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Draw your own conclusion on what's public art

Sandra McLean

THIS week, the Tate Gallery in London handed out its annual Turner Prize to an artist who doesn't know how to paint or draw.

Jeremy Deller, 38, freely admitted as he pocketed the \$63,000 prize for a video about US president George W. Bush's home town in Texas that he didn't have any technical skills because he was kicked out of high school art class.

In the light of the recent hullabaloo over public art in Brisbane, thank goodness Deller is safely ensconced in Britain and his work will stay in the Tate. One can't imagine how the locals would react at the sight of yet another art work that doesn't look as we still expect art to look - like a Russell Drysdale landscape.

Crazy, considering it is well over 90

years since the Dadaists broke the boundaries of the frame to explore the very meaning of art and how this meaning can be creatively challenged by something as banal as a bicycle wheel.

Back then there was indignation that such an object could be art, and people still dare utter out loud, "Is that really art?" This is particularly the case with public art. Consequently, public art is often disliked and distrusted.

My colleague Des Houghton has suggested (*C-M*, Dec 4) that there is too much bad public art in Brisbane and declared he is "getting a little weary of art snobs pontificating about the virtues of Queensland's public art".

There's no point debating whether Houghton is right or wrong about our public art being awful - that is a purely personal opinion and he has every right to express it. But it's odd that Houghton has coupled snobbery with public art

because this is the most democratic of art forms. People do not have to brave that often daunting cultural barrier and go to an art gallery to see it. Public art, for better or worse, is found where we live our daily lives - in the parks, the streets and inside public buildings.

Even law breakers have access to public art when they front up to the new

'It is a shame that what is truly a Smart State policy continues to get junked'

Brisbane Magistrates Court in Turbot St - hardly the stuff of art snobbery.

Public art gets criticised so much because it is so, well, public. If everyone saw what was going on in the art galleries of the world they would realise

that public art is pretty tame. Not all good art is an instant crowd-pleaser. When the French Impressionists first showed their work in Paris in the 19th century one critic hated it so much he remarked he wanted to go out and bite someone. Now Degas and Monet are considered traditional and way, way beyond our price range.

When former arts minister Matt Foley introduced the Art Built-In policy in 1999, the cynics smirked. How funny it would be to see hard-nosed builders working beside a gaggle of airy-fairy artists.

Yes, there has been friction, but building is a painstaking process.

Also, artists don't just romp up to the Government and declare their work is art and, therefore, must be made public. They have to submit a detailed submission through the Public Art Agency if it is a state government project. Houghton also suggests that Art Built-

In is a strange name for a policy, but it makes sense. It is art built in so it is part of the very fabric of a structure. This is what the idealistic Foley set out to achieve. He wanted to end the marginalisation of art to make it part of daily life.

Again, this makes sense and it is a shame that such a forward-thinking policy - truly a Smart State policy - continues to get junked by those who think too much public art is a waste of space.

As for Houghton's dire warnings of the next public art project to settle in our sphere of vision - Donna Marcus's saucepan lids and vegetable steamer installation earmarked for the CBD - it goes without saying that there will be complaints and mumbles about a waste of taxpayers' money. Hopefully, it won't cause anyone to bare their teeth like our Impressionist-hater. And you never know, someone might actually like it.

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