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A community artwork conceived and produced by David Humphries. Commissioned by AMP – an official partner of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games

SIGN FOR THE DREAM

The Olympic Journey Celebration Pathway – Darling Harbour, Sydney 2000

RESTING in the grassy verge, just outside the Convention Centre at Darling Harbour in Sydney, is a 36-metre snake pathway. Its skin ripples with 23,000 etched Australian names that shine dark blue on discs of marbled terrazzo. Glinting in the sun, this large-scale community artwork is a lasting message from the people of Australia to the Olympians of the 2000 Sydney Games.

The artwork is the final result of *Sign for the Dream*, the pathway of goodwill conceived and executed by international Australian artist, David Humphries.

Humphries calls himself a “public” artist. In order to define this role, it becomes necessary to resort to theatrical terms, or describe what he is not. He is variously a scenographer; a conceptualiser of form, colour and decoration in public space; a designer and the person who can help a community, client or architect realise messages about a space or environment through an artwork. Then, working with artists and artisans, Humphries orchestrates their skills to make the idea a reality in whatever form has been designated – mural, terrazzo floor, or sculptural installation.

David Humphries – Creator of the Olympic project ‘Sign for the Dream’



The idea of this Olympic project was to devise a monumental artwork that would not only galvanise the community, but also express in some way the thoughts and feelings of ordinary Australians in the months and years before Sydney hosted the Olympic Games.

What eventuated was a distillation of a brainstorming session between Humphries and the staff at AMP, the sponsor, but reflected decades of understanding in Humphries of the significance of art in public places, the processes and mechanisms that inspire public participation, and the most effective ways of expressing the ideas or themes as an exciting and coherent work of art. It was an inspired suggestion



Humphries’ initial concept sketch for the Celebration Pathway in 1997



PHOTO: FERRY TWEEDIE

Detail of river snake terrazzo

that messages and family names could be etched into a terrazzo path and then installed at a prominent site. The project was named *Sign for the Dream*.

The organising committee for the Games had already planned an advance parade and picnic featuring the huge mascots, former Olympic athletes and performers in towns across Australia; it seemed natural that during this lead-up to the Games, people could be invited to offer messages of warmth and welcome and to *Sign for the Dream* with their family names.

And so it eventuated. Each of the 23 communities was allotted a single disc of acetate on which the names were signed.



Signing a disc at one of the 23 cities

At each venue the atmosphere was one of feverish excitement as hundreds queued for hours outside the tents set up to house the *Sign for the Dream* centre. Inside, as each person came closer to signing some became nervous in case their hand shook; such was the emotive force and significance of the opportunity to immortalise their family name. Each disc ended up containing at least 1,000 such names. Placed side by side and transformed into terrazzo in the final design, these discs combine to form the back of a snake, like a serpent carrying eggs or a riverine waterway with its floating craft.



David Humphries with a terrazzo disc depicting the Earth seen from space

The image of a snake is a powerful linking concept for many people – think of the Pacific sea gods, the dragons and serpents of Asia and the symbols of the Ancient World. Large serpentine rivers meander across the continents of the world and, when seen from above, this image begins to explain several other aspects of Humphries' exciting concept – as a reference to the many routes to Australia travelled by athletes and visitors, it is typical of the metaphors he has employed in many of his public installations.

The most common image, one that links the designs he has done for many sites, is the planetary overview of Earth as seen from space, that was first beamed to humanity by orbiting satellites. This image has been employed by Humphries in Darling Harbour, Robina Town Square, St Mary's Cathedral and elsewhere in Australia.

For Humphries, this is the most important image to appear in his generation – it showed us that we were a speck in the universe, one community that must cooperate to ensure survival. What better image to use in public art. In his terrazzo tributes, Earth becomes the circle and the clouds of the atmosphere become softened wave-like ripples of shielding colour.

Each sphere of this work can be interpreted as a microcosm of the Earth itself – yet at the same time, each represents a particular community – the embodiment of the maxim for the environment movement: "Think globally, Act locally". The family names will be there to read for a long time to come. For some families who signed, this was a gesture towards long life and posterity – they would be "immortalised", at least for the duration of the terrazzo surface, as having played a small role in such a significant historic event.

