

PORT OF CALL



Fremantle's initially ambivalent attitude to public art has resulted in a biennale that binds the city's occupants in their curiosity and community, writes **Victoria Laurie**

A few weeks ago an art heist took place in the dead of night in Fremantle. Stolen was "Bella", the large bronze figure of a woman swimmer who sat with her back to the Indian Ocean at Bathers Beach, a four-minute walk from the CBD.

The 150kg sculpture has not been seen since.

"Now she rests in some thief's backyard probably with a view of a Super 6 fence and a Hills Hoist – which may or may not be slightly better than the railway fence and dumpster next door to the fish-and-chip shop she was previously oriented towards," notes the architectural team at design company UDLA.

As part of the 2019 Fremantle Biennale, the team has installed a tongue-in-cheek sculptural memorial to Bella at the site where she was stolen, a giant "Bellascope" that scans the horizon looking for her.

The cheeky tribute – and the \$100,000 theft itself – is typical of Fremantle's ambivalent attitude to public art. Thirty years ago, when the port city was riding high hosting the 1987 America's Cup challenge, the sculptural brilliance of Ben Lexcen's winged keel attracted more interest than any bit of art.

And in the 1990s a public art commission of broken pillar forms by artist Jon Tarry was due to be installed in Fremantle's civic square, but it attracted such a hostile public response that it was stopped mid-project.

"It was a shame," Fremantle council's public art co-ordinator Corine van Hall says. "The confidence was taken out of council and it's taken a long time to bring it back."

Yet nothing could better demonstrate a resurgence of confidence than the current Biennale, which opened on November 1 and runs for three weeks.

The event's aim is to attract "site-responsive art from Australian and international artists responding to the history, landscape and communities that make up the rich tapestry of Fremantle".

The Biennale's first incarnation, titled High Tide, ran for two weeks in November 2017 with work from more than 35 international, local and national artists.

The program included the first major commission in Australia by Swiss artist Felice Varini, an installation called Arcs d'Ellipses that stretched 800m along Fremantle's High Street.

The yellow circles enveloping the scene were revealed in their entirety only when viewed from the historic Round House at the end of the street.

Yet this public art piece also came in for a pasting. "It was so

popular that we asked if it could be extended beyond the original few weeks, and at that point we probably should have tested whether we could flick it off," van Hall says.

As it turned out, Varini's yellow tape had stuck fast to the shopfront walls. "Our very hot sun had just baked it on to the building surfaces." Eight months on, the art tape had been removed carefully from the buildings, but not before a former mayor threatened to sue for the damage.

Not surprisingly, van Hall says the Biennale has opted for more ephemeral installations this year. It opened with Daan Roosegaarde's evocative light-and-mist "virtual flood" show Waterlicht, and includes a playful series of architectural booths — structures ranging from a hole-in-the-wall seat for one to contemplate the ocean, to a cube made from fishing nets and recycled plastics — along a walking route through Fremantle port.

This year's program, themed Undercurrent, includes 15 new commissions, engaging more than 40 local, national and international artists. The festival trail extends from the High Street "spine" — where the action was concentrated in 2017 — to the spaces around Fremantle's biggest waterside asset, its port.

"This Biennale is about the periphery, exploring the coast and the port site," says Tom Muller, an artist who doubles as Fremantle Biennale's founding artistic director (with co-curators van Hall and Katherine Wilkinson).

"The Fremantle Port Authority has been amazing," he says. "Two years ago, we approached them with all the sites we wanted to work with and got clearance. At the same time, we approached particular artists who we thought would be fitting, so the site and artistic commissions happened simultaneously."

Exhibitions, performances and installations are encountered as you take a leisurely walking tour to the port's South and North Mole, Maritime Museum, Old Customs House and Fishing Boat Harbour.

It took a bit of persuading, Muller admits, to convince port authorities to allow a shanty town to spring up at South Mole, where you can book into a spa, shop at a souvenir store or even spend a night in this "holiday hamlet" inside an industrial port.

Grandly named South Mole Resort, it is in fact a tiny impromptu town made from found or scavenged building materials. It is the latest in artist Jesse Lee Johns's self-proclaimed republics, complete with passports and visas, that he has installed in various locations. He has renamed the Perth suburb in which he

lives "the Commonwealth of New Bayswater". Johns says he's obsessed with the idea of secession and trying to live by one's own rules — and then finding it impossible.

"You can start a country, but there's no economy, no income. You try to be a recluse and support yourself and you end up having to open a beach resort." Johns says the Fremantle Biennale "is a fantastic event and a great opportunity for people to come in and do great work. There's a lot of trust involved."

There are several walking tours on offer as part of the festival, including a tour through Oberon-class submarine HMAS Ovens, which sits in a dry dock next to the soaring sail roof structure of the West Australian Maritime Museum.

After climbing 9m-high scaffolding stairs and bending down through narrow hatchways, the visitor encounters the sonic legacy of this Cold War-era vessel.

The acoustic work Standing Wave is the work of Lawrence English, who curates Borderlands for Dark MOFO in Hobart and has run his own Sound 40 studio in Brisbane for 20 years.

English has thought hard about the Cold War era of "listening to things that should and should not have been heard".

He says the Oberon-class submarines were prized for their sophisticated surveillance capacity — "they had hydrophonic arrays on the submarine that could literally track a single boat coming out of New York harbour from the other side of the world".

