

# Producing public art

by June Cummings

Sydney, of all Australian cities is least endowed with public art, so it is almost an apology that a recent major work is underground.

However for artists Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford, it is the very 'understatement' of the site that gives the piece its celebratory raison d'être and artistic licence to explore a new medium.

When the grand old Mark Foys department store (which in the 1980s suddenly found itself at the wrong end of town for retailing) was purchased by the state government, heritage listed and reincarnated as Law Courts, the subway entrance to the building also came in for a facelift.

The entrance to the tunnel which leads to Museum Station on Elizabeth Street, provided an ideal showcase for Mark Foys wares and was lined either side with floor to ceiling display cases. The new owners of the Mark Foys building the NSW Attorney General's Department in conjunction with architects Peddle Thorpe decided that this aspect of the building's precinct should be conserved and commissioned an art work.

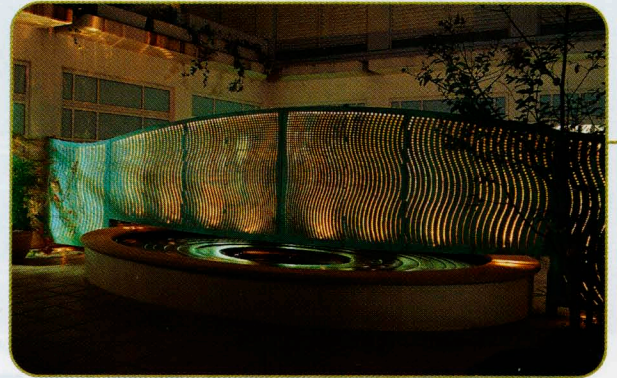
Jennifer Turpin is no newcomer to public art. She chose this monumental art form while still a student at the Sydney College of the Arts and her medium is water. Her collaborator Michaelie Crawford is similarly qualified.

But what to do with old display cases built into the walls of a tunnel.

Turpin says, "We explored the notion of the tunnel and through research discovered there is a whole network of tunnels under the city. We also became interested in historic water tunnels and found that near the site was Busby's Bore dug by convicts in the 1800s which took water from Lachlan Swamp in Centennial Park to the town. Also the headquarters of the Tank Stream is not far away. "Then the builder found seepage in the tunnel so it seemed appropriate to work with the concept of water and underground water. So notions of seepage and flow and what happens to water took hold along with the celebration of underground water and the idea of a network of tunnels under the city."

Turpin says. "We came at it from two ways - poetic imagery versus working water." Turpin has chosen a new medium, film, to portray water.

The glass fronted display cases on one side of the



tunnel encase moving light patterns of water-like imagery, refracting, floating and these images are reflected in the dark smoked glass fronts of the cases on the opposite wall.

Also two thin cases protrude from the opposite wall, backlit with maps and drawings of early water supply systems from that part of Sydney and are overlaid with texts about legal cases on subterranean water. This represents the working water imagery and the legal connection with Mark Foys transformation from a retail store into Law Courts.

"A lawyer researched old cases on subterranean water which was all about ownership codified in law, for what is a natural phenomenon, for example seepage injuring other land. The language was interesting, water percolating, oozing, seeping through the ground," Turpin says.

The imagery of the display cases has also undergone transformation. Rather than bright showy advertisements for consumerism, they have been re-united with their subterranean origins. The effect of the all embracing blue/back watery walls and illuminated neat white text is one of tranquillity and womb-like protection, but also mystery.

"Because the poetry of the water is contained by the original copper frames we have called the whole art work Tank." Turpin says.

Bringing the concept to reality was a difficult technical exercise. Work was confined to the 40m display windows with 35m of glass divided into cases 3.5m high by 4m wide and their existing transoms and doorways. In order to project a film of water onto the glass, projectors had to be concealed behind the doorways to the cases and deployed to reflect back.

"We spent nine months in the studio getting the images, which is largely a technical process. Because of the limitations of the space we went to the CSIRO and looked at lenses and worked with physicists working in optics, but always as artists. We have used wide angled







lenses to bring light back and forth on very large concealed mirrors.”

