

VIEWPOINT

**Falling through Space.
The gap between public art /new infrastructure and the
displaced natural environments**

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Figure 1. *Ponds Dreaming*. Art work by Jill Chism (Sydney, 2011-2014).

As an artist, whose involvement with creating art in public spaces now spans 19 years, one of the key issues I have is with how to link public art (mostly incorporated in new public infrastructures) with the natural environments and prior histories that the artwork and infrastructure have displaced. My aim is always to address the importance of the balance between nature and culture. The way in which our relationship to nature and the prior histories of a 'site' are translated, depends foremost on the nature of the commission and its location. Variables related to the commissioned artwork may include the following:

- It is tacked on to an already built structure

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- It is allocated to a specific site within an existing architectural plan
- The artwork and infrastructure are created in collaboration between artist and architect
- In rare cases the public work is impermanent (e.g. the case of Great Walks – Art and Environment 2006).
- The artist is given full control either by a self-created event – as with ‘Call of the Running Tide’ – Environmental sculpture and multimedia event in the Douglas Shire in September 2019, or through a rarely received creative fellowship such as ‘Waters Edge – Creating Environments’ 2007 -2010

I will now elaborate each one of these variables. Starting with the situation where the commissioned artwork is *tacked on to an already built structure*. An example of this is my commission for an entrance sculpture for the new Marlin Coast Neighbourhood centre, ‘Sharing’ (Figures 2 and 3). An essential aspect of this work was that it created a space where visitors could gather and converse. However, the central theme of this work is the question of ecological imbalance created by the making of the new suburb of Trinity Park. One of the fallouts of development was the large amount of cleared land. In this work I researched the types of trees that were being replaced and using reflections text and images of fallen leaves, I reminded viewers of our relationship to the natural environment, the histories of the site and the nature/culture conflict that is inevitable with development.



Figure 2. *Sharing* at the Marlin Coast Neighbourhood Centre, Digital Art Glass Reflective Stainless-steel panels wood and polished stainless steel, 2011 (Source: Jill Chism).

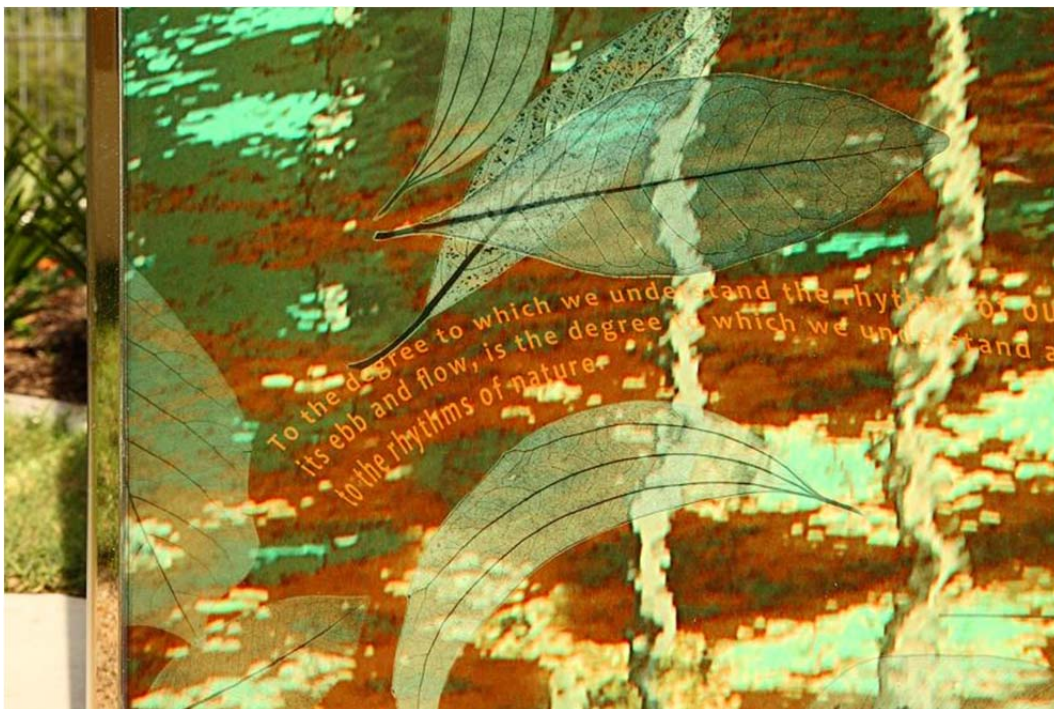


Figure 3. Detail of *Sharing* at the Marlin Coast Neighbourhood Centre, Digital Art Glass Reflective Stainless-steel panels wood and polished stainless steel 2011 (Source: Jill Chism).