"The Cold War still echoes today; a lot of the current points of tension are an echo of that era, and the Ovens vessel is a way of reconsidering those implications now," English says. "We are still listening, just more deeply."

Thirteen mini-pavilions — involving 50 local architects, designers and builders — extend along the original Fremantle shoreline, which now contains the busy port.

One site on busy Victoria Quay near the ferries to Rottnest, Perth's holiday island, commemorates the fact Rottnest was once a prison, and that Noongar women lit fires nearby to act as a beacon for prisoners fleeing the island.

"The pavilions offer a new vantage point, or new iterations of Fremantle," says Muller. "The brief is to create a simple but intimate space for one person at a time."

Another project, Theatre of the Sea's performance piece Somnus, is a Slovenian-Australian commission featuring 50 chorists and a cast of 30 exploring sleep and nocturnal imagination.

A film commission resulted in Pearls and Blackbirds, Kelsey



Somnus, a performative installation by Theatre of the Sea, left; Pearls and Blackbirds by Australian artist and curator Kelsey Ashe, above

Ashe's 40-minute feature filmed underwater in the seas around Fremantle. *Pearls and Blackbirds* examines the undercurrents of WA's lucrative pearling industry, which relied on female Aboriginal pearl divers and Japanese migrants who came through the port of Fremantle on their way north in the late 19th century.

"She takes the historical connotations of blackbirding, but her film will return the pearls where they came from," says Muller. "It's a confronting journey that takes you through the undercurrents of our state."

Behavioural Ecologies (Red) is a freewheeling group of 20 or 30 performers dressed in red and white who will wander the port city raising red flags, gathering 100 red cars and staging a big event at the Red Lighthouse on South Mole.

Muller describes it as "unscripted interventions and disruptions happening around Fremantle" during the Biennale's program.

English observes that, like Hobart, Fremantle has a strong sense of community. "To me the Biennale makes a lot of sense; it's a group of local people thinking about the place where they live and what they would like that place to be. You can see the reach of it already and the curiosity of people living here."

He suggests the Biennale's free-spirited nature is especially valuable in a state where art institutions appear to be less flexible — "everything seems very much set in stone".

"A Biennale opens up the possibilities of this kind of work — there are fresh ears and fresh eyes," English says.

Muller concurs. "The Biennale emerged from the fact that fewer people come to visit institutions in a controlled environment. There's almost a sense of frustration, of seeking attention, of trying to make art relevant again. Placing art back into the public realm is a way of forcing that reconnection with the public to have an artistic experience."

But he says Fremantle has suffered through the years and the Biennale is a tonic. "Then there has been a commercial downturn, with shops closing. There's a generational shift too — many

of the older Italian shop owners had a different way of engaging with life.

"We've been living with a post-bohemian sense that Fremantle is how it should be, a sense of complacency that it's a museum town with a produce market, 'so leave it alone'. We'd say it's much more than that.

"There's a real sense of a village, a community in this place that's special. We want to share that with the rest of our state. The mayor and council have been instrumental in creating all of this because they see the value in creating a new cultural currency."

Van Hall says the Biennale, whose funding reached \$500,000 this year, aspires to help local artists "get real budgets and present their work at a national and international level".

"We hope in future to take it overseas because we're here on the Indian Ocean Rim, and we'd like to take our artists into the biennale circuit and start trading. There are biennales in India, Hong Kong, Vietnam and other places we'd like to approach.

"These first two years we wanted to establish a very particular aesthetic, a localised response to site. That's the difference here, that every artist must respond to the site they're given.

"Now we've set a high benchmark and people are attracted to



Art is not just there to be beautiful or ugly but to activate the place

Daan Roosegaarde

it. So the next two years will be spent looking for partners internationally. That's the thinking, although it might take more time than that. We're aiming for longevity with the Biennale, but we have to make it self-supporting."

On the opening weekend, Roosegaarde's fluid water sculpture enchanted viewers who stood under the mist-and-blue-light magic of *Waterlicht*, which the internationally renowned Dutch artist brought straight from a popular outing in New York.

Waterlicht transformed the city's Esplanade Reserve with a layer of fine water particles lit by LED lights and lenses that illuminate the airborne "waves".

"It's like being under a blanket, people start to whisper, others stare at it for hours," says Roosegaarde. "It's beautiful but a bit scary — you sense the possibility of flood. You have the waves taking away land here in Australia, and you have drought. Both abundance and lack of water."

Roosegaarde's design studio has been lauded internationally for creating pollution-removing air vacuum sculptures and pavements that glow in the dark from daytime sunlight capture.

"For me, climate change is bad design, or unconscious design," he says. "We can do one of several things, we can feel sad and lonely, and wait for instructions, or we can say: 'Let's design our way out of it.'"

"That's what the Fremantle Biennale is for, to open up the discussion and talk about new solutions. They are a young team, making a platform for knowledge and discussion, where art is not just there to be beautiful or ugly but to activate the place."

On one evening, as if nature was doggedly determined to join in, *Waterlicht* was hit by waves of drenching spring rain. Roosegaarde, ever upbeat, didn't mind at all.

"The rain hits the light and creates diamonds, so it actually becomes more beautiful. So I say: come and hang out, wonder, enjoy, share."

The 2019 Fremantle Biennale program runs until November 24.

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