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myview

words **Rodney Chester**

IMAGINE if you bought the Mona Lisa at the Louvre's next post-Christmas sale and took it home to hang it above the telly.

For a while, it would impress dinner guests when you did your party trick of having her eyes follow you as you jump off the couch to go to the loo.

But would the fascination with that eternal smile on the Leonardo da Vinci masterpiece fade with familiarity?

If the Lions lose this year's AFL grand final in a cliffhanger, Queensland's rugby league chaps go down next year three-zip without Alfie, or Pat Rafter never picks up a racquet again, wouldn't you want to wipe that pesky smile off her face so you could drown yourself in misery?

After a few years, you might look at her only on special occasions. Eventually, you probably wouldn't give her a second glance. Then, once the artwork has lost its impact, what do you do with it? You could move her into the bedroom but I'm yet to meet the man who could perform at his best under the gaze of a woman who never stops smirking.

Or you could do the *Changing Rooms* thing, where you paint everything garish colours, whack a print of a lighthouse on the wall and shove Mona into storage under the stairs.

That's the challenge faced by public art. It's one thing to produce art that is challenging or makes an impression, but will it continue to make an impression on the people who scurry past every day on the way to work?

Hundreds of people sit in Brisbane's Post Office Square every day having lunch. But how many look up at the two-storey high sculpture on the side of the Westpac Bank? And, if they did, would the ageing sculpture still make an impression like it once did?

Will the people who smile each day at Christopher Trotter's City Roos on George St take any notice of them 10 years from now? Do we still feel the same way about the people sculptures that we fell in love with at Expo and now can be seen in places such as Adelaide St or spread around the city in various back yards? To explore the changing interaction with public art, I conducted a study of the way people react to Sebastian Di Mauro's Eagle St sculpture of two giant hands, *pictured*, with a determination to continue my research until I either had answered these challenging questions or finished my chicken, cheese and mayonnaise toasted sandwich, whichever happened first. The hands, for my money, are a fun addition to the city streetscape, lifelike in their detail but alien in their size of 2.2m high. My research revealed that people react to them in many different ways.

There are some people who give the hands half a glance and keep walking. These folk form the "What are those big silver hands? Meanwhile, back at my mundane but very busy existence" category. There are some women who are confronted by the hands' reflective surface. These are the "Do these hands make my arse look fat?" types.

And there are those who stop, stare and wonder about the hands and perhaps the giant they belonged to, now apparently buried beneath the footpath of Brisbane's commercial heart.

The need to decorate our large buildings with public art is clearly a very primitive social desire which goes back to hand paintings on cave walls and which is responsible for that mysterious urge people have to decorate front gardens with garden gnomes.

Perhaps our public artists could learn a lot from people who share their abode with a little concrete bearded man in a cap. Because, as daggy as they undoubtedly are, at least garden gnomes have longevity.

Perhaps we should throw out the giant silver hands, metal kangaroos and go back to the gnomes. Unlike some types of public art, a 2.2m tall garden gnome in front of every building in Brisbane city would be hard to ignore.

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