It has been sited at a key Olympic venue in a well-frequented part of the city, and close to water, as it should be, if the snake's symbolic



From 23 cities across Australia, families immortalised their names with good wishes to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games 'Sign for the Dream'



connection to journeys, and waterways, is to be upheld.

With the Olympic sponsor AMP, Humphries selected some of the key phrases and messages collected at venues along the route of the journey across Australia in order to form banners across each disc. These messages, together with the thousands of signatures on the discs, became a powerful and resonating set of documents for which Humphries felt keenly his role as guardian. He had been entrusted

to carry these messages to completion by making from them a permanent artwork for the city.

On reflection, Humphries is awed by the scale of the task he set himself and recalls the work of another man, another mark maker with a message for mankind, Arthur Stace, who for decades anonymously marked the streets of Sydney with the beautifully handwritten chalked word *Eternity*.

The unknown poet and his copperplate hand made "eternity" an unsolved mystery of the city. A sign of the hold the word and legend took on the public imagination is its immortalisation in lights on the Sydney Harbour Bridge as over a million people watched from the harbour foreshores during the first



People of all ages were motivated to sign their family name for posterity man, along with the obsessively inspired muralist Gully Jimson (as played by Sir Alec Guinness in the film classic *The Horse's Mouth*), are figures who inspired their wild and creative youth as outsiders.

All the big public and community art projects Humphries has been involved with over three decades carry messages or have metaphors within the design. These came not only from his personal symbolic references but also from the communities that initiated the project, from the brainstorming workshops to the corporate boardroom or factory floor, whether people are involved by sponsoring the work or having to live with it on a daily



moments of the New Millennium. Humphries has also maintained a remarkable commitment to creating memorable and moving visual statements throughout the city.

The final sphere in his Pathway Project is a permanent tribute to Arthur Stace on which Humphries etched the signatures of his own family, friends and supporters, to surround and support the poet's message – *Eternity*.

For many artists who grew up in Sydney in the 1970s, the *Eternity*

basis in the workplace or streets. Humphries' work is thus claimed and owned fully by the community from which it grew.

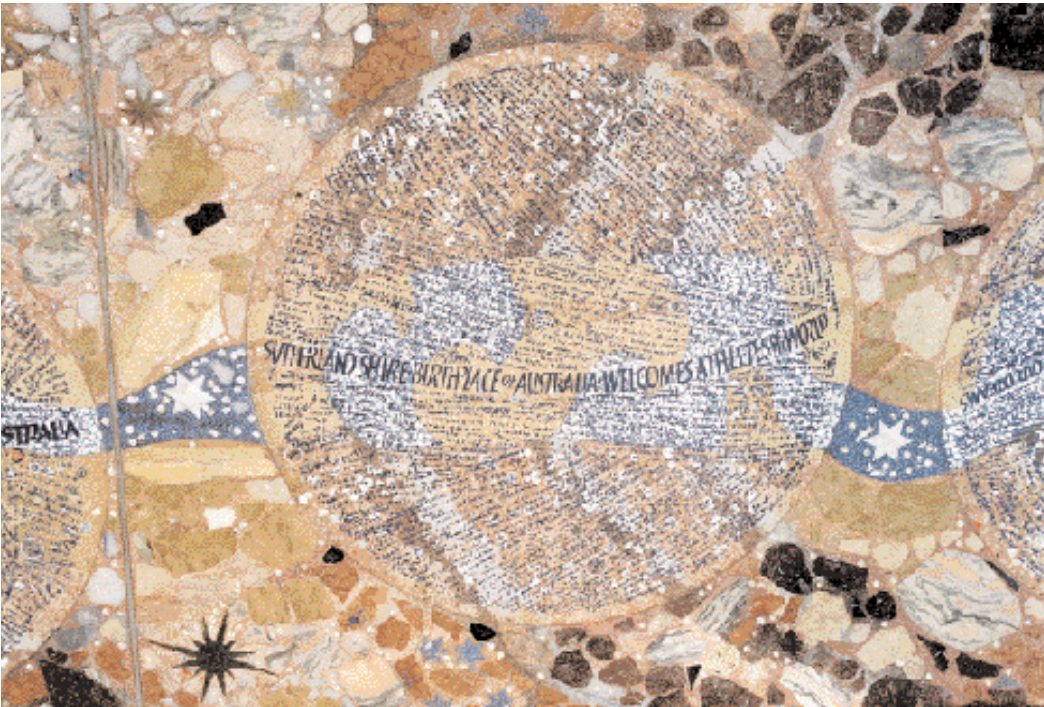
Yet Humphries' public art projects are not just interesting messages, however profound, they really work as art. Many are characterised by a typically heightened sense of colour, a freedom of expression in execution and a certain naive playfulness. Others, created for government instrumentalities, are elegant and Modernist – the most



