



On Being 'ARTea'

story **MARGRET MEAGHER**

A TRIP DOWN SYDNEY'S M4 MOTORWAY WILL bring you face to face with a series of designs adorning the concrete acoustic walls. The designs are by public artist Ruth Downes whose artworks include a water feature at the Bicentennial Park in Homebush Bay, a glass mosaic in Parramatta Mall and corporate logos for WorkCover NSW and South Sydney Council.

If you had ventured a little further to Canberra when the *National Sculpture Prize and Exhibition* was on show at the National Gallery of Australia over summer, you would have come face to face with 40 teacups - not just ordinary teacups, mind, but a series of witty, irreverent and highly creative tea cups in a sculpture called *Tea Party in the Mayoral Garden*.

Why teacups you might ask. *State of the Arts* caught up with Ruth Downes over a cuppa and an 'ARTea' chat.

"While developing my public artworks, I was exposed to people's desire to belong in their community and I wanted my sculptures to enliven people's lives. This sense of daily life led me to look at the rituals in our lives and domestic paraphernalia began to absorb and fascinate me. It soon became apparent that the rituals surrounding tea offered a vibrant and cohesive theme for a series of sculptures and the personal and intimate nature of the teacup was an ideal starting point.

From there, I explored the imagery of tea cups, the sayings and folklore associated with tea and began playing with the language as much as with materials. I have enjoyed generating a sense of fun and humour by amalgamating unexpected materials, techniques and words."

Each of the 40 works in the series has its own individual character yet when they come together, as they might at a mayoral tea party, they merge as a community, with the extroverts taking centre stage and the others siding with more compatible souls.

The result has been a carefully displayed series of teacups which each present a pun on the word 'tea'. *Mourning Tea* shows the versatility of a black veil, *Tea's Off* combines yellow golf tees sitting on Astroturf, *GSTea* is the full 10%; the *Mintea* cuppa is crafted from Minties wrappers, while *Tea Break* demonstrates a new use for cracked marble. A colourful assortment of cottons is your *Reel Tea*.

It is probably no surprise that Ruth Downes' *Tea Party* won the People's Choice, racing past the other 29 entries with 7,854 votes in her favour. As Gallery Director, Brian Kennedy commented: "It's

a marvelous engagement with something we use in daily life."

This successful engagement was also demonstrated by the large numbers of people who walked through the NGA doors to see the exhibition, achieving a core objective of the project which was to make sculpture more widely accessible. The inaugural \$50,000 *National Sculpture Prize and Exhibition*, developed in partnership with Macquarie Bank, attracted an estimated 90,000 visitors to the NGA between November 2001 and March 2002.

According to David Clarke, Executive Chairman of Macquarie Bank, "for too long sculpture in Australia has not received the recognition it deserves and Macquarie Bank is proud to be playing an important role in acknowledging and showcasing talent that exists within Australia today".

The depth of that talent was also a surprise when a total of 490 entries were submitted, far exceeding expectations. Judges included Julian Beaumont, Chairman of the Macquarie Bank Art Collection; New Zealand sculptor Neil Dawson; author and Senior Curator of Australian Painting and Sculpture at the NGA, Deborah Hart; artist and Dean of the College of Fine Arts at UNSW, Ian Howard and the NGA's Brian Kennedy. The 30 finalists included Peter Cole, Kevin Connor, Lionel Bawden, Sebastian di Mauro, Richard Goodwin, Gunther Kopietz, Liu Xiao Xian, Bronwyn Oliver, Roslynd Piggott, Ken Unsworth and Lena Yarinkura.

The winning entry *Human, Human - Lotus Cloisonne Figure 1*, by Sydney based artist Ah Xian goes on exhibition at Macquarie Bank's Sydney and Melbourne offices from May. The sculpture, 16 metres high, was fired in a pit kiln in the Chinese province of Hebei.

Also on the move, the *Tea Party* is packing its 40 bags and heading off to Washington where the sculptural series will go on exhibition in June/July at the Australian Embassy. This exhibition is being staged at the invitation of the Australian Ambassador who saw the work when visiting the gallery on a Christmas break, and has been facilitated by further support from Macquarie Bank.

Both the National Gallery of Australia and Macquarie Bank have been delighted with the response from both artists and gallery patrons to the *National Sculpture Prize* and are committed to their joint and ongoing support of sculpture nationally with plans now underway for the 2003 prize, with a third planned for 2005. Which is good news for sculptors in Australia and even better news for sculpture fans who will clearly travel far and wide to satisfy their interest in this diverse and compelling artform.