

# Courtly art judged

Michele Helmrich reflects on creations at Brisbane's Magistrate's Court

IF YOU are curious about the artwork at Brisbane Magistrate's Court, you'll require a degree of perseverance. Or the necessity of a court appearance.

To enter beyond the front door you confront the sort of security that today is found at most airports. The security is not for the artworks.

Nonetheless, \$1.7 million worth of art has been integrated into this complex. As the Public Art Agency is keen to emphasise, this represents the most substantial investment the Queensland Government has made under its Art Built-in policy, first introduced in 1999, by which 2 per cent of the value of its capital building projects is spent on public art.

Has the \$1.7 million been well spent? After the recent debate about Brisbane's public art, it might be daring to suggest that it has, and is worth a look.

A walk up George St brings you to the Turbot St corner where Daniel Templeton's gleaming aluminium work provides a dramatic entrance statement to this new building by Cox Rayner Architects in joint venture with Ainsley Bell and Murchison.

Templeton's work is a reminder of the abstract lyricism that often defined art made for public places in the 1960s and '70s — think of the clean forms of Australian artist Clement Meadmore, for instance.

Some commentators might prefer that all outdoor sculpture stuck to such simple and elegant statements of form. But, in the wake of sculptures such as American pop artist Claes Oldenburg's giant clothes peg of 1976, *Clothespin*, it has become difficult for artists not to add other levels of meaning, including irony and humour, to their basic ingredients.

So should we expect postmodern reworkings of the scales of justice and the like at the Magistrate's Court? Thankfully, no. Curator Jay Younger, in her choice of artists, has avoided such clichéd references.

In his case, Templeton's tall concertina-ed folds look like a stylish ruffle, echoing perhaps the archaic pomp of those who represent the law.

Templeton says that *Confluence*, as his work is called, describes "the dynamics of an altercation", the fluid

ribbon an analogy of the wayward habits of unruly citizens and the point and counterpoint of the court process.

In reality, *Confluence* would make a perfect logo for the Magistrate's Court. For this is the McDonald's golden arches or the Bart Simpson equivalent of Meadmore's solemnity, selling the "brand" of the court.

Templeton's is not the only work to be seen before reaching the security cordon. Brisbane artist Eugene Carchesio, for instance, has coordinated murals of coloured tiles in geometric patterns along a pedestrian ramp to one side of the exterior, facing the building.

Carchesio's *Test Patterns for Hope No.5* is placed in conjunction with Guy Parmenter's futuristic street furniture, providing a good example of how art and architecture — and in this case functional furniture — have been brought together in this project to complement each other.

It is no surprise that three Aboriginal artists were commissioned to produce work for this court precinct, given the indigenous community's frictions with European-style justice. It is also no surprise that their works are far removed from the Meadmore model of public art.

For instance, if you've arrived by way of Roma St, your first encounter will be with Fiona Foley's *Witnessing To Silence*, a sombre piece counterposing Australian place names set in plaques, among the floor tiles, with 3D stainless steel columns containing ash as well as a tall stand of sacred lotus lilies.

Foley, an indigenous artist from the Hervey Bay region, imbues her work with the gravity of her people's history, but also in this case with allusions to the extremes of Australian climate — flood and fire. The cast bronze lilies offer, in contrast, contemplation and hope.

Another, Judy Watson, provides the major welcoming piece inside the building, directly before reaching the security screens. This impressive work is alone worth the visit.

Walk further and you discover one of the most intriguing works in the Magistrate's Court — Bruce Reynolds's *Cast And Elevation*. In this



PUBLIC art... Lilla Watson's *Sacred Waterholes*, above, and below, *Cast and Elevation* by Bruce Reynolds.

work, Reynolds extends his usual practice of making collaged paintings and sculptures from old lino into a large double-sided wall in which lino and carpet remnants are incorporated along with finely worked reliefs in concrete.

This major undertaking would not have been possible without a permanent site and a serious injection of funds and tradesmen's know-how. It must rate as Reynolds's most ambitious work to date.

The domestic history alluded to by worn lino, and its styles for all tastes, is here joined by fragments of pressed tin imprinted into finely cast concrete. Hoop pines and other trees also emerge from the concrete, with Reynolds forming a visual connection to the parkland entrance and hillside that dominate the view through the glassed walls at the Roma St side of the building.

Exploration of the public areas of the building over several floors will reveal more artworks.

Potentially perplexing for court visitors will be the works by Sandra Selig, entitled *Stray Lines*, composed of screens of taut red-and-orange sewing thread cutting big arcs over the atrium spaces overlooking Roma St.

If there are qualms, they are due to the works' struggle for visual dominance against the distractions of ceiling detail and doors, and for how well they will fare over a period of years; Selig's thread works have usually been installed on a temporary basis. Moreover, in their subtlety, they may simply fail to be seen.

A visit to the Magistrate's Court may inspire a moment of reflection. Some art works do likewise. In Judith Wright's *Dark Pigeon* (in the Level 5 waiting area), two large sheets of Japanese paper hang loosely under glass, their pale grey and white forms suggestive of birds and flight and that



which is unspoken. Printed on the wall above are lines from *Casida of the Dark Doves* by the Spanish poet Garcia Lorca.

A similar note of abstract reverie is to be found with Judith Kentish's *Cloth Skins & Life Lines* (in the Level 8 waiting area), comprising two lengths of ivory coloured cloth crisscrossed by lines of satin stitch, threads hanging loose. The irregularities of these sewn paths inflect the grid-like patterns with an organic imperfection that matches life's course.

What a delight that "public art" can encompass works that don't trumpet their importance with theatrical flamboyance. Such modest statements include Barbara Heath's finely crafted door handles and lift plates, Marian Drew's scroll-like photograms of water life (placed alongside the lifts), and Lilla Watson's *Sacred*

*Waterholes* (Level 7 waiting area). Watson, for instance, translates Aboriginal dot painting into drawings comprised of burnt holes, as if imprinting memories of traditional law and country on its surface like a tattoo.

It is said by the historian Giorgio Vasari that the Renaissance sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti, after spending 40 years working on the bronze doors for San Giovanni in Florence, was given the honour of serving on the chief magistracy of the city.

While the artists who worked on Brisbane Magistrate's Court shouldn't hold their breath waiting for such an honour, their work does deserve a second look. My advice is that you don't wait until that unpaid parking fine results in a special invitation.

A publication titled *Engagement: Art + Architecture: Art Built-in Brisbane Magistrate's Court* is available.