

Sculptor takes out top prize for populari-tea



Benjamin Haslem

AMONG an array of esoteric sculptures, it was the humble cuppa that won the hearts of most of the 90,000 visitors to the National Gallery of Australia this summer.

Sydney sculptor Ruth Downes's work *Tea Party in the Mayoral Garden* was yesterday awarded the people's prize at the first National Sculpture Prize and Exhibition in Canberra.

Her work features 40 miniature sculptures of teacups, saucers and spoons all based on a play on the word 'tea'.

There is *Mintea* — a cup and saucer made of Minties wrappers, and *Amnestea*, a candle surrounded by barbed wire in the shape of a cup as the Amnesty International symbol.

A marble cup and saucer cracked into pieces is called *Tea Break* and a glass lying on a tiny mattress, tea spilling out and a box of Bex Powders to one side, is called *A Bex, a cup of tea and a good lie down*.

Gallery director Brian Kennedy said Downes's work was a huge hit. "It's a marvellous engagement with something we use in daily life," Dr Kennedy said.

Downes, 48, said people were constantly offering her new tea words, but she decided 40 sculptures were enough.

"I'm not going to continue doing it — you can take a point so far. For me, 40 was a good size for a party and the four-tea is nice," Downes said.

But she had one more sculpture up her sleeve — *Abillitea* — a billy of tea on a campfire that she presented to the Irish-born Dr Kennedy as she accepted her \$2000 prize.

"Now you're assimilated into Australia, I feel it's appropriate you should partake of a billy tea ... for your great contribution and your abili-tea."

Cup final: Downes with her work *Tea Party in the Mayoral Garden*, which won the people's choice award at the National Gallery of Australia yesterday

Picture: Ray Strange