



Skygarden, Sydney, entrance lobby, terrazzo with mosaic inlay

CORPORATE AND PUBLIC ART VISIONARY

Enter the world of David Humphries and you step into the magic theatre of dazzling art creation on a prodigious scale. Text by Marie Geissler.

DAVID Humphries works with architects, interior designers, communities, developers and multinationals who pay homage to his expertise in orchestrating large-scale art projects for modern buildings and their surrounds. His company, Public Art Squad Pty Ltd, is multi-disciplinary, having put in place some of Australia's most memorable public art commissions over the past decade. Colossal murals, sculptures and marble terrazzos make up his sophisticated design portfolio. In the tradition of the luxuriant floor mosaics of Ancient Rome, Humphries' most recent commissions include two highly decorative and spacious terrazzo plazas for the \$360 million Robina Town

Centre development on Queensland's Gold Coast. Through their grandeur and presence, these works add substantial cultural context to the retail complex. The terrazzo mosaics have been carefully integrated into a sprawling architectural complex designed by The Jerde Partnership.

The first, titled *Think Globally*, is located in the centre of the Town Square and based on a motif of Earth as seen as from space. Long liquid lines of swirling creams and blues describe fluffy cloud patterns and strips of sea beneath. A cosmic piece, organic plays of line intriguingly allude to the rotational energy of the planet's physical form.

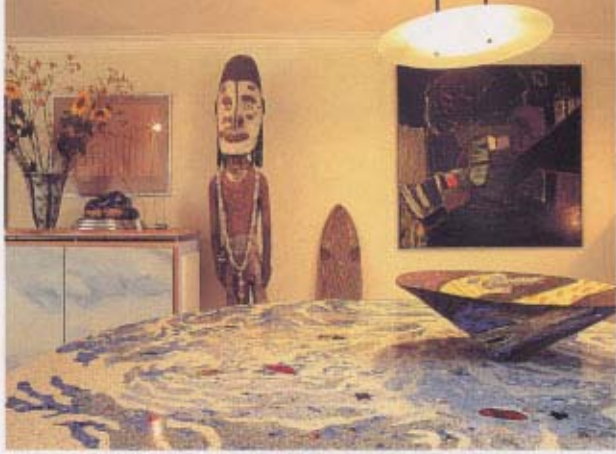
The second plaza mosaic *Life Force*, in the Lakeside



Detail of terrazzo floor works



Detail of terrazzo floor works



Terrazzo table in Humphries' studio, Sydney

PHOTO: GUY LAWRENCE



Water-jet-cut marble mosaic

Celebration Place, is positioned lower on the site to the Town Centre, adjacent to the still waters of the lake. The central image is a radiant sun with long flame-like fingers that take a wave-like serpentine form reaching out to the nearby buildings and gardens in a welcoming gesture. Inspired examples of paving, both plazas are major focal points for the architecture, each vitalised by radiating energy that links them seamlessly to their surrounds.

Comprising over 200 square metres, each plaza was painstakingly created on site over a period of several weeks, with Humphries' team orchestrating the design elements. Firstly, the graphic imagery was delineated by brass and/or polystyrene templates, then marble and glass pieces were laid out over the surface. These were then infilled with coloured terrazzo cements and smoothed over. The final step was grinding back and polishing, allowing the bright decorative inclusions to show through while creating a non-slip surface for pedestrian safety.

Not limited to floor applications for terrazzo, Humphries has employed this medium to walls in the form of pre-cast panels. His feature wall for the Glasshouse refurbishment, in Sydney's CBD, demonstrates his skill in creating a three-storey terrazzo masterpiece. Now the centrepiece in the centre's food court gallery, it is a superb sculptural installa-



Terrazzo floor with mirrored glass inlay, Humphries' studio, Sydney.