Trying to identify the budget was another skilful exercise, which was finally arrived at after the artists started by submitting high cost concepts and honed them.

Identifying the site was also trepidacious. “The tunnel was boarded up for years so we had to do everything from drawings. We went into the tunnel by torchlight a couple of times.”

“It was a big learning experience.” Turpin says, “ You try to do something unusual in public spaces, but construction sites are tricky places, fitting in with the culture of project managers, and architects all trying to maintain their integrity.”

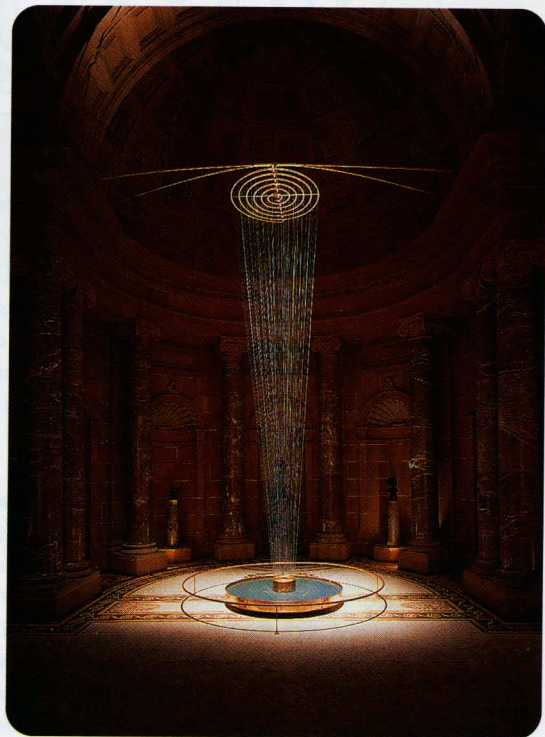
But, Victor Essey of Gondella Pty Ltd the builders responsible for the tunnel reclamation was a “dream builder”. “We worked closely with the builder. He was a sympathetic, charming, patient, resourceful man. He enjoyed the process of working with artists and cared about the quality of the final product. He anticipated problems before we did and offered solutions.”

On a personal level, Turpin says she is fascinated by the physics and optics of water “because the way you see water is the way light affects it”. Along with collaborating with Michaelie Crawford she also works with her father Peter who is a retired engineer.

Since the mid 1980’s Turpin has had a string of public art commissions and exhibitions of her work.

Probably the highlight was 1994 when the Art Gallery of NSW exhibited “Water Works” in its foyer. Monumental in scale, Turpin says this piece works with gravity and surface tension, forcing a 6m high curtain of water to run down slightly askew fine nylon lines for a rainforest-like liquified air effect.

In collaboration with her father she has two pieces in the



new Westmead Children’s Hospital. “Drawers of Water” is 4m high with water incongruously cascading down tiers of timber drawers. “Well” is a very shallow, 25mm elliptical pool where a standing wave effect flows into a central well. It has a backdrop of a very fine screen, lit at night.

More recently, a collaboration with Michaelie Crawford, has produced solar powered water sculptures.

In a design concept for the Olympic Games called “Solar Flowers”, solar panels are placed on tapered steel poles or stalks, like sunflowers with their faces to the sun and the solar energy collected is used to pump bubbling water in a lagoon, with the bubbles varying in intensity according to the levels of sunlight.

A similar principle has been used for “Solar Sprays”, a sculpture in Manila, where 40 to 50 flexible hoses have been attached to the poles of the solar collectors. Responding to the solar energy, the hoses swirl making liquid drawings in the air.

Another of Turpin’s water pieces is in the Brisbane International Airport and she has recently won a commission for a water fountain in the Denton Corker Marshall designed office building for 363 George Street, Sydney.

**Opposite page:**  
Brisbane  
International Airport  
‘Water Sculpture’

‘Drawers of Water’

‘Well’

**This page:**  
‘Tank’

**Victor Essey, Michaelie  
Crawford, Jennifer  
Turpin at work in the  
tunnel**

‘Water Works 111’

‘Solar Sprays’

