

Des Houghton's note



Off to the skip with junk art

I'M GETTING a little weary of art snobs pontificating about the virtues of Queensland's public art program. I'm especially tired of the way they are drooling over works like those dismembered hands on the footpath at Eagle St in Brisbane.

Sebastian Di Mauro's shiny sculpture, *Chat*, unfortunately has become a landmark. Only the other day I heard a young couple agreeing to meet at "the groping hands on Eagle".

I have long admired Di Mauro's better works, but groping hands isn't one of them.

The big aluminium hands are junk art on a par with the Sunshine Coast's Big Pineapple, and the unspeakably ugly Big Cassowary, which will scare the daylights out of you as you drive between Tully and Mission Beach.

To me, the big hands and the big bird look like leftovers from the set of a 1967 sci-fi movie.

A colleague, not normally known for his vulgarity, suggests the big hand with its raised index finger is the proctology association's memorial to John Hopoate.

Trendy sculptures with little artistic merit are bobbing up everywhere while Brisbane's incestuous "art club" is revelling in its own mediocrity.

Public art is being commissioned by the State Government at an alarming rate, and Brisbane City Council and some private companies have jumped on the bandwagon.

It's resulting in a Disneyfication of Brisbane and may eventually turn us into an international laughing stock.

Witness the looniest piece of all - Luke Roberts's *UFO* which hovers outside the Commonwealth Bank on Boundary St, West End.

It is satire surely, and some might suggest an appropriate artwork for the entrance to a suburb rich in Rastafarian hairstyles, funny cigarettes and rusty VWs with "No Nukes" stickers.

West End always was on another planet.

The public art push began innocently enough in 1999 when Minister for Social Engineering Matt Foley introduced the oddly-named Art Built-In policy.

Foley rightly feared we were getting a lot of cement and glass towers, and not much else.

The Queensland Government, he declared, would evermore devote 2 per cent of the budget of all government buildings over \$250,000 to footpath or foyer art, "ensuring that cultural expertise and contemporary discourse are an integral part of shaping the built environment and influencing the spirit of place".

Now Art Built-In is Foley's Curse as a mountain of ordinary art is churned out each year to meet the building boom. It's already starting to smell like a gravy train.

The real problem is that most of the works lack daring.

They are simply too tame, they are uncontroversial, and they are a waste of public funds.

Show me one work that is truly original, exciting and challenging.

Works that fail to provoke some reaction should be taken immediately to the nearest tip.

Into a big skip I would throw Richard Tipping's childish *Watermark* sculpture at the New Farm Powerhouse, which does nothing but interrupt a pleasant view of the river.

Also into the skip would go Barbara Heath's *Net*, clinging to the wall of the Neville Bonner Building in William St like a discarded yabbie trap.



THE good, the bad and the plain ugly . . . clockwise from right, Sebastain Di Mauro's *Chat* on Brisbane's Eagle St, Judy Watson's *Heart, Land, River*, Scott Redford's celebrated *ROCK* at Roma St Parkland, Daniel Templeman's *Confluence* and Barbara Heath's *Net* on the wall of the Neville Bonner Building

And out would go John Coleman's ridiculous *Cicada* at the Queensland Museum. As if we haven't got enough pesky insects already.

Despite my concerns, I'm not against public art.

The series of shelters along the cycling trail at the foot of the Kangaroo Point Cliffs are a small joy.

They work well because they have been carefully integrated into the boardwalk.

South Bank's serpentine arbour is a striking feature.

Roma Street Parkland is an outdoor gallery of some note - Rhyl Hinwood's carved sandstone pieces, Hew Chee Fong and L. M. Noonan's

water blocks and the stone and paving impressions of Lilla Watson and Vanessa Fisher are reasonably interesting.

But the parkland is rather cluttered.

Scott Redford's celebrated *ROCK* is a slightly amusing sculpture, but I am no fan. The large letters look like they have been jerked from the sleeve of Kiss's greatest hits. Is the skip full yet?

Nearby, George St's metal kangaroos, made from nuts and bolts, are banal.

Thieves tried to remove them a few years back and I'm sorry they were unsuccessful.

Not far away, at 33 Charlotte St, Sebastian Di Mauro is back with a

curious new work. *Drift*, a sculpture representing a seedpod or a cocoon. Although I'm not enthralled, I quite like it.

There has been a lot of backslapping over the art in the new Brisbane magistrates courts in Turbot St.

There are 14 major pieces of public art of varying merit.

At the entrance, Daniel Templeman's *Confluence* is a large metal ripple that successfully engages its site, perhaps thumbing its nose at the rigidity of the legal stonecrushing inside.

Functional too, for *Confluence* has fresh skid marks showing it to be a handy launch pad for skateboarders.

A major work inside is Judy

Watson's *Heart, Land, River*. It is a umph.

And what next for Brisbane?

Today, I can reveal that a set of large spheres will soon adorn the footcourt of the massive new Brisbane Square project on the corner of Queen and George in a commission worth \$400,000.

The spheres, of varying sizes, will be constructed by Gold Coast artist Donna Marcus from saucepan lids and vegetable steamers.

Water will be sprayed through them to create cooling mists.

Hmmm. Can't wait.