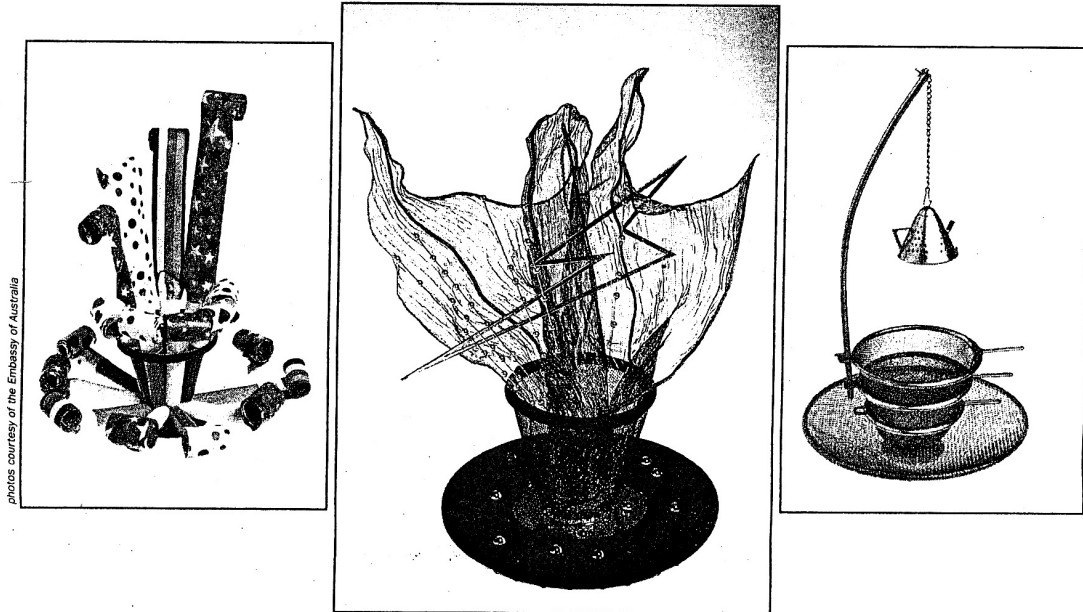


# Art

## Tea Is Her Bag

*Quirky Tea Cups, Lush Landscapes Characterize Work of Two Australian Artists*



Australian artist Ruth Downes puts her own creative spin on the standard teacup set with, from left, "Frivolitea," "Storm in a Teacup" and "Strained Tea."

by Serena Lei

Ruth Downes, a tall, striking woman in a polka-dot dress, is explaining the social dynamics of the tea set. Her eyes wide with excitement, she leans in close as if to share some delicious secret with me.

Apparently, the "Bushies," an outdoorsy set of teacups and saucers made from Eucalyptus leaves and tea tree branches, are mingling with the "Party Girls," a frothy, gauzy, fuzzy rendition of orange pekoe, lemon soother and red zinger teas. The more shy, frail creatures stand to the side, she said, while "Frivolitea," a teacup and saucer shaped from brightly colored noisemakers, stands on the highest platform, clearly showing off for attention.

Downes has created a clever, striking collection of teacups and saucers that play off language and tea rituals. She has also grouped the cups into tiny cliques, as if characters in a real tea party. "Amnestea," for example, is a cup and saucer fashioned from barbed wire, wrapped around a candle. The teacup in "Tea's Off" is created from golf tees set on a plastic grass saucer. "Mourning Tea" mourns appropriately in black, while "Partea" sits on a dish of CDs. "Russian Caravan Tea" is several smaller teacups in one, with a tiny Russian doll nestled in the smallest teacup. And "Storm in a Tea Cup," or what we might refer to as "Tempest in a Tea Cup," is a beautiful, explosive storm, complete with lightning and rain-

drops centered in a teacup.

Because Downes is a native of Australia, her art has a particularly Australian flavor. "Protea" and "Spiked Tea" are made from plants indigenous to Australia. "GS Tea" refers to the new Australian tax system. In Downes's version, 10 percent more tea rises up above the rim of the cup as it rests on a saucer of coins. "A Cup of Tea, a Bex, and a Good Lie Down," featuring a teacup resting on a mattress, is akin to "Take Two Aspirin and Call Me in the Morning."

Downes is showing all 43 teacups in an exhibit at the Australian Embassy aptly titled "Tea Party in the Mayoral Garden." One of Downes's favorites is "High Tea," a metal teacup on a platform made to resemble a water tower, similar to the ones found on large properties in outback Australia. Downes calls it "quintessentially Australian" because it is a twist on the formal rituals of British high tea. "High Tea," Downes points out, is one of the "difficult" individuals at the party. It sits with another uptight personality, "Strained Tea," made, appropriately, from tea strainers.

"As adults, we forget to play," Downes said. "Australians like to have a good time ... and laugh."

Downes was inspired to create her teacup series when threading buttons with wire. She began to shape the buttons into a loosely knit cup shape, resulting in "Teatering." Although she stopped at 40 teacups (creating three more specifically for this exhibit, including "Boston Tea Party"), Downes receives numerous new

suggestions. She said that once you start, it is endless fun to come up with clever, and not-so-clever, ideas. One person for instance offered "Creativitea," while another gestured toward "Invisibilita."

When describing what is so uniquely Australian about her work, Downes said, "Australians appreciate the land ... because it is a young country, and it hasn't been spoiled." Referring to her use of natural materials and bright colors, she said that Australia possesses a "natural beauty and color. Even the sky and the water seem bluer."

Downes could have just as well been describing the work of fellow Australian artist Ken Strong, whose exhibit stands alongside Downes's at the embassy. Strong's landscape paintings revel in the "natural beauty and color" that Australia has to offer. Because of a preponderance of landscapes reflected in water, a critic once described Strong's work as literally half abstract and half representational. Strong bristles at the interpretation. He describes his art as impressions of a scene "characterized by color and movement."

Strong's paintings hold no deeper secret than serenity. Spanning Australia, Europe and the Washington, D.C., area, his landscapes are nostalgic and charming, with a free-flowing style. His skills are best seen when he paints water scenes. The blues—from pale aquamarine to deep cobalt—are so brilliant that they fairly sparkle, depicting the waters of the Chesapeake Bay as a glittering invitation. Strong admits that accuracy is less important to him than his impression of a place.