The next variable refers to the artwork being allocated to a *specific site within an existing architectural plan*. A new visitors' centre was required for the Cairns Botanic Gardens and Tanks Art Centre in 2011 (Figures 4 and 5). At this point there was significant concern and public debate about what the building complex *should* be. The new precinct was mooted at the crossroads of an approach to architecture in Cairns. Many strong community voices vied for a traditional approach derived from existing local architecture, specifically 'The Queenslander'. Another set of voices felt that any set of buildings in a natural environment would create unnecessary disruption to nature. I was already using digital art glass in my public artworks and working with transparencies, reflections and texts as a way of both reminding us of the surrounding natural environments and posing questions for the viewer about their relationship to nature. To solve the question of the centre's intrusion into the surrounding environment, the architect opted for a fully reflective building, which complemented my current use of materials. However, greater use of reflective materials formed another departure point for me as I then went on to create numerous works where the sculptures were dissolving, reflecting the sky and surrounding natural environment, or where natural elements from the site were deliberately incorporated through large layered photographs. Examples of this are 'Ponds Dreaming' at the centre of the Ponds community in Western Sydney, 'Sharing' at the Marlin Coast Neighbourhood centre in the Northern Beaches of Cairns, and 'Reflections on a Blue River' in Mackay for the hospital entrance ceilings. The latter work is based on images of the Pioneer River, which runs from the sea through the city to the hospital.

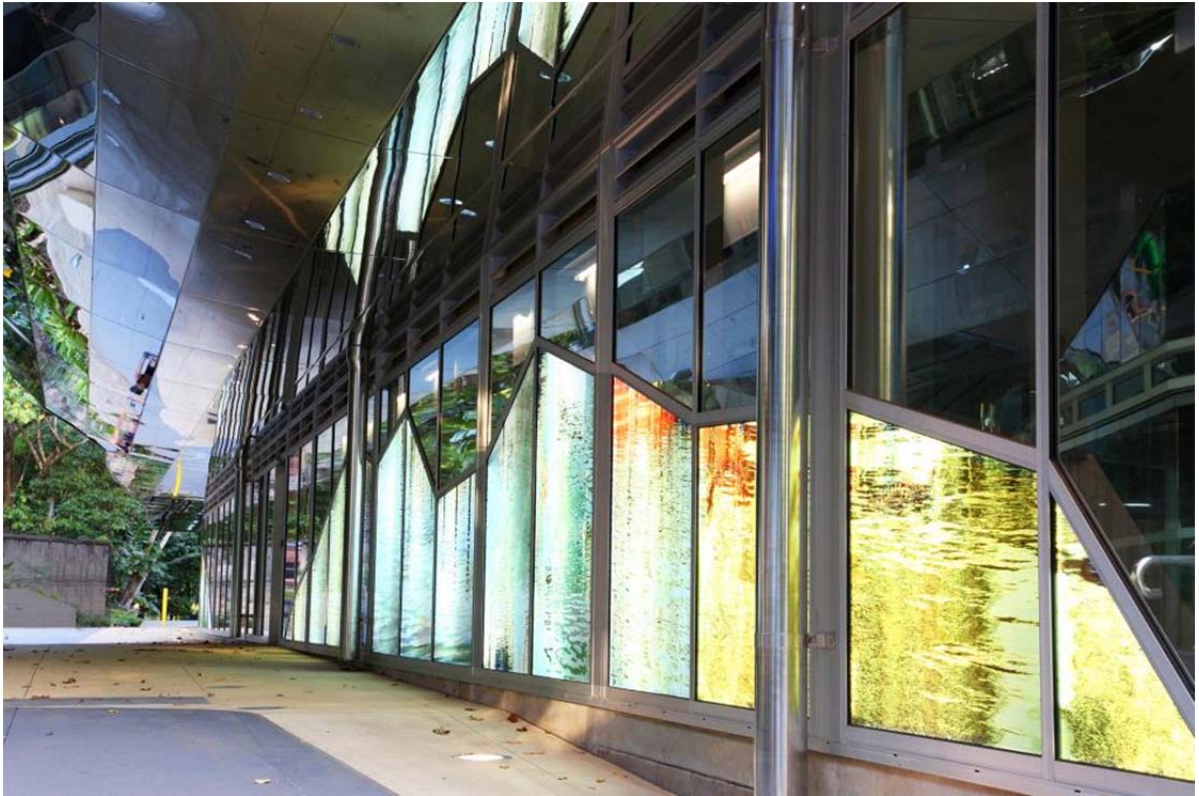


Figure 4. Reflections from the Tanks Cairns Botanic Gardens Visitors Centre. Digital Art glass and LED panel lighting (2012). (Source: Jill Chism)



Figure 5. Detail of Reflections from the Tanks Cairns Botanic Gardens Visitors Centre. Digital Art glass and LED panel lighting (2012). (Source: Jill Chism)

The artwork and infrastructure can also be created in collaboration between artist and architect. From 2016 to 2018 I created a collaborative work in Darwin with Liquid Blue, Architects and in particular with Daniel Hahn. As the commission involved the reconstruction of the Parap Pool, the theme 'Under the surface' (Figures 6 and 7) was the bodies interaction with water¹. The final entrance sculpture and 70 linear meter facade melded art with architecture.

