

WHY PUT SCULPTURE BY THE SEA?

Sculpture by the Sea, the annual outdoor exhibition of contemporary sculpture along the Bondi to Tamarama coastal walk in Sydney, is about to celebrate its 17th year, running from October 24 to November 10. For this to be a valuable exercise, sculpture ought to enhance our experience of being by the sea in some way.

So how do we feel by the sea? Swimming in the surf, playing on the beach, combing the rockpools, and scaling the cliffs offer a wealth of enjoyable experiences. But it is not only that we enjoy these experiences: the landscape at Bondi and Tamarama also has the capacity to transform the way we feel about ourselves.

Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975), the English modernist sculptor, might have had the Bondi to Bronte walk in mind when she remarked, “What a different shape and ‘being’ one becomes lying on the sand with the sea almost above from when standing against the wind on a sheer high cliff with seabirds circling patterns below one.”

Nature offers us a special experience of beauty that is often missing from our experience of beauty in art. In a seminal essay on the neglect of natural beauty in contemporary aesthetics, Ronald Hepburn (1927-2008), a Scottish philosopher posthumously described as “the father of environmental aesthetics”, identifies several senses in which aesthetic experience of nature diverges from aesthetic experience of art:

- In our experience of the landscape we are both actor and spectator; we are a part of – or surrounded by – the object of experience, whereas our experience of a work of art is an experience of a distinct object from which we might feel detached;

- Unlike art, nature is frameless: when we attend to the landscape, there is no obvious distinction between

the object of our attention and its surrounds;

- Formalism is inappropriate in appreciation of the landscape: although the landscape can be experienced exclusively as uninterpreted shapes, colours, patterns, and movements, etc, it should not be limited to this but always be appreciated for what it is.

Perhaps most importantly, Hepburn recognises the effect of nature involves being immersed in something beautiful: “On occasion, [a spectator] may confront natural objects as a static, disengaged observer; but far more typically the objects envelop him on all sides. In a forest, trees surround him; he is ringed by hills, or he stands in the midst of a plain ... we are *in* nature and part of nature; we do not stand over against it as over against a painting on the wall.”

And how do we experience sculpture? Sculptures affect our experience of the spaces in which we encounter them. But, they do not do this by making us feel part of them. Traditionally, a sculpture is a three-dimensional object that the spectator encounters either from one perspective, or by walking around it. Unlike our experience of nature, in our experience of a sculpture, we are no more in and of a traditional sculpture than we are in and of a painting: we stand over and against a sculpture when we experience its beauty.

Why put sculpture by the sea? If simply being at the beach or on the cliffs affords us a special experience of beauty, it might seem redundant to display art there, however beautiful that art might be. There are, however, two good reasons for doing so. First, sculpture has the potential to awaken in us aesthetic appreciation of these natural places. Secondly, experiencing some sculptures by the sea combines both artistic beauty and natural beauty in a poignant and powerful

way. Happily, both occurred at last year’s *Sculpture by the Sea* exhibition when the need for art to awaken the spectator to the aesthetic – as opposed to commercial – value of being by the sea was recognised by at least two sculptors.

Dave Mercer’s *View™* is an acrylic and stainless steel sign which, placed on the plateau south of the headland, ‘branded’ the experience of the view in order for the viewer to be able to appreciate it. *View Piece*, by Kristin McIver, consisted of a neon sign that not only prepared us for the experience of the view, but prescribed a response – it reads, ‘breathtaking’.

Although *View™* and *View Piece* told us about how we should experience the sea, neither sculpture actually transformed our experience of it. Each talked about the experience of the sea, rather than engaging in it. Ruth Downes and Geoff Webster did more than talk about the view from the Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club in *Casting Around*. The arc and sweep of their 30 black fishing rods and holders mounted on the handrail actually transformed our experience by taking an everyday activity of beach fishing in Bondi, and revealing the beauty in it. The arc described by the black fishing rods had a certain elegance. We oscillated between attending to the activity of fishing and the beauty of the form created by the activity.

We also oscillated between seeing the sea as a magnificent background for this sweeping gesture, and as the object to which the gesture points us. The fine black arc invites us to pick out each of the blues and greens that mingle in the ocean, and the lines of white froth that rise and fall on the waves. The contrast with the black arc sensitises us to this. The handrail was previously something to assist us, now it has become something to behold. This whimsical sculpture changes our awareness of the

seascape; how we relate to it; and, in doing so, it changes us.

Special mention should be made of *Invasive Colonisation* by Alex Goad, three earthenware mobiles suspended from tree branches in Mark’s Park. Although not site-specific in the way that *Casting Around* was, they could genuinely transform the experience of standing under a tree. Perhaps this is why they won the 2012 Art Gallery Society prize.

So the fundamentally important reason for putting sculpture by the sea is that some sculptures can enhance our appreciation of who we are when we are by the sea; they can transform our experience of familiar places along the Bondi to Bronte walk; and, in doing so, they awaken us to the power of sculpture as an art form.

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Above: **Ruth Downes and Geoff Webster** *Casting around* 2012. Photo: Howard Jones. Right: **Alex Goad** *Invasive colonisation* 2012. Photo: Clyde Yee. Opposite, from top: **Kristin McIver** *View piece* 2012. Photo: Marianna Massey. **Dave Mercer** *View* 2012. Photo: Clyde Yee. All works Sculpture by the Sea Bondi, 2012.

