VISUAL ART

Not weighed down by noisy debate over public art, the City of Sydney shows a light touch with three bold new commissions.
By *Patrick Hartigan*.

Cloud Arch makes Sydney the city of lightness

Cloud Arch, by Junya Ishigami. CREDIT: JUNYA ISHIGAMI

Writing and thinking about unrealised public art projects feels a little bit like biting into air. Air that is invariably a tad decadent and a little controversial. On the palate of some might be the question of how can we justify such flights of fancy in the context of a city with far more urgent needs.

Whatever the result, the chosen works will affect our experience of the city in significant ways. To my mind, the City of Sydney has made the right choice in its three major commissions, announced last month: the clarity, lack of compromise and lightness of touch is, I believe, likely to be a high-stakes move with positive rather than negative outcomes for Sydney.

I make this prediction in part based on the vast amounts of time I've spent roaming, loitering and daydreaming in Sydney for the past 30 or so years, but also based on other engagements with public art and architecture around the world. In relation to the former I believe Clover Moore's move to give George Street over to pedestrians and light rail should be noted first and foremost as the key creative endeavour for this city; the subtraction of cars

and buses will soon provide the heart and centre Sydney has never really had. Besides the narrow column of Hyde Park, the middle of the city usually leaves me feeling alienated – a more cacophonous version of Jeffrey Smart's *Cahill Expressway* (1962) – and ducking for refuge in shopping malls I never intended to enter.

The dwarfing unfriendliness of Smart's painting, and the alienating consequences of big city growth, bring to mind my favourite childhood book, *The Selfish Giant*. In it, Oscar Wilde tells the story of a giant who returns home, having been away for seven years, to find all the local children playing in his garden. Angrily he banishes them and builds a big wall around his property. Alone in his castle, a long winter sets in, but only over his garden – a fact that eventually wakes him to his meanness, before allowing the children to come back in and play. Making the central artery of a city a pedestrian-only zone is akin to Wilde's giant letting the children back in.

Junya Ishigami's *Cloud Arch* will rise above the buildings at the beginning of this new pedestrian zone like the slender contrail of a sky-writer's plane. At the centre of the east–west and north–south corridors that comprise Sydney's CBD, it will take our eyes upward, beyond the blinkers of its corridor walls, towards one of the best things the city has: that unusually blue sky. In combination with the relative lack of noise and diesel fumes, this drifting line – for some reason, perhaps its stainless-steel material, I keep thinking of the old monorail line recycled and flipped vertically – promises to bring a much-needed feeling of escape, lightness and reverie at the juncture where it is most needed.

Imagining this change of conditions, the upward drift, makes me feel the giant's grip loosening. When it comes to lightening the grip of buildings and structures through an appreciation of the interaction between built and natural forms, Ishigami is something of a master. His engineering feats have attracted the attention of artists and architects for their deft troubling of weightiness against weightlessness. *Cuboid Balloon* (2008), an ethereally floating though extraordinarily heavy aluminium cube installed in the foyer of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, enchanted and baffled along these lines. Similarly, the waft of *Cloud Arch*, rising up to 68 metres and therefore visible from across the city, promises to provide a reassuring if strange sense of gravity to Sydney – especially in terms of that much needed locus.

It is the quality of sympathy, and the function of reflecting back to a population what they most take for granted, that often seems to separate public artwork successes from failures. For this reason, it seems sensible to include architects on the radar of the selection process: when it comes to a city full of buildings and infrastructure, why wouldn't they, or at least artist–architect teams, be considered a good option?

One of the more disappointing and all too frequent hallmarks of public art is its quality of compromise, with so many examples looking like they've been dragged through the bureaucratic wringer. The corporate wringer, too: many of them protrude from the buildings of their corporate sponsors with macho vapidity, the slain remains of a hunter's trophy. Something also happens to art on a large scale whereby the innate convolutions of any given artist's work can feel good one moment and then like a deal gone terribly wrong the next.

I recently encountered an exception to these situations when walking down Hunter Street, where a large-scale text work has been installed outside the Chifley building. While not part of the current group of commissions, I think it provides a good example of the ambitious yet sensitive approach that the City of Sydney, under the guidance of Barbara Flynn, has shown with recent public art projects. Jenny Holzer's *I STAY (Ngaya ngalawa)* sits nestled in the palm of its corporate hand. But this work, an electronic screen attached to one of the diagonal supports of its building, inflects differently. It revels in the subtly undermining

disconnect between data that is streaming to the rhythm of the nearby stock exchange, and the stories of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders that provide its content – an intriguing rather than predictable play of light across the bark of its sponsor.

In Belmore Park, at the Central Station end of town, *Pavilion* by Hany Armanious will take the somewhat iconic blue milk crate and scale it up to the size of a three-storey building. Armanious is a sculptor who creates trompe l'oeil casts of the discarded and overlooked, of objects that often sit in tantalising proximity to the contexts they enter as artworks. Examples that have included plinths and offcuts of plaster wall or water-swollen chipboard bring awareness to the provisional, imperfect qualities of all physical matter. Things get old and this ageing or wounding of objects can, if brought into clear enough focus, become a stage of great drama and beauty. *Pavilion*, while also emerging from the kerbside of art and everyday life, is different – less a meditation on wabi-sabi and more a celebration of the ubiquity of its mass-produced subject. But while the outcome might be straightforward the route is never simple: over the years, as a regular visitor to the artist's studio, I've enjoyed watching a milk crate under Armanious's attentions undergo, like so many of its infrastructural colleagues, a whole series of questions and propositions on its way to becoming *Pavilion*.

Forever straying from their intended use, milk crates are just as likely to be carrying tools in an artist's studio or a tradie's ute, or propping open a stubborn door. Mostly one sees them sitting upturned on the street, waiting to be sat on, or as fashionable seating in an inner-city bar. Taking its cue from this remarkably unremarkable beacon of utility, *Pavilion* will likewise sit, welcoming people from afar to nestle in one of the lovelier but more neglected corners of Sydney.

The third new commission, by British artist Tracey Emin, will be situated closer to the Circular Quay end of town. Emin's work will comprise an inscribed bronze plinth or monument with a bird perched on it – symbolising distance and the loneliness no doubt shared by all faraway visitors to Australia, and felt by Emin during a prolonged residency in Australia. In the surrounding streets will be a scattering of another 60 or so handcrafted bronze birds, to be found atop windows, architraves and lampposts.

While I find *The Distance of Your Heart* to be less exciting – to have less purchase and probable staying power – than the other two commissions, its Easter egg hunt of birds nevertheless promises to provoke a largely different experience, of ushering our eyes hither and thither, with its own discreet rewards.

The commissioning of public artworks is an expensive, fraught and failure-prone affair; astute awareness from the council governing these precarious projects is what a city's population can only hope for. As portrayed through the drawings of my childhood book, of children dangling from branches or beard tufts, we are, as pedestrians and users of large cities, absurdly tiny players in the giant's backyard. Fortunately, our city's spaces are being opened and we can look forward to the continuing thaw.

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