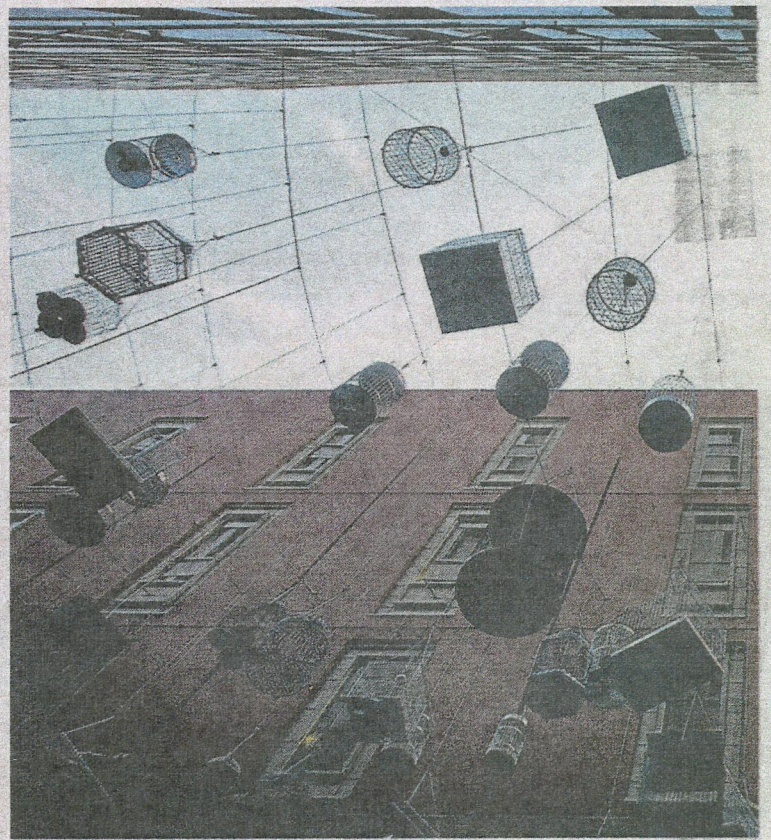


VISUAL ART

Broad canvas: Artist Jason Wing with his Chinatown street artwork *In between Two Worlds*. Photo: Dallas KilponenLandscapes past: Michael Thomas Hill's *Forgotten Songs*

Different strokes

Sydney's public spaces, once home to tired monuments and corporate grandiosity, are transforming into living galleries as visionary artists and policymakers opt for creativity over vanity, writes MICHAEL FITZGERALD.

Caroline Rothwell's first brush with public art in Sydney was something of a baptism by fire. When she was invited to create works for a laneway alongside the George Street cinemas, the Yorkshire-born artist was more used to showing her sculptures in the white-cube spaces of museums and galleries.

But this site, smack bang in the heart of the city's so-called "Angry Mile", was suggestive less of heaven than hell. "It's between two pubs so it's the most feral site at the weekend," Rothwell says. "I had to come up with a work that can handle a lot of urine and ... vomit."

She made the most of her circumstances, fashioning a spray-and-wipeable stainless-steel frieze of etched trees. The work stood her in good stead when it came to her second commission, unveiled as part of the city's Art &

About festival last September. With *Youngsters*, Rothwell placed two pint-size hooded bronze figures, one standing nonchalantly by the corner entrance of the Burberry shop on George Street, and the other doing a handstand a few metres up Barrack Street. A year later, the artist is still overcome by the public's warm embrace of her street urchins. "This one gets a lot of love," she says of the standing figure. "People pat it as they go past, which I really like, so it's polished." The handstanding figure might be patted less, she says, but collectively the hooded pair "have become people's friends".

Rothwell's cartwheeling kid has helped turn popular perceptions about public art on their head. "She just nailed it," says the City of Sydney's recently appointed curatorial adviser, Barbara Flynn. "She got everything right: the

scale, placement. I like the fact that they're across from Martin Place but in a smaller park that allows them to exist."

