

Sydney Morning Herald Column Sculpture by the Sea 2017

Sculpture by the Sea 2017

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David Ball's 'Orb' took out the big prize

Sculpture by the Sea is 21 years old and everyone is invited to the party. From the moment the show opened last week the walk from Bondi to Tamarama was crowded with sightseers, school groups, and tourists speaking a confusion of languages worthy of the Tower of Babel. Cameras and mobile phones were clicking relentlessly. If it were possible to count the number of photos taken during the show's three-week season the total would be in the millions.

It's ironic that something as concrete as sculpture should find itself in a symbiotic relationship with the world of social media, but the selling point of this exhibition has always been its connection to the landscape. A sculpture that might look humdrum in a busy plaza takes on a dramatic new dimension when set against sea and sky.

Conversely such an environment poses a challenge for works that are too small or too timid. It's a problem *Sculpture by the Sea* (SXS) has never been able to outgrow because most artists simply do not have the means to create large-scale pieces. As a consequence the show is always filled out with sculptures that would be more at home in a corner of the lounge room rather than battling it out with the elements.

The other dichotomy is between works made by sculptors who believe that form is all-important, and by those who are satisfied with a visual gag. Every year there is much professional grumbling about these jokey works, but they are usually the most popular pieces. Some are genuinely witty, such as Jane Gillings's *Are We There Yet?* which looks certain to be a crowd-pleaser.


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Jen Gillings's 'Are We there Yet?' (detail)

Running alongside the stone steps at the edge of Mark's Park, Gillings has set a miniature road with dozens of toy vehicles and a row of humorous shop fronts (a store called "Betty's Machetes" sits next to "Clive's Knives" and so on). This will be a rocky road for the purists but it's attracting a lot of positive energy.

There were also mixed reactions when the Aqualand Sculpture Award of \$60,000 went to David Ball from Mittagong, for a large steel loop called *Orb*. The title refers to a tiny metal ball which breaks the loop, and also acts as the artist's signature. It's an elegant piece but purely formal in its concerns.

The prize is a good break for Ball, a talented but largely unsung sculptor. However, this year's stand-out entry is so obvious the judges may have felt compelled to look elsewhere (it's a common syndrome with art prizes!). In terms of scale, ambition and degree-of-difficulty, Harrie Fasher's *The Last Charge* is easily the most impressive work in the show. Placed on the ridge where Mark's Park faces the ocean, it features eight rusty steel horses made from shards and twisted rods. There's an incredible dynamism in this grouping, which honours the charge of the Light Horse at the Battle of Beersheba on 31 October, 1917.



Harrie Fasher's 'The Last Charge' led the field this year

How many boxes does a girl have to tick? Not only does the show coincide with the centenary of a famous event, the sculpture connects with two sculptural traditions: the war memorial and the equestrian statue. It's not a stately bronze effigy of a noble rider but a complex, semi-abstract ensemble of horses in motion that makes most of the other sculptures in the show look dull and conservative.

Fasher had one of the best entries last year, but this time she's made a superhuman effort. The Australian War Memorial should take a hard look at this piece.

The other sculptor who has given it everything is Peter Lundberg from the United States, who was a prize winner in 2012 and 2014. Lundberg's *Walking Woman* is arguably his best-ever entry but his previous successes may have counted against him. An oblique homage to Rodin's *Walking man* (c.1877) in cast concrete, Lundberg's work also has a sense of history, as this is the 100th anniversary of the great sculptor's death.

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Peter Lundberg's 'Walking Woman'

Concrete can be a lifeless medium but Lundberg manages to make it seem as tactile as clay. The work almost swaggers on its two giant legs.

Chinese artists feature at both ends of this year's show. At the beginning of the Bondi walk there's an eye-catching piece by Xia Hang called *Rangerer* – a massive, shiny, stainless steel, robotic dragon fly, bristling with weapons. This piece of apocalyptic science fiction is matched by a vision of perfect harmony at the Tamarama end, in Chen Wenling's *Autumn Moon in the Sky*. The work features one of Chen's signature red boys reclining on a stainless steel cloud, under a crescent moon.



Chen Wenling's 'Autumn Moon in the Sky'

This harmonious scenario is somewhat overshadowed by the looming bulk of J rge Plickart's *Existence (Just a Loop in Time)*, the other stand-out piece at Tamarama.

After 21 years SXS has become a Sydney institution. Founding director, David Handley is quick to point out that some of this year's younger participants have grown up with the show and been inspired by it.

I wish this meant 2017 was notable for brilliant young discoveries, but the most prominent entries belong to the old stagers. Chief among them must be Orest Keywan, who is celebrating his twentieth SXS appearance, with a spacious, allusive work called *Bronze Age*. Paul Selwood's *Phyli* is an ingenious piece of steel origami, made with no more than a few strategic cuts and folds. Ron Robertson-Swann's *Delphi* is a stylised altar.



Orest Keywan's 'Bronze Age'

With 104 works on display it's impossible to go into too much detail, but as is often the case, the strongest pieces are clustered in Mark's Park, while the weakest are scattered along the pathways. There are exceptions to this generalisation but every viewer will see it a bit differently, which is the best aspect of this broadly democratic event.

SXS has become part of the fabric of life in Sydney and once again it has worked its familiar magic. For months the city has been praying out for rain but the gods wouldn't budge until the day those sculptures were in place. Listening to the downpour on my rooftop I'm wondering how many thousands of people are soaking it up somewhere between Bondi and Tamarama.

Sculpture by the Sea 2017

Bondi to Tamarama, until 19 October – 5 November, 2017

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