PHOTO: GUY LAWRENCE



Zandra Rhodes with her tables made by David Humphries

PHOTO: GUY LAWRENCE



Installation of water-jet-cut marble inlay for terrazzo floor

PHOTO: GUY LAWRENCE

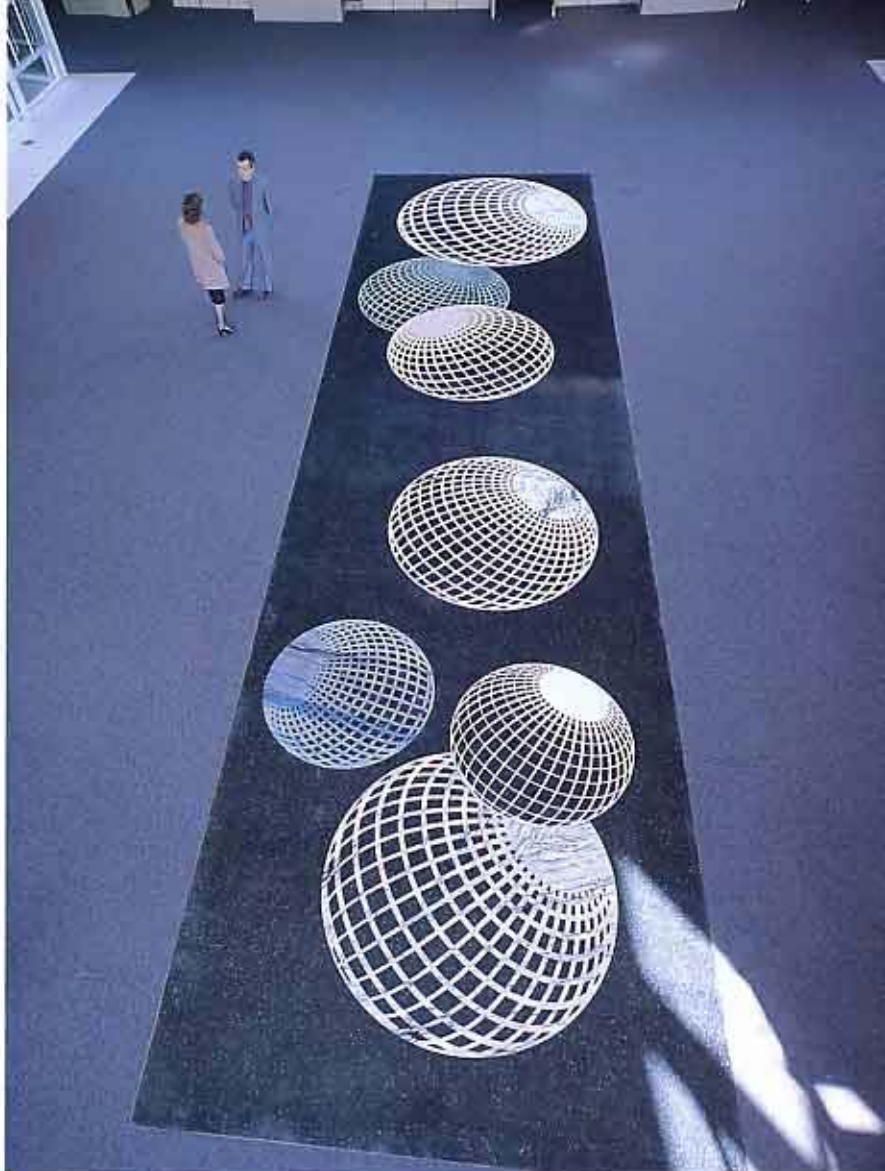
tion comprising 114 terrazzo slabs, each 1 x 8 m wide, prefabricated in the factory and installed on site.

Projects of this scale are familiar territory to Humphries. As Art Executive to Merlin International Properties he themed, art directed and produced the decorative arts commissions of major retail developments during the period of the Australian Bicentenary. Murals, terrazzo, sculpture, banners, flags and ceramics were created for such projects as the original Harbourside Festival Marketplace at Darling Harbour, and the international award-winning retail and commercial centre Skygarden in Sydney's CBD. An exciting time. From his 20,000-square-metre art production studio in Ultimo, Humphries coordinated the works of a formidable artistic team that included Thancoupic, Banduk Marika, Peter Travis, Warren Langley, Rodney Monk, Patsy Healey, Jenny Orchard, Stacy Pollard, Zig Moskwa, Bruce Goold, Sandra Taylor and Debora Leser.

