



# Arid – a sculptural collaboration

**SAM YATES**  
project coordinator



*Arid* started in 2004 as an audience development project, a sculpture joint venture between Fountain Gallery and the Australian Arid Lands Botanic Garden. Both places are owned by the council and the idea was to try and capture the audience that already exists at the garden and introduce them to the gallery. Nothing like that had been done before. When I came on board, I also wanted to use it to do something about acknowledging local sculptors and provide an opportunity for them to show their work.

Port Augusta is a very creative town. There are lots of Aboriginal artists and heaps of artists generally. And not just visual artists but musicians and so on. We launched the first show on the same weekend as the *Eremophila Festival* and so basically we had an audience straight away. (*Eremophila* is an arid plant!) We had buses running for free from the gallery to the Arid Lands and that was another good initiative to get people inside. In that first year, artists were invited from all over Australia to take part but they mainly came from Port Augusta and the immediate region. They made the works off-site and were paid a nominal fee. The works were spread around these magnificent gardens and the outcome was so

good and so positive that we said straight away, 'We need to do this again.' In 2004 the show went for four weeks but so much work goes into it that I said, 'Next time, let's do six weeks.' And that's what we did in 2006. In 2008, we've extended it yet again.

I have a committee which works hard. I always create a committee! This one is mainly made up of people from the Friends of Australian Arid Lands Botanic Garden, volunteers, the tourism development officer and council staff, mainly from Parks and Gardens. You need those council boys to move heavy things around. We've had a curator, Harry Koch, and as the local arts officer, I do bits and pieces of everything.

I'm really happy about how the event is growing and who is represented. We obviously wanted a strong Indigenous component but sculpture was not really the thing for these Indigenous artists. I mean, it was one of the original forms of art for Aboriginal people but it sort of dropped away into a 2D thing, painting. So we ran some Indigenous sculptural workshops funded by Arts SA to try and inspire people back into thinking about 3D. And that was really successful. In that first year we had three Aboriginal artists take part but two years later, we had eight.

In the lead up to the 2006 event, we also had an artist-in-residence in Port Augusta Secondary School and at the youth centre for disadvantaged kids. And we had a program at Baxter Detention Centre as well. We wanted to give the refugees a voice in the community and the sculpture they

produced was a beautiful mosaic, which went back to Baxter until it closed down and now it's in the Fountain Gallery.

The theme for 2006 was 'Water – save and conserve' and of the 27 works, 12 came from regional areas or interstate and 15 were from Port Augusta. There was a beautiful sculptural piece from Roxby Downs called *Dance with the Brolgas* by Rachel and Mark Young and it was all metal and welding and it was just a beautiful interpretation.

And then there was *On Tenterhooks* by a Northern Territory artist called Julie Milton. She was an installation artist and she spent five days before the exhibition opening creating her work. People got to watch her make it. It was hundreds of half eggshells in a pathway up to a tree and we wanted to keep that sculpture in the garden so we could watch it. It lasted about three months, the birds would come down and peck little holes and slowly it disintegrated. We loved watching that.

We have been able to acquire a couple of pieces including a wonderful sculpture from 2004 called *Birthplace*. It's made of white Hebel block, basically a giant pregnant woman and it's such a significant story for us. Port Augusta is the birthing place for women all around the region. Women from everywhere used to come here to have their babies because the water's here. The women still come and the place where the hospital is built was actually where the birthing centre was for Aboriginal people. That idea... oh, it sends shivers up me. It was an Aboriginal man, Donny McKenzie, who created it and he had to get approval from his aunts to be able to sculpt a female and a pregnant one. And it's wonderful.

We don't have a sculpture art prize in South Australia and we would love to make *Arid* an acquisitive competition. That takes a lot of money, of course, but I've been talking to two big mining companies and we'll keep our fingers crossed. In the 2008 show, we'll auction the works and have a gala night for the sponsors and hopefully have them sign up again.

Now that we've begun we've gone past our original goals and it will only get bigger and better.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

*Metal Serpent* by Craig Ellis (Cello)  
PHOTO: SAM YATES

*Dance with the Brolgas* by Rachel and Mark Young  
PHOTO: CARLY SHARP

*Birthplace* by Donny McKenzie  
PHOTO: SAM YATES