¹ See <https://www.jillchism.com.au>

In addition to adopting the use of 'Pic Perf' or perforated aluminium, I also used reflective materials and glass while merging the zig zag formation of the façade with the motion of an ocean wave to create the entrance sculpture. The finished artwork and building are particularly striking because both artist and architect were committed to the best possible outcome.



Figure 6. *Under the Surface* Parap Pool Darwin, Digital Art Glass, Pic Perf, Dibond reflective panel (2018).
(Source: Jill Chism).



Figure 7. *Under the Surface* Parap Pool Darwin, Digital Art Glass, Pic Perf, Dibond reflective panel (2018).
(Source: Jill Chism).

There are also some rare cases where *the public work is impermanent*. In 2006 the Environmental Protection Agency EPA in league with Queensland Parks and Wildlife decided to open up a number of 'Great Walks' along the Queensland Coast. I was the artist nominated for the 'Wet Tropics – Great South Walk' from Wallaman Falls to Henrietta Gate 56.8km, known as the 'Jagany' (goanna) walk. A unique public art experience, this commission was called 'Marking Time' (Figure 8), and opened the possibility for me to create ephemeral work and create poetry from the experience of undertaking the walk. The final work integrated the parks and wildlife map with topographical maps of the area, photographs of the experience and poetry created during the walk.



Figure 8. Detail from *Marking Time* currently in the Powerlink collection in Brisbane, Australia. Digital Art, Photographs and drawing on paper 2.4m x 2m (2006) (Source: Jill Chism).

From the poem 'Walking in space without falling' – accompanying final exhibition at Queensland Arts Council, and toured regional galleries in Queensland (Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, 2006) – I have included an excerpt, which elucidates how foreign we actually are to a more primal connection with the natural environments around us, as experienced by the Warrgamay, the traditional owners of the area:

‘Walking through the unfamiliar with openness to the moment, not absorbed by the mundane/(everyday), offers a way through the mysterious pass. Sorry thoughts of separation (...) the Warrgamaygan’s separation from their people taken to Palm Island. My separation is from the rawness, bluntness of the bush: roars and screeches of feral bulls/clean-skins, the possibility of crocs, while here with the breathing earth, swaying trees and silences. My incarceration is the built structures cluttered by daily habits and chores: calling my life. It is the insulated environment, leather couches and concrete walls, career and expectations dividing my space from this unenclosed one with which I am unfamiliar.’

My approach to the *Great Walk* as a metaphor for our life’s journey was ‘informed by the Eastern meditative practice of using mindful walking as a tool to still the mind and develop awareness. The idea of the environment as a historical narrative offered the possibility of potent insights from the past including the stories of the Warrgamaygan people (Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, 2006).

The last possibility is that *the artist is given full control* either by a self-created event or through the rarely received creative fellowship. Recently, in 2017, I created *Call of the Running Tide*, an Environmental Sculpture and Multimedia event which culminated in a 10-day festival in the Douglas Shire in September 2019. The event involved four venues, 28 artists and over 150 performers. As a lauded event in a region that encompasses world heritage listed rainforest and close access to the Great Barrier Reef it evidenced public recognition of the need for art events that highlight current local and global environmental issues. This event has set the precedent for a biennial ‘Call of the Running Tide’ festival, with the next festival in September 2021. Figure 9 below shows my piece.



Figure 9. *New Wave* 7m x 2.8m x 3.6m Marine Debris on armature (2019). The work both indicates a wave and the skeletons of large marine animals. (Source: Jill Chism).

This event builds on the experiences of 'Waters Edge – Creating Environments' (2007-2010), an interregional event I created as a result of a creative Fellowship from Arts Queensland².

Both events abovementioned were and are highly satisfying in that they involved responding to various sites in the natural environment, while drawing attention to local environmental issues. Here art and environment are directly entwined. In these public art events, the artists and participants have '(taken) only photographs and (left) only footprints' (Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, 2006).

In conclusion, there are projects, such as 'Great Walks - Habitus Habitat' and the self-created festival above – 'Call of the Running Tide' – where art and artist directly respond to natural environments. In these cases it is the artists' role to draw attention to our connection as organic beings while communicating the impact of human habitation. There is an expectation that public artworks are long lasting (10 years has been mooted by various employees of Arts Queensland). However, due to the poor quality and material constituents of discarded and recycled materials along with the expectations of the various clients, my solution has been to predominantly use poetic sayings and illusory material that reflect the surrounding landscape environments and the changing skies back to the viewer. There is a sense that the sculptures are partially dissolved drawing our minds back to what is important: that primary connection we have to earths' ecosystems and natural environments.

Reference

Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (2006). *Habitus Habitat: Art and Environment in the Great Walks of Queensland*. Brisbane, Australia: Environmental Protection Agency.

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² 'Waters Edge...' catalogue available for download at <https://envart.jillchism.com.au>