Rothwell's street urchins join a new breed of public artworks that are typically intimate in scale. They pop up in unexpected places and are more quirky than corporate. Around the corner in Angel Place is Michael Thomas Hill's sound sculpture *Forgotten Songs*, a flotilla of gently chirruping birdcages, and in Chinatown, Jason Wing's *In between Two Worlds* sends painted clouds and spirit figures soaring above the formerly dank and rat-infested Kimber Lane.

Call them the anti-monuments. They often begin life as temporary artworks, but become more permanent over time through popular support. Their power is subversive and stealthy – light years away from the more lumpy monu-

ments of old that have been derided or dispatched from public view. "It's not art that's just plonked," Sydney lord mayor Clover Moore says. "It's art that grows and evolves and is very much a part of our city."

This kind of work looms prominently in the vision of our city planners. When Premier Barry O'Farrell gave the green light last December for light rail along George Street from Circular Quay to Central Station, little did he know that in ridding the street of cars he would be opening the floodgates for artists.

In the city's recently ratified Public Art Plan, authorities envisage the edifices, voids and rooftops of George Street occupied by a phalanx of public art similar in spirit to that of Rothwell, Hill and Wing, with six or more cross-roads and parks also to be assailed by art. Moore has already earmarked \$9 million for

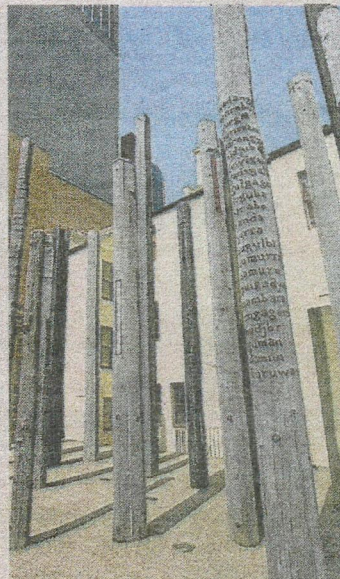
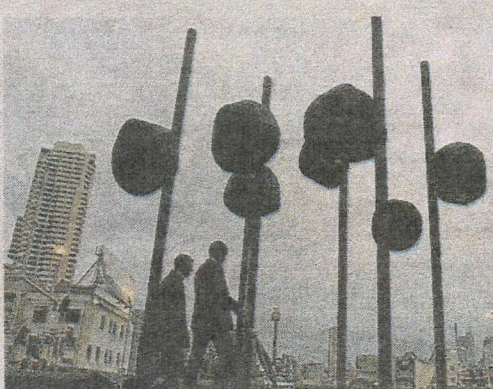
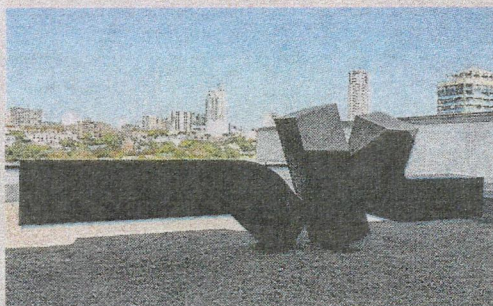
Shapes and the city: Sculpture's highs and lows

Worst

Ken Unsworth's *Stones against the Sky* (1998) What hasn't been said about this curious sculpture that straddles one of the most prominent sites in Kings Cross? Unsworth's potential Stonehenge was turned into "stone cringe" because of a mismanaged process in which the artist's vision of gumtrees and hovering stones was eviscerated.

Clement Meadmore's *Flippant Flurry* (1977-78) The work itself is great but the siting of this sculpture unfortunately takes its title to heart. It is installed out of sight on the roof of the Art Gallery of NSW. What could have been one of Sydney's best public works has become a private embarrassment.

Florenzo Bacci's *Pope John Paul II* (2008) It was a beautiful gesture by Sydney's Italian community to donate a statue of their beloved pope for the western facade of St Mary's Cathedral. Unfortunately, this bronze work by Florenzo Bacci is no Bernini – or Francis Bacon, for that matter. Wielding a palm frond, Bacci's subject can't decide if he is man or God.



