

OPINION

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Wanted: some bravery in Sydney public art

By Charles Purcell

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Next year marks the 50th anniversary of one of the most controversial artworks in Australian history – the wrapping of Little Bay. Artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude teamed up to cover a 2.5 kilometre stretch of our coastline for a work that immediately polarised audiences.

What was *Wrapped Coast, One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia* trying to say? Was it brilliant? Was it barmy? Was it a work of rare genius? What everyone could agree on, however, is that it was brave.



Wrapped Coast by Christo, pictured, and Jenne-Claude, 1969, Little Bay, Sydney.

Reading art collector and philanthropist John Kaldor's role in the piece and his recollections of the collaboration in the *Herald* reminded me of the power of the work. Sadly, it also reminded me that we appear to be losing our courage when it comes to public art.

What would have been Australia's most expensive public artwork – a floating cloud in Barangaroo South – has been abandoned. Now Sydney's \$22 million

Cloud Arch sculpture is also under a cloud, another victim of the ongoing saga of light-rail relays.

It's all very disappointing. We seem to have lost our creative nerve ... particularly when it is attached to our hip pocket nerve.



Not going ahead: The Cloud Arch is a victim of the troubled light rail project.

Good art involves bravery and sometimes it also involves money. Look at the purchase of *Blue Poles*, whose \$1.3 million price tag was considered scandalous in 1973. Now it's worth \$350 million. That's why it's important to dream ... and dream big like Christo.

Public art in Australia has become too parochial, too petit bourgeois ... too timid. Where is the in-your-face art of yesteryear? Where are the grand public statements? Why aren't we "freaking out the squares" anymore? I want more in my public art. I want my pre-existing beliefs to be challenged by breakfast, the dominant paradigm to be smashed by lunch and the aforementioned squares to be freaked out by dinner.

I want Banksy to cover every inch of the light rail construction on George Street with baffling pop art.

I want Tracey Emin to donate another bespoiled bed to be displayed in the foyer of Parliament House.

I want first-year art students to wrap the entire Town Hall in Gladwrap.

I want artists to be entombed under the road of the Harbour Bridge for 72 hours in homage to Mike Parr's provocative performance for Dark Mofo.

I want rubber ducks as big as ferries in the harbour and Jeff Koons-style floral puppies so enormous they blot out the sun outside the MCA.



Jeff Koons adds some final touches to his sculpture Puppy in 1995. *CREDIT: STEVEN SIEWERT*

I want giant four-storey mechanical elephants prowling the city like in Nantes, which revived its fortunes with audacious public art.

I want The Scream projected onto the Opera House as part of the New Year's Eve festivities.

I want two-storey multicoloured milk crates all around the University of Sydney as a potent homage to student furniture.

What I want most of all from our public art is courage.

Philanthropists, financiers, arts bureaucrats and artists - I await your best efforts.

Charles Purcell is a Sydney journalist.