

# CANBERRA'S PUBLIC ART ENRICHING LOCAL IDENTITY AND THE ART OF ROADSIDE (DIS)ATTRACTIONS

Through government schemes and programs, public art in Canberra has in the last decade provided a “backdrop to the everyday.” But how have these artworks added value to the landscape, and how has the community responded?

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY AMANDA EVANS



01

*ONE OF OUR DEEPEST NEEDS IS FOR A sense of identity and belonging and a common denominator in this is human attachment to landscape and how we find identity in landscape and place.* – Ken Taylor<sup>1</sup>

In 2006, in an effort to enrich Canberra's sense of its local identity, encourage and foster awareness in the arts and cultural diversity and provide “a means of remembering and celebrating who we are as a community”<sup>2</sup> the ACT Government embarked on the ambitious and unsurprisingly (for Canberra) contentious Percent for Art scheme, the intention of which was to engage local and interstate artists to create artworks of a distinctive nature that spoke about Canberra as a place for people and to enliven spaces and provide access to art for all Canberrans. In addition to this, Roads ACT commissioned several “colourful” and “site-responsive” pedestrian overpasses, and placed them at key locations along some of Canberra's visually iconic arterial roads.

The scheme, which is now defunct, largely as a result of community concern over cost, has run through into the centenary year. Understandably, most of the artworks have been placed in and around the central business district, with some in parks and in major town centres. But, in keeping with

the scheme's promise to deliver access to art for all Canberrans, other pieces have popped up in suburban shopping centres, while several larger and more contentious pieces have been installed at major arterial and freeway intersections around the city.

Canberra – “the city in the landscape”<sup>3</sup> – is celebrating its one hundredth birthday and so it seems a fitting time to consider how this landscape, which is the city's form-giving element, is enriched (or not) by these latest additions to its urban, suburban and peri-urban spaces and places. The national capital landscape is an enduring and constant place of contemplation and reflection; a place that provides the setting for both the local and national communities' collective memory and a backdrop to the everyday. So, who could argue that the city in the landscape, a city often described as an oversized garden, is not the ideal place for a collection of public artworks that would resonate with this vernacular?

Yet many of these installations have not been embraced by the very community for which they are intended to speak. So, what is it about them that sits so uncomfortably? Of course, there are the obvious criticisms such as cost and the more subjective arguments about aesthetics, but there is more to this than

these predictable cries. Could it be that when the artworks suddenly appeared in places with which the community already connects significant experiences and memories, the community perceived these safe and secure places of contemplation and acceptance to be under threat, and potentially lost forever?

Canberra is defined by its landscape; it is “a city like no other,”<sup>4</sup> as Walter Burley Griffin said of his and Marion Mahoney Griffin's plan. This plan was determined by the catchment and based on a vision that was an expression of refined geometry aligned with immediate and distant mountains – elements which are its natural focal points, and which are viewed along and reinforced by the wide tree-lined avenues. This is a landscape that provides the backdrop for dramatic perspectives; a landscape of unfolding blue and purple hills and the natural drama of the diverse range of vegetation and wildlife that inhabit them. All of this happens as day turns to night and the seasons tick over.

In considering the effects of adding sculptural artworks to some of Canberra's iconic landscapes and vistas, some questions come to mind, such as: Do they reinforce the value of the landscape? Do they provide visual



02

01 CREATED BY MARCUS TATTON, FUTAGO AND CHRIS VINEY, *WIDE BROWN LAND* IS LOCATED AT THE NATIONAL ARBORETUM CANBERRA. IT IS THREE METRES HIGH AND THIRTY-FIVE METRES LONG.

02 *DANCERS ON THE LAKEFRONT* BY KONSTANTIN DIMOPOULOS IS AN ABSTRACT REPRESENTATION OF THE REEDS THAT LINE THE SHORE OF LAKE GINNINDERRA. THE SCULPTURE IS LOCATED AT THE BELCONNEN ARTS CENTRE.

and or physical connections to other natural or man-made elements? Do they draw the landscape and the people together in a sort of moving spatial harmony? Do they reflect the community in some way? Have these objects enriched the landscape experience of the city or have they simply created more visual clutter, and in the case of the arterial art, merely created a series of roadside distractions? Of course, seeking to ask these questions may seem idealistic to anyone who lives in any other major city, but they are nonetheless important in the overall understanding of the way the landscape is considered and valued, especially by Canberrans.

It could also be argued that the push to provide “art for all” does not acknowledge the value of the existing landscape setting, where the colour and movement of nature, the textures, the changing light, the seasonal and ephemeral qualities of the vast expanses of diverse vegetation, and the varying landforms are considered as lacking meaning, and where spaces that allow for a fuller understanding of the urban form and the landscape setting are considered as no more than empty spaces with no identity waiting to be activated by objects. Has the unique drama of nature playing out on this national stage been somewhat lost in an attempt to make Canberra a city like every other?