For Humphries, every project is unique, designed specifically for the site in question and client's brief. It is remarkable to experience the artist's versatility - from the classical style of Skygarden to the quirky-style fantasy of the Glasshouse next door.

Humphries' most challenging, hi-tech installation is an exquisite work for the Queensland Clunies Ross Centre for Science and Industry in Brisbane. A design *tour de force*, the work is futuristically inspired, created to give vital expression to the application of science and technology within industry profile of the complex. A computer-generated image, it comprises seven circular shapes floating, cum free-falling, in a dark spatial void. A familial grouping, they seem to bounce lightly across the floor of the building's two-storey conference lobby. Made from marble imported from Brazil, China and Italy, the shapes were precision cut with water jets, laid in a resin-based terrazzo, ground back and polished. The project took 20 days on site from commencement to completion.

A recent terrazzo project was the entrance lobby



Terrazzo marble inlay floor, lobby of Queensland Clunies Ross Centre for Science and Industry, Brisbane. Below: Details of installation. Photo: Richard Stringer

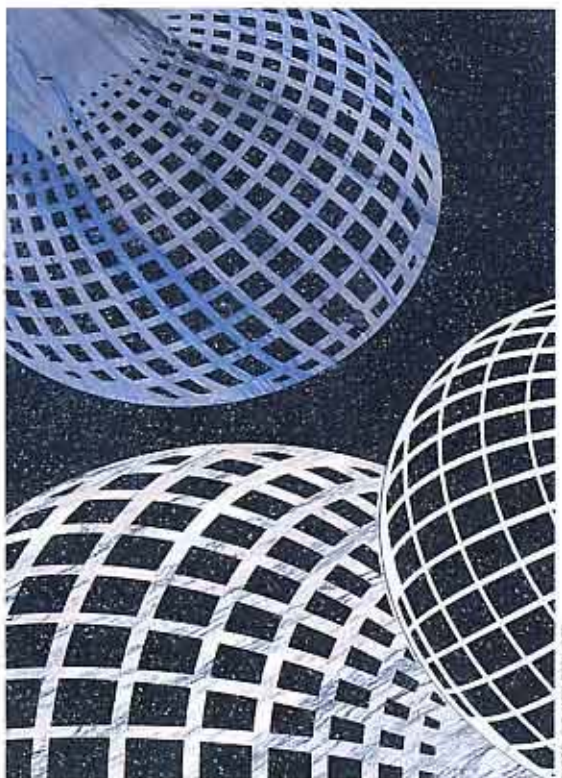


PHOTO: © OWEN STRIMBETH



PHOTO: PUBLIC ART 50/60



Harbourside, Darling Harbour, Sydney

PHOTO: PUBLIC ART SQUAD



Terrazzo detail



Terrazzo floor, Bistro, Campbelltown Catholic Club

PHOTO: GUYE ADRIEN



PHOTO: DAVID HUMPHRIES



David Humphries working on a terrazzo installation

and main bar of the Sydney Harbour Casino. A dynamic piece, it is themed as an aerial view of landscape and combines blending of ochres, golds, pinks and blues with inlays of onyx, marble and mirrored glass in an organic and flowing design. This theme is continued in a terrazzo bar top and cocktail tables.

In June, 1997 AMP commissioned a celebration pathway for the Olympics that comprised a series of circular modules set into a terrazzo path. These incorporate the "well wishes" from community members from 23 regions across Australia. Their signatures are inlaid into terrazzo. The work is designed to be experienced from close range and also to read as a larger image from above.

Humphries' ventures into the international market have resulted in projects ranging from major floor works and sculptural installations in Singapore to the entrance floor of the planned Zandra Rhodes Museum of Fashion in London.

The production of terrazzo table-tops, panels and tiles enables his work to become accessible to the international and domestic market with works available through agents in Singapore and Los Angeles.

A thoroughly experienced art professional, Humphries is daunted neither by dimension or conceptual brief. His creative flair is fired by complexity and mega-proportion. He has always liked a large playing field. More often than not he is inspired by cosmic, kinetic context. From an early age he has had a fascination for universal scale. This evolved in an almost organic way from ideas and experiences he was exposed to as a child in his home environment.