Ups and downs: (Clockwise from top left) *Flippant Flurry*; *Edge of the Trees*; *Stones against the Sky*. Photos: Dean Sewell, Peter Rae, Fiona Morris

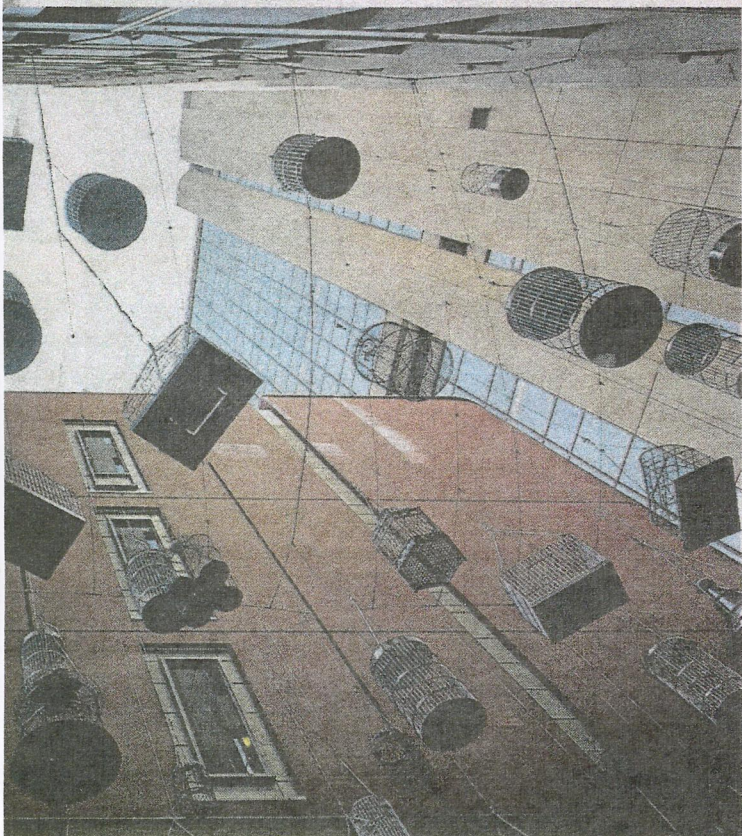
Best

Harry Seidler's *Commercial Travellers' Association* (1977) Many would say the Opera House is the best public sculpture in town but, for my money, Seidler's mushroom-shaped clubhouse in Martin Place is even more mysterious. It is, in itself, a perfect work of art.

Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley's *Edge of the Trees* (1995) This collaborative piece in the Museum of Sydney forecourt embraces the highest ideals of public sculpture. The grove of "trees" offers not only a whispering soundtrack of spoken Aboriginal names from first contact and the crunch of gravel underfoot, but a sanctuary for private reverie.

James Angus' *Day In Day Out* (2011) While its eye-popping palette might recall a 1970s kitchen colour scheme (inspired by the changing hues of sunlight falling on Sydney sandstone, I'm told), the exuberance of the sculpture never fails to lift my spirits. It is also a little rude, with its curves spilling out of its tightly minimal city setting.

MF



In Angel Place. Photo: Wolter Peeters

Enlightened: The City of Sydney's curatorial adviser, Barbara Flynn, next to *Day In Day Out* in Bligh Street. Photo: Wolter Peeters

such projects and the person responsible for realising them will be American-born Flynn. "I don't know, it sounds nutty in a way, but the city really moves me and I'm there every day," says the international curator. "I'm interested in making it a really exciting place to be, by doing unconventional things."

Flynn has just drafted project briefs for George Street and its adjacent sites, seeking expressions of interest from as wide a pool of artists as possible. She is even toying with the idea of putting together an informal group of international figures such as the Australian head of New York's Public Art Fund, Nicholas Baume, and the Tate Modern's Chris Dercon to spread the word. "We're trying to do the best project like this anywhere in the world," Flynn says. "There'll be pitfalls and it won't be easy to pull off but I think if you don't start with that position, something's probably not quite right."