Resin infilling into names sandblasted onto a terrazzo disc



On site installation at Darling Harbour, Sydney



'Sign for the Dream' – Artist statement: 'Composed of the marks made by hands of thousands of Australians, it records cultural diversity and symbolises unity. It welcomes athletes and visitors, and beams the collective good wishes of the Australian community in true Olympic spirit.'

recent being an original historic map (drawn by the designer of Canberra, Walter Burley Griffin) reinterpreted into a stunning terrazzo artwork for the forecourt of the Canberra Exhibition Centre at Regatta Point.

Never intimidated by large visions, Humphries always takes hold of the space within and between the existing structures and has fun – so does the viewer!

After growing up in Wollongong, Humphries studied art at the National Art School. His subsequent career has encompassed community festivals, a stint heading community arts administration for the NSW Government, Director of Applied and Decorative Arts for Merlin International Properties and numerous projects and murals in Australia and overseas. With only a handful of others, Humphries literally created a genre that had not existed in Australia previously. The Public Art Squad murals of the 1970s and early '80s galvanised communities and showed local governments how to be creative. At

Detail of names on terrazzo surface



the time of the unveiling in 1988 of Harbourside, Darling Harbour, and subsequently Skygarden, he was lauded as creating the benchmark for the era in the cooperative ventures between artists and artisans in public buildings.

But Humphries was to go further, finding even greater stimulation in new possibilities offered by the medium of terrazzo. Commencing with the important floors in the Reception Hall of the Cardinal's House at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, he went on to forge a new pathway for art in public places by taking advantage of the medium as an exciting process of art making. Over the past decade Humphries has undertaken an extensive range of terrazzo commissions, on each occasion working with artisans who had a complete understanding of the techniques and history of the medium, from ancient times to the present day.

The crypt of St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney has a historic terrazzo floor made by Peter Melocco in the 1940s. For Humphries, this work has always been a source of inspiration. The commission to expand on this revealed a long European tradition of incorporating religious symbolism in the floors of churches – and the use of metaphors in terrazzo thus took hold of his imagination. He began to also seek new ways of expanding the capabilities of the medium by adding pattern, colour and texture with his muralist experience.

Humphries is inventive and brave. For him each new project is quite special and unique – it evolves, like a wall under the hand of Gully Jimson. Leaping about on the site, his leprechaun face beaming with delight, Humphries confidently directs the sludgy-coloured cements being whirled and poured into the crevices between his template patterns and over inclusions of stones, until, finally, they are submerged in the lava flow. Then, days later, when the surface is ground down and polished, the archaeological cutting process reveals a gleaming marbled treasure trove.

Sign for the Dream remains behind at Darling Harbour although the Olympic athletes have gone. The snake rests now, sunning itself in the grass, at Pyrmont. Over time, it may become a relic, a historic pathway, possibly even a shrine, to those who have immortalised their family name for Eternity.

Jennifer Isaacs

Jennifer Isaacs is a Sydney-based international art curator and consultant. She has published over 20 books on Australian culture with a particular emphasis on Aboriginal art.

For further information contact the Public Art Squad, Sydney. Tel: (61 2) 9663 5611. Fax: (61 2) 9663 5612. Email: pas9663@bigpond.co