

# RUTH DOWNES

Ruth will be holding an exhibition titled Lunch for the Trades at the Manning Regional Art Gallery this month.

## When did you first become interested in art?

I have always had an interest in art. I was introduced to the art world by my mother, who sent me to classes at our local Willoughby Workshop Art Centre when I was in primary school.

## > Has sculpture always been your favourite type of art? What is your favourite medium to work with?

After school I studied design for 4 years at the National Art School in Sydney. This training in the early 1970s fostered a very disciplined approach to art and design. This led me into exhibition design work at the Australian Museum.

I then moved into graphic design and corporate image development. I set up my own business, a very solitary journey for many years, and then evolved this two dimensional work into more three dimensional. The world of public art commissions as well as object making has been my most recent creative passion – hence the new exhibition Lunch for the Trades. I have dabbled with a variety of mediums and have a fascination for a broad range of materials.

## > Your Lunch for the Trades exhibition will be held at the Manning Regional Art Gallery this month. How would you describe the works?

Lunch for the Trades exhibition is a tribute to those who work in the trades – a recognition of talents and expertise undervalued in our society.

This exhibition is a cafeteria style spread of constructed 'meals'. It is a play on the language and visual delights of modern cuisine intersected with images of food wrought by each trade.

Each meal assemblage employs the specific materials of a particular trade. There is a huge diversity and unexpected beauty in these materials – a beauty that can transcend their utilitarian function.

The skills, techniques and dexterity of the trades are enormous yet are often derided as old-fashioned, mechanical and prosaic. Much of their work is private and hidden, or contributes to a greater whole that is not immediately discernible.

Food has become another range of consumable 'products'. We live in an age of food creation, artificial enhancement and uniquely personalised meals for every physical type, health condition, lifestyle or profession. Our obsession with food as entertainment has led to the creation of meals tailor made to satisfy

our increasing demands for visual excitement, novelty value and infinite choice.

Today, 'what we do' defines us more than ever before, so this culinary reflection of daily toil reinforces a sense of self in an unexpected yet celebratory way. The cafeteria setting has an unaffected production line quality, appropriate for a work-a-day meal.

Exhibition display details: There are 22 meals, each identified by a metal meal sign and affixed to a plastic cafeteria tray. The trays are displayed on continuous tubular stainless steel racks on supporting plinths.

A menu board and cutlery containers (with tools of the trades) accompanies the lunch spread. In addition, there are three photographic panels which highlight the preparation of three trade lunches. (An A3 photocopied menu/floor sheet gives details of each work and Ruth's CV).

## > Which is your favourite piece in the collection?

It is hard to comment as to which is my favourite piece in this collection of works. This exhibition represents a 2 year journey. It led me to meet with a variety of tradespeople, to discuss their occupations, their experience and expertise, as well as becoming familiar with the tools and materials they use in their particular trade.

For example, 'Mechanic's Minestrone Soup' is a steel hubcap with a luscious rich red 'soup' containing nuts, bolts and spanners in a vibrant arrangement. It is playful and seductive and presents another awareness of the mechanics trade. A friend reviewed this meal as one "looking healthy, so rich in minerals to put a spring in your step and spark up your life."

I was also drawn to several rare trades. I met a French gilder who taught me some of the fine skills of laying gold leaf. The Gilders lunch is 'Chicken nuggets with golden roasted potatoes'.

My investigation into shoe making led me to a bestoke shoemaker (in Surry Hills, Sydney) where 2 brothers in their late 80s have always and continue to work full time together. They showed me their 4,000 custom made timber shoe lasts, including those of Kerry Packer and his polo mates. They have no apprentices.

In my follow up research I went to the only shoe making supplier on the eastern seaboard. It's big, but they explained to me that they now mostly supply shoe repairers, as there are barely any shoe makers at work in Australia any

more.

You may have heard about the closure of Blundstones boot factory in Hobart after 137 years of operation – unfortunately not an isolated story.

Standardisation and globalisation are reducing the quality and value of our skills base. We no longer notice or understand how things are made. There is little awareness nor encouragement to use our hands ...'to make or repair things'. There is little comprehension of the satisfaction in mastering a skill and the joy of making.

We put on our shoes, having little understanding of how they are made and what materials were used. I studied my new sport shoes. They have 11 different brand names on them. Sadly the workers in the different factories in China, India and other countries who make the different shoe components, do not have the satisfaction of making the whole shoe as did the traditional shoe makers.

## > Apart from this collection, what other subjects have you covered with your works?

My previous exhibition was on the subject of tea! Tea Party in the Mayoral Garden. It is an arrangement of 40 sculptures of teacups and saucers made as visual puns on the word 'TEA'. For example, Mourning Tea is a cup fashioned out of black veiling. AmnesTea recalls the barbed wire wrapped candle of Amnesty International's logo. MinTea is a cup and saucer made from Minties sweet wrappers. ParTea froths with miniature streamers and balloons on a music CD saucer.

Tea Party in the Mayoral Garden won the People's Choice Award at the National Gallery of Australia's Sculpture Prize in 2002. It then toured to the Australian Embassy in Washington DC and it has subsequently been touring around Australia.

I also had a work in Sculpture by the Sea in 2005. It was titled A Fine Kettle of Fish. This was a site specific work – a statement about the situation of over-fishing the oceans. I used a compilation of wire mesh and several hundred silicon fish (otherwise known as squidgies!)

## > You have been involved with many permanent public artworks. How did you become involved with these and which one is your favourite?

I have made my living over the last 10 years as a public artist of permanent artworks in public outdoor spaces. This started as I was previously being commissioned by several local

Councils to design street pole banners to high-light festivals etc.

Parramatta City Council then commissioned me to design a glass mosaic for their main Church Street Mall. That was great fun, but I needed to find an experienced mosaic artist to ensure a high standard of workmanship.

I was introduced to Franco Colussi, who had been a mosaic artist for the Vatican in Rome as well as making and installing the indigenous mosaic in the forecourt of Parliament House, Canberra. I learned the benefit of finding skilled and dedicated artisans to work with; I became aware of how little knowledge I had, but I loved the process of evolving these works.

I was subsequently commissioned to design an eight metre wrought steel sculpture of an eel at Parramatta Wharf. The RTA and State Wide Roads then commissioned designs for many kilometres of concrete acoustic walls along the M4 motorway in western Sydney. I might add the scale and complexity of these projects has engaged my partner in life and work, Geoff Webster.

As an Industrial Designer, Geoff has brought an invaluable wealth of knowledge and skills to our partnership. We have continued with other works employing a variety of other materials and trades and craftspeople who take pride in their work.

## > Having studied landscapes and landscape architecture how do you incorporate this into your works?

Many of these public art projects are worked in conjunction with Architects, Engineers and Landscape Architects. I really enjoy connecting with these professionals. I believe that public art must be relevant to the space and the environment.

My concepts always have a relevant story, which refers to the history, industrial memory, nature or usage of the site. Working with Landscape Architects insures the work then fits with an overall scheme, and the workmanship is carried out in conjunction with the overall project/improvements.

## > How long does it take to complete the average piece?

Public Art projects can have a very long time frame, not unlike building.

The process from concept to completion may take 3 years. There are many processes involved which require Council approvals.

## > Thank you Ruth.