Humphries' first real job was as a labourer in the steelworks of Wollongong. He found big industry at once awesome and exciting. It was compelling in many ways to a young man starting out. He liked the idea that what he was making would be contributing somehow to the construction of a large project somewhere. He was also intrigued by the industrial landscape. The surreal imagery of glowing furnaces and stark silhouettes of cranes against a night sky firmament studded with stars were images that remained indelibly etched in his imagination.

Encountering the outback was also important. Driving vast distances across land to Ayers Rock in 1966 and flying over the interior gave him a sense of human scale, of mankind's place on the planet. Formative years and experiences such as these were seminal in shaping how he saw the world and in

Terrazzo marble mosaic, Celebration Plaza, Robina, Qld



Terrazzo table on "Think Globally" theme



Reception Hall, Cardinal's House, St Mary's Cathedral



Terrazzo Square, Robina, Queensland



Installation of terrazzo mosaic, Celebration Place, Robina



Floor detail with mirrored glass inlays



Prefabricated terrazzo panel for garden

determining how he was to go forward. They taught him the importance of self-discipline. They steered him for the hard world of business. They helped him hone his talents as he prepared to make inroads into the career of making art large scale for the challenging arena of corporate art. Delivering on time and budget were among the many things he took aboard, early on.

His fascination with large scale is countered by passion for detail and close focus. This plays a vital part in the manner of his delivery. The world in all its minutiae is a constant source of inspiration. This disposition for observation and awareness of things around him and his curiosity about how they work, is expressed in the imagery of his projects. Humphries takes subjects like stars or ordinary everyday objects, and plays with them in isolation. Like the images of a Fellini film, they are reborn, blown up to perhaps a hundred times their normal size and suspended in a timeless spatial context. He likes to wow his audience. In this process he simplifies and creates the spectacular.

Humphries' talent to entertain draws on a remarkable and eclectic background as an arts festival director. He understands well the importance of game, play and interaction in motivating and stimulating an audience. It is a sense of pageant and fantasy that is both challenging and whimsical. Aware of the propagandistic nature of public art, his imagery is tuned to the symbolic and democratic language of theatre. They are images informed by issues of cultural and social concern. Conscious placemakers, sometimes they are about the planet and its fragile environment, as in his beautiful terrazzos for St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney; sometimes they are of a narrative genre - objects to evoke memory, especially those of holiday and escapist dreaming. Powerful imagery always, Humphries demands that the viewers' attention be captivated. He makes you look again. This sense of immediacy and the provocative tease is what matters most.

Humphries' artistic talent was recognised early. He won local art prizes and in his last two years at



Entrance hall, residence of Peter Molocco, Sydney



Terrazzo mosaic, Celebration Place, Robina, Queensland



Terrazzo mural, incorporating Ozone Glass, The Glasshouse, Sydney

school was the only student to do art for the then Leaving Certificate. This one-on-one tutoring by his inspired art teacher was privilege that has paid enormous dividends. He exhibited his work early and found the sales and commissions to be a reliable source of income for his student years. His career on leaving school could best be described as that of a free spirit "sixties hippie".



Preparation of marble for inlays, Public Art Squad studio, Rosebery, Sydney



Detail of terrazzo and stained-glass screen

When Humphries enrolled at the National Art School, East Sydney Tech, it was a time of considerable cultural change in Australia. Prevailing art world practice was under review and the relevance of painting as the artist's major activity was seriously challenged. Notions about expression of images, ideas and media were expanded and through the exploration of newer art forms, artists sought to reconnect art with life. Artists rejected the capitalist hold over their production. The burning issue for them was that their creative product should not be regarded as art until it began to work on people. Its success was judged on its ability to connect meaningfully with a wider audience. The response of artists to this prevailing mood was to make works that could not be sold. Christo's Little Bay project was perhaps the single most inspiring experience for Humphries.

Inspired by these ideologies and the belief that works of art were ideas and images that could give insight into individual identity and consciousness, Humphries joined in with the *avant-garde* and experimental lifestyles and expressive performances of the era. A key event was the 1969 wrapping up of Little Bay when he joined the artist and a team of students to create an extraordinary landscape sculpture, an experience that opened his eyes to the importance of ephemeral art and the business that is created to support it.

