


FEATURE 

FLOORED GENIUS

A couple of old mates from the roaring '60s have come together to dazzle a storm-ravaged fragment of Californian coastline. HELEN GREENWOOD reports.

HIS gorgeous piece of whimsy is the terrace of Zandra Rhodes's house in Del Mar, California. A grotto fantasy of sun, sea and sand, the terrazzo inlay is a collaboration between the former swinging '60s fashion designer and the Sydney artist David Humphries.

Humphries is one of Australia's finest terrazzo artists. He has splashed shards of colour on the floors and walls of corporations, hotels and government buildings from Darling Harbour and Hamilton Island to Singapore and New Caledonia. With his Public Art Squad company, he has brought the ancient art of mosaics into Australia's public plazas and malls.

Humphries, who finished art school in the late '60s when the mission was to connect with a broad audience, has a free-spirited manner that belies his rigorous professionalism.

He met Rhodes in the mid-'70s when the fashion maverick was just hitting her stride. A mutual friend, the photographer Grant Mudford, introduced them. Humphries was doing a postgraduate degree in arts administration and Rhodes was then creating the romantic, extravagant clothes that would make her famous.

"We got on like a house on fire," says Humphries. "I stay with her every time I am in London or America. Zandra is one of those people who keeps in touch with friends."

Over the past 20 years, the unconventional designers have worked on a couple of commissions together, including the Northern Plaza entrance to Harbourside Marketplace, Darling Harbour – the squiggles are a Rhodes motif – and a series of limited-edition terrazzo tabletops.



The smithereens: Zandra Rhodes's terrazzo lends a Dalí-esque madness to Del Mar's pastel waterfront.

These days, Rhodes spends her time between her Californian beach-house and a London studio. With her husband, former Warner Bros executive Salah Hassanein, she lives on a double block of land at Del Mar, a ritzy beach-side suburb between San Diego and Los Angeles.

When El Niño storms savaged the Californian coastline 18 months ago, the beachfront terrace was washed away. A retaining wall 12 metres high

and 30 metres long was constructed and, says Humphries, "Zandra thought it was a terrific opportunity to do the terrace in terrazzo."

Rhodes did the outline, guided by Humphries, who also managed the project from the technical and production side.

Humphries flew to California ("I was the house guest in this fantastic place with seven bedrooms and ensuite for six weeks," he says with a

big laugh) and interviewed the various tradesmen needed for the job: the terrazzo company to lay it, the grinders and polishers, and the people to make foam templates and glass inserts.

Humphries laid the 72-square-metre patio with the workmen and Rhodes flew in to help with the hands-on part: mixing colours, sprinkling on crushed-glass mosaics, marble, shells and mirror-backed pieces.

"It was like a mosaic collage," says

Humphries. "It is the most superb example of our work you could get. It's blue-chip terrace."

Humphries, who works and lives in a warehouse in Rosebery, is used to co-ordinating huge projects.

He has themed and produced decorative arts commissions for major retail developments, including the Harbourside Festival Marketplace, Darling Harbour, and the award-winning Skygarden in Sydney's Pitt Street Mall.

Along the way, he has worked with well-known artists such as Warren Langley (glass), Jenny Orchard (ceramics), Bruce Goold (fabric and painting), Sandra Taylor (ceramics) and Deborah Leser (fabric).

Like the Rhodes terrace, much of Humphries' work is an applied architectural feature, like the floors in the Skygarden or Star City casino's lobby. Here, he says, "because of the nature of the material, the terrazzo becomes a part of the building program".

His most recent project is the Celebration Pathway for the Olympic Games, a huge snake incorporating 25,000 names of people who took part in the Olympic Journey organised by SOCOG in 1997-98. The snake is a sculptural piece, installed in front of the Olympic Ballroom at Darling Harbour, designed to relate to the stairs and the building.

Humphries is also working on another collaboration with Rhodes – the renovation of a building in London's Bermondsey Street, on the South Bank near Tower Bridge.

The development, which includes six apartments, will house the London Museum of Fashion on the ground floor. And, of course, Humphries has been commissioned to do a terrazzo inlay in the entrance foyer.

Photograph courtesy PUBLIC ART SQUAD