One can already trace Flynn's fingerprints across town; she was curator of Art & About's laneway projects in 2010 and 2011, which ushered temporary works into the world, including Newell Harry's neon bull's-eye placed high in Temperance Lane. As an art adviser, Flynn has worked with architects, developers and city planners to oversee private commissions including *Day In Day Out*, James Angus' colourful cast-aluminium sculpture that resembles an amoeba frozen midair above the cafe entrance of 1 Bligh Street. More monochrome and mysterious is Flynn's recently unveiled project at 161 Castlereagh Street, where Welsh artist Cerith Wyn Evans' white neon mobile inspired by Japanese cloud

formations trembles in the air, speaking poetically about the transience of life.

Lofty in ambition yet light in scale, Wyn Evans' neon seems close in spirit to that of Wing's work in Kimber Lane, the first of several City of Sydney public art projects planned for Chinatown in coming years. Wing is a street artist of Aboriginal and Chinese descent, whose angelic figures glow blue at night, to subtly remind passers-by of the transforming nature of the city.

Michael Thomas Hill's *Forgotten Songs* in Angel Place is an almost subliminal reminder of landscapes past. Engraved on the pavement, the names of bird species call attention to the colony of cages overhead and the gentle note of birdsong. "It's quite wonderful because you can stand there and listen to the songs that Europeans would have heard when they first arrived in Sydney," Moore says. "So it's got that wonderful history about it, and it's a nicer sort of birdcage, too, because all the doors are open."

Across town and just past Central Station is the third of Rothwell's city works, *Symbiosis*, a 12-metre inflatable red tree sprouting from the rooftop of the old Broadway brewery like an urban weed seeking longevity. A temporary artwork that sprang up at the Central Park development last October, *Symbiosis* is symptomatic of the success of Sydney's new breed of public art, says MCA curator Anne Loxley, who oversaw the work and who sits on the City of

Sydney's Public Art Advisory Panel. "We can do temporary public art pretty well and we are getting better and better, but it is the monumental where we need to work," she says. "There's a lot of good stuff but there's not one piece of public art that moves any of us the way that the Opera House or the Harbour Bridge moves us."

Public art experts struggle to find consensus on what has worked in Sydney in the past. Much clearer is what hasn't. Discussions on public art have been caught in a spiral of negative debate: Tom Bass' 1963

wall fountain in Hunter Street has been likened to a urinal, and Bert Flugelman's *Pyramid Tower* (or "the Silver Shish Kebab") was controversially moved from its place as the centre-piece of Martin Place to the street behind Australia Square.

But nothing has quite copped the wrath of the punters as much as Ken Unsworth's *Stones against the Sky* (aka "Poo on Sticks"), a genuinely original idea crudely compromised by a reduced budget and poor fabrication. "The reason why there was that regrettable outcome is not because of Ken's talent," Loxley says. "He needed a different team, a different budget."

For the gravity-defying work *Symbiosis*, Rothwell was given generous technical support and a budget to pull it off. "Often with public art you're suddenly having to deal with engineering issues, building codes, endless meetings. Those things can be quite bamboozling when you first start

out," Rothwell says. "So if you've actually got the professionals there to say, 'Yes, this is possible,' it takes all the pressure off."

Which leaves the artist with perhaps the hardest task of all: to dream up public artwork as inspiring as the Sydney Opera House. Standing in front of Lin Li's golden tree in Chinatown, Aaron Seeto wonders if we should be less concerned with icons and more about creating public artworks that reflect their specific communities. "It's a fine balance between creating monuments and creating different types of experiences that are reflective of the location," he says. "It's not just plonking stuff in but it's actually that long-term engagement."

Rothwell wonders if the days of bronze sculptures the size of flying saucers are over. "Often the best public art is the art that subtly fits into a city and is actually a quiet discovery rather than being an icon," she says. "I don't think icons are very useful."

On this particular morning, Rothwell has cycled into town to give her *Youngsters* a clean and a wax – not because of unwanted bodily fluids but, rather, to encourage their enriching glow. "The salt and the pollution will change the patina over time," she says, "but I actually think that's one of the lovely things about bronze: it's one of the only materials that often gets better with age." Just like our city's art.

"I had to come up with a work that can handle a lot of urine and vomit."

Caroline Rothwell



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