In 1969-70, in the spirit of the Yellow House and the wildly outrageous musical *Hair*, he staged many student performances or *Happenings* called "environments" at Sydney's Cell Block Theatre, titled *Alexander Nevsky's Homecoming* and *One Way Ticket to Sunshine* and *Noah's Ark Communications Project* at the Workers Education Association building in Wollongong. It led to art critic Daniel Thomas writing of his work: "The exhibition as a whole becomes more important than the individual objects in it, and eventually the artist becomes as much a dramatist as a painter or sculptor."

Humphries' formal career as an artist began in theatre arts, initially as an arts festival director in regional NSW, moving into community mural projects and art-in-residencies, such as Macquarie University, then into a five-year stint as Policy/Project Office - Community Arts with the Division of Cultural Activities, NSW Premier's Department.

Leaving Australia in 1974, he took a year's study leave to a Postgraduate Diploma in Arts Adminis-

Marble mosaic for La Meridian Hotel, New Caledonia

tration from the City University, London. It was an action-packed time. He became very involved with the London theatre and fashion world, establishing friendships that have continued through his career. Seeking new challenges, he travelled widely over the next 10 years, attending and recording photographically many festivals and public art projects in the USA, Europe and South America. Humphries reminisces fondly about such times and his experience of celebratory events and their process. It was a sharp learning curve for him. He gained his experience raw, often working with artists, festival directors and/or arts coordinators at the coal face. A stint in New York in 1976 took Humphries into the ghettos district of the lower east side where he was seconded to a community arts collation considered a model project in Manhattan. There he researched public and community art programs. This was a turning point in his view of the artist as a collaborator in a community context, creating work directly relevant to their audience. This had a direct influence on his work approach. Community arts and murals became the focus of his career for ensuing years.

Humphries and then partner Rodney Monk directed hundreds of mural projects across Australia for more than 10 years. They also co-authored *The Mural Manual* for the Arts Council of NSW and shared the 1985 Sir John Sulman Prize for their mural in inner-city Redfern.

These experiences and sensibilities are what this artist draws upon and applies to his projects; a pluralistic approach towards the making of public icons. His notable commissions include Director of Applied and Decorative Arts for Merlin International Properties, Harbourside Festival Marketplace, Darling Harbour and Skygarden, Sydney; painted murals for the Federal Airports Corporation in Sydney and Darwin Airports; the centrepiece art floor for the Telok Ayer Marketplace in Singapore; marble mosaics for the lobby of La Meridian Hotel, New Caledonia; the decorative floors of the Reception Hall of Cardinal house, St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney; the Northern Plaza entrance to Harbourside Festival Marketplace, Darling Harbour; foyer and bistro of Campbelltown Catholic Club; lobby of Tech Pacific Sydney; sculptural and banner installations for Lend Lease at the Erina Fair Shopping Centre; sculptural installations for White Sands Shopping Centre, Singapore; terrazzo floor works for Trade Winds Restaurant, Hamilton Island; lobby of Sydney Aussie Rules Club; lobby of St Vincent's Hospital, Toowoomba; and foyer of Queensland Clunies Ross Centre for Science and Industry.

Enjoying the challenge of working with other art professionals, Humphries works with leading architects, artists, designers and master craftsmen, at the cutting edge of international art design. At his sprawling warehouse-studio in Rosebery, a unique space and the dynamic heart of his operation, they work with him as he plans and develops his commissioned work. Always "hands on", Humphries is not office bound but rather works on site whenever opportunities permit. Passionate about the humanising impact of art, he rates its commercial value highly, regarding its cultural impact as significantly value adding to the worth of properties.

Marie Geissler

David Humphries can be contacted at Public Art Squad, 8 Princess Ave, Rosebery, NSW 2018. Tel: (02) 9663 5611. Fax: (02) 9663 5612.



Terrazzo floor, lobby of the Campbelltown Catholic Club



Glass mosaic memorial



David Humphries



Terrazzo table tops at Public Art Squad studio



Terrazzo with inlay signatures for 'Sign for the Dream', AMP's Olympic project