

# Stirring originaliTea just the cuppa for sculpture lovers

Lauren Martin

The room was charged with ElectriciTea yesterday when the people's choice award in the National Gallery of Australia's first sculpture prize went to a clear FrivoliTea, causing A Storm in a Teacup, with a 10 per cent GSTea kicker.

The Balmain artist Ruth Downes's collection of 40 sculptural puns on the word tea was tipped early on by the gallery's security guards, because it cleverly does something art rarely does: it makes people laugh.

Mourning Tea is a cup fashioned out of black veiling. AmnesTea makes a cup and saucer form from the iconic wire-wrapped candle of Amnesty International's logo.

Tea'd off is, of course, a cup of yellow golf tees on an Astroturf green saucer.

Downes even made a special 41st tea cup for the gallery director, Brian Kennedy, after he announced her win: a scorched tin cup in crepe flames.

The oft-embattled Irish expat director got his own authentically eccentric Australian Billy Tea - or, as Downes put it, a marker of his AbiliTea.

Downes's own ability to be playful again was sparked by the 18-month project.

She recalled being a sickly child who loved to play, but said that, like most adults, she had to a degree lost that capacity to play.

Until this work - which has so struck visitors to the exhibition



People's choice . . . Balmain's Ruth Downes with Tea Party - her winning collection of 40 sculptural puns on the word tea at the National Gallery in Canberra. Photo: Pat Scala

that they have offered Downes an "infinite" list of tea puns.

Even a five-year-old suggested the other day that she add a

GrotTea and a NaughTea. Perhaps she could use the \$2,000 prize money for that, but to make a living Downes will con-

tinue doing public art, exhibition and graphic design.

She has designed visuals to help relieve the stark concrete

acoustic walls along the M4 motorway, a water sculpture for Homebush Bay and a wrought steel sculpture and mosaic at the

Charles Street Wharf in Parramatta.

The exhibition continues until March 10.