But Canberrans accept living in a city that, as the national capital, provides the setting for the memories of past events and noble acts, and of course the tangible memorials of war and monuments of government and democracy. In the former case, Kings Park behind the National Carillon comes to mind; in the latter, Anzac Parade and the parliamentary zone. These national places are generous in their provision of dedicated space for each sculpture or memorial that adds value and context and which gives meaning to their social, cultural and physical characteristics and intent. These works can be both understood from afar and engaged with in a very intimate way. Their siting is considered and valued as part of the experience of them.

Perhaps this is what irks most critics of the local scheme, where the emphasis seems to be more on the object and less on its context, certainly in terms of its place in the broader landscape and the meaning and values placed on it. It could also be a discomfort with objects apparently intended to create a sense of place but ignoring that one already exists.

#### **Art in the city**

Within the city there is a multitude of sculptures and sculptural styles, with many exhibiting materiality and scale that resonate with the

idea of a contemporary city. However, they are often situated uncomfortably close to either each other or urban infrastructure, which does not allow for a full reading of them. The sculptures are seemingly at odds with each other and their setting. This criticism is not intended to denigrate the art in any way, but to highlight the overall effect on amenity within the spaces. The visual clutter belies the simplicity of the original design layout for the city.

Placing artworks within pedestrian plazas as foci or to mark entries to precincts and places is a standard tool in the urban designer’s kit, but in Canberra, where the city’s active edge has been compromised through the closing of the main through streets, the building of indoor malls, and the abundance of streetscapes dominated by loading docks and carpark entries, thus leaving empty canyons of pedestrian open space where the rules of engagement are more like the wild frontier than those of a designed and community-focused urban environment, filling these spaces with objects alone is not enough to create a thriving atmosphere.

By contrast, in the past, the placement of some of the older works was imbued with symbolism and meaning; each was carefully chosen and sited as a reflection of the values and characteristics of the young city then >

03



and now. In Civic Square, *Ethos* (1961) by Tom Bass was, at the time, sited through a process that considered the spatial character of the area and the sculpture itself. This sculpture is a contemporary and symbolic piece depicting “The restless, virile, energetic movement of free enterprise” arising out of the planned city; “the two facets should become as one, striving forward progressively – the spirit of the city.”<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, the elegant simplicity of the site has been encroached upon with the installation of a large water feature which both dominates and confuses the purpose of the space.

#### **New town art**

In contrast to the city’s landscape, the recent and ongoing revitalization of the town centres is providing a clearer opportunity for site-responsive artworks to be installed that resonate with the past, present and future of the local community. Many of the works placed in town centres reflect an understanding of the power of well-placed art in the landscape. In Belconnen, two works express this well. The first, *Running Lights* by Thylacine Art Projects (2006), provides a visual and audio narrative. Five coloured beacons sit within Lake Ginninderra, creating a moving reflection and playing a sequence of notes as they gently sway in the wind. The reflective and colourful display mimics the ephemeral qualities of the water through the day and night. The second, *Dancers on the Lakefront*

by Konstantin Dimopoulos (2010), is an abstract representation of the reeds that line the shore of Lake Ginninderra. These bright yellow rods emerge out of the pavement in clusters and provide a definitive visual arrival cue to visitors to the Belconnen Arts Centre. They can be easily seen from the road for some distance and are tactile and engaging for pedestrians, who can walk through and around them on the promenade. Both works use illumination to engage the surrounding space and to reinforce the awareness of their presence. They are both site-responsive, yet they create a new design language within the precinct and acknowledge the very nature of the existing landscape setting.

#### **Park art**

Within the parks there are many installations that respond to and integrate well with their settings, and which provide an insight into nature or the natural systems around us. One that stands out is *Wide Brown Land*, by Marcus Tatton, Futago and Chris Viney (2011). This large piece has been carefully sited on the brow of a hill within the National Arboretum and is easily visible from the northbound lanes of the Tuggeranong Freeway. It not only speaks to the site, but delivers a familiar narrative of Australianness, with its burnt oxide colour reflecting the desert, and words drawn from the familiar Dorothea Mackellar poem “My Country.” Its “Coreten steel” form

wiggles its way across the grassy hilltop; it can be touched, sat on and climbed through; it acts as a place from which to view Canberra’s valleys, hills, lakes, rivers and mountains; and it is a place to be viewed from within the arboretum and from afar. It is a truly interactive experience. The colour, form and meaning all speak a known and familiar language.

#### **The art[erials]**

Movement around the nation’s capital is only achieved by car, bus or bike on its network of freeways and arterial roads. These roads are connected in the same way as in any other city with flyovers, intersections and roundabouts, so it is in these landscapes we find ourselves fleetingly considering “arterial art.” Here, the idea of using marker beacons has led to confused intent and bewildering outcomes, which neither engage the community in a positive manner nor fit the site appropriately. Canberra’s newest beacons sit in uncomfortable nowhere-ness.

