission or suggest. They wouldn't dare be the arbiters of taste in a field that is mainly like in its jealously and tribal hatred.

Hinchcliffe says that each work funded by the Council must be "informed by a concept plan drawn up by a committee of local traders and citizens".

The Public Art Agency, says Stafford, similarly advises govern-

ment department heads on potential artists. It also calls in project managers and design professionals to "bore with all parties as the works are completed on time and within budget."

Hinchcliffe says the key to the council's guidelines is the involvement into which the art will be placed.

"You just can't order up lions," he says. This might come as a surprise to Premier Peter Beattie.

"True art involves keeping the connection between people," Hinchcliffe says.

Great. There's the 2400-year-old Temple of Athena in Athens. Rome flaunts its Trevi fountain. Copenhagen's darling is the Little Mermaid and the Mammouth Pie enchants tourists.

Now, if someone can come up with the kind of conciseness that has 300 years it might be recorded that in Brisbane, in 2000, we were on the right track.



Courier Mail: Arts Section 19-8-2000

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