

Bluewater Trail Public Art, Mackay

True North by Donna Marcus

When Donna Marcus was approached to develop concepts for public art outside a new shopping centre in Mackay, she was aware of Mackay's significant investment and interest in culture, particularly the program delivered by Artspace Mackay since the new gallery was built in 2003, and the public artwork developed by Fiona Foley for the Bluewater Trail along the Pioneer River.ⁱ Having lived in regional centres as a child, she knew the part that investment in cultural facilities may play in the civic life of the community. She was also drawn to the commission by the ambitious plan for Canelands Central. As a result she approached it with an innate appreciation of the potential of the new shopping centre for Mackay residents, "a space designed for people to use and to be".ⁱⁱ

In this context, Marcus has created visually commanding sculpture that is also sympathetic to the "beautiful, simple void" of the interior architecture of the shopping centre. The design of the building, by Lend Lease architect Darren Kindrachuk, was influenced by the rural and industrial structures that have been so important to Mackay and this resonates strongly with Marcus's sculptures. Constructed to her specifications from marine buoys, they are utilitarian in materials yet anchored to both the community's vibrant economy and its ties to the sea. The layers of ideas float as far and wide as universal consumption and the ethics of modernism.

The siting of these colourful beacons also creates a visual link between the populated shopping centre and the Pioneer River that takes Mackay to an international market. They speak both to the history of the city and, aesthetically, to the contemporary concerns in Foley's large-scale public art works along the Bluewater Trail.

Using the nautical term *True North*, the four sculptures exhibit strong colour combinations with industrial and recreational referencesⁱⁱⁱ. *True North* is strident in its yellow and black (the colours of work) and hangs at the front of the building, a beacon that draws the eye. *Isolated Danger* is an intense black and red. These two buoys are hung high off the ground under the canopy of the shopping centre. The other two, located on the other side of the Matsuura Avenue, along the river, are playfully red and white. Red, when it occurs in nature, is often a danger signal. It has been adopted for its visibility on the seas, but within this sculptural group also speaks to the connection of Mackay to its sister city, Matsuura, in Japan. Matsuura's floral emblem is the red and white camellia, with these colours also echoed in the country's national flag, carousels, and nautical structures. Importantly in this context however, the red and white buoys flag their given nautical meaning, "safe water", and refer to the buoys marking safe passage north, through Queensland's Great Barrier Reef, to Matsuura.

The conceptual cues in the seafaring connection are reinforced in the construction of these sculptures. Built to last, and with minimal maintenance requirements, they are constructed by assembling off the shelf polyethylene ocean buoys in the selected colours. These components were built in Victoria by buoy manufacturers Sealite^{iv} and designed for assembly on site in Mackay by fabricator Stainless Aesthetics. Marcus stated, "Director Mike Mooney's craftsmanship is seamless". They are colourful nautical sentinels, lit in the evenings by marine LED lighting and, at double human height, dwarf the viewer at close range. At night they attract from many kilometres away.

There is a seductive quality in ocean buoys. "You see them lined up on people's decks and other places. Something about them is part of our larger consciousness of the size of the ocean, the fundamental attraction of water, but they also have a simple ship-like beauty and functional aesthetic. Everything about them is highly designed and finished for the purpose," noted Marcus.

The simplicity inherent in this manufacture and construction system is a hallmark of Marcus's work. She is possibly best known for her reuse of old aluminium cookware to construct studio sculptural work, often on a large scale. Her public artwork, built with original and fabricated materials, has been highly influenced by the design principles of Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983), a visionary whose understanding of global problems back in the 1930s and 1940s was extraordinarily sophisticated.^v Fuller was a pioneer, advocating energy and material efficiencies and Marcus has adopted his ethics, investing in innovation and utilizing the best available technologies to make sculpture quickly and well. She noted, "There is a real synergy between then and now in reuse and economies".

Fuller, in his book, *I Seem To Be a Verb* (1970), wrote: "I live on Earth at present, and I don't know what I am. I know that I am not a category. I am not a thing—a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process—an integral function of the universe."^{vi}

Marcus's mature work echoes this sentiment both in the holistic capture of her oeuvre and in her approach to its execution. In *True North*, giant buoys float on land but are visible from kilometers away at sea, hundreds of kilometers in space. Within that there is a holistic embrace of the vastness of the universe, with recognition that our place within it may be miniscule but our *modus operandi* is not insignificant.

The unexpected nature of ocean buoys floating in a celebratory fashion on dry land is whimsical, poetic, and odd enough to stimulate the imagination. Roland Barthes wrote, "The quick-change artistry of plastic is absolute: it can become buckets as well as jewels."^{vii} In *True North* Marcus shows us this transformation. Utility becomes artistry, function becomes concept, and the familiar becomes exotic. Her sources resonate through modernity and are marked by innovation. In the journey she traverses we view the materials of the age, positioning Mackay within the global economy, whilst paying tribute to the local.

Louise Martin-Chew
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ⁱ Marcus spent time in Mackay creating a private sculptural commission for the foyer of Mackay's Lanai Apartments in 2009.

ⁱⁱ All quotes by Donna Marcus from interviews with the author 2011 & 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ True North, Isolated Danger, and Safe Waters are all titles given to buoys with these colour combinations by manufacturers Sealite.

^{iv} (an Australian company which is a global leader in marine buoy and lighting technologies)

^v http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buckminster_Fuller

^{vi} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buckminster_Fuller

^{vii} *Mythologies by Roland Barthes*, selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers, Hill & Wang, New York, ca.1954-56: p.97.