Canberra’s major roads were designed to give motorists a range of visual experiences, which include, among other things, undulating landform, sweeping and wide verges, and immediate and distant views through trees, across grasslands and beyond. The exposure to seasonally diverse vegetation and the colours of sky and earth, both subtle and brilliant, is intended to build on the ephemeral nature of the experience. So it is bewildering that several



O4

O3 LOCATED IN BELCONNEN, *RUNNING LIGHTS* BY THYLACINE ART PROJECTS (2006) IS MADE UP OF FIVE COLOURED BEACONS SITTING IN LAKE GINNINDERRA. THE BEACONS PLAY A SEQUENCE OF NOTES AS THEY SWAY IN THE WIND.

O4 *DINORNIS MAXIMUS* BY PHIL PRICE IS AN ELEVEN-METRE-HIGH KINETIC SCULPTURE LOCATED NEAR THE ADELAIDE AVENUE ROUNDABOUT AT WODEN TOWN CENTRE.

installations have been placed in such sites and now compromise the views of those driving through. For example, the safety screens that form the *Kent Street Bridge Screen* (2011) in Deakin, by Thylacine Art Projects, interrupts the existing longitudinal vista to and from Parliament House and the Brindabella Ranges beyond. The turquoise screens are embossed with a plan view of the contours of the mountains that they block and represent a designed solution that misrepresents the colours, form and views of the landscape that already exist there.

Many of the arterial artworks are not of a sufficient scale to really own the spaces in which they sit. In many instances, the artworks are sited so uncomfortably within large settings that they are diminished in effect and devalued by their loss of presence. Take, for example, *Dinornis maximus* by Phil Price (2008), an eleven-metre-high kinetic sculpture that has been placed on a mound in the median of the arterial on the northern edge of the Adelaide Avenue roundabout at Woden Town Centre. This work is a dynamic and visually engaging piece; however, even at eleven metres, it is lost in the vast space it inhabits. The consequence of this, and the fact that it is viewed fleetingly while trying to navigate the roundabout entry, is that it renders the work artistically insignificant and functionally annoying and distracting.

Another issue that may be cause for some of the uneasiness with these works is their

inaccessibility. Experiencing the richness of art is difficult when you are trying to navigate intersections and merging lanes. Many of the more significant pieces are placed within the central medians of traffic lights or roundabouts where there is clearly no safe access.

One example, the controversial, horizontally formed *Land Art*, part of the work *Five Artworks* by Richard Goodwin (2007) on Gungahlin Drive, is situated on a rise adjacent to a merging ramp on a ninety-kilometre stretch of freeway. This work, which can really only be read from the air, is both physically and visually inaccessible and as a result provides no clues to the passer-by as to its contextual meaning.

The proliferation of public art over the last decade at the intersections of most of the major freeways around Canberra has been an interesting exercise in public distraction. While the intent of the scheme and the artworks are valid, the result has been the objects being misunderstood and neither reflecting the local community nor enhancing the places in which they sit.

Canberra is a young and contemporary city, where the opportunity to express the values of its legacy through contemporary art forms that speak of the city and its newness is ever-present. Canberra's search for meaning allows it to define itself over time and this assists the city to create designs that not only respond to the past and present, but which also seek to inform

and educate into the future. Our understanding of the meaning of place and placemaking in the context of the national capital's defining landscape is evolving with the hope that we will create designs into the future that reflect it.

The programs implemented in Canberra have generated the creation of many dynamic and engaging works in the city's everyday spaces, and have opened a dialogue about creativity, identity and the collective memory of the landscapes we value. As ArtsACT director David Whitney says: "there's a lot of public art in Canberra because it's a city of ideas and a city of creation and creativity."<sup>6</sup> However, programs such as these do require more of this profession's input to strengthen the landscape and experiential outcomes associated with it.

- 1 Ken Taylor, "Landscape and Memory: cultural landscapes, intangible values and some thoughts on Asia," *Finding the spirit of place – between the tangible and the intangible*, 16th ICOMOS General Assembly and International Symposium, 29 Sep – 4 Oct 2008, Quebec, Canada.
- 2 J. Stanhope, *Action Statement for Public Art* (Canberra: ArtsACT, 2006).
- 3 Ken Taylor, *Canberra: City in a Landscape* (Canberra: Halstead Press, 2008).
- 4 Where Griffin wrote in *The New York Times* in 1912 on being selected as the winning design for the federal capital: "I have planned a city not like any other in the world ... I have planned an ideal city – a city that meets the ideals of the city of the future."
- 5 ACT Heritage Council, Interim Heritage Objects Register, 10 April 1996. (NCDC meeting notes not dated, early 1960, NCDC file 66/1181)
- 6 David Whitney, "Weaving a Way into the Art of the City," *The Canberra Times*, 11 November 2011.