

Sculpture king

WALCHA ARTIST AND FARMER STEPHEN KING HAS WON SYDNEY'S SCULPTURE BY THE SEA PRIZE AFTER HELPING TURN HIS TOWN INTO AN OPEN-AIR GALLERY.

BY JANENE CAREY

FOR 15 OF THE PAST 17 YEARS, Stephen King has hoisted a huge wood-hewn work of art onto a truck in October and driven more than 400 kilometres to install it as part of Sydney's Sculpture by the Sea. Disappointed time after time when the winners of the popular outdoor exhibition were announced, he developed the habit of ensuring a stack of jobs was waiting on the farm to distract him from the post-exhibition blues. But in 2013 this strategy backfired. His shearing and lamb-marking sessions were repeatedly interrupted by congratulatory phone calls and media-interview requests, because he'd finally cracked it, winning \$60,000 in the state's most lucrative sculpture prize.

Stephen is an artist with three decades' worth of experience exhibiting nationally and internationally, as well as a grazier who runs 1900 merino ewes and 200 breeding cows on an 1100-hectare property near Walcha, in northern New South Wales. Some of his prize money will go into feeding drought-hungry stock, but most will be used to put more hands on the farm so he can focus on building up the income he earns from artistic commissions and sales. Currently, art pays about a quarter of the household bills, although Stephen notes somewhat ruefully that he spends more than half his time on it. "We couldn't survive without the farm," he says, "but I've always hoped the art would be another enterprise, so the time I dedicate to it would pull its weight."

Stephen began his career as a printmaker, studying in Sydney and London before moving back to work the family farm with his father and brother. He set up a printmaking studio there, but gradually drifted to sculpture. "There was wood lying around and I used to pick up bits and pieces," he says. He married painter Julia Griffin, whom he had met at Sydney College of the Arts, and they took up residence on an adjacent property, 'Blackfellows Gully', in 1983.

Representation by a mainstream art gallery in Sydney run by Chandler Coventry gave the careers of Stephen and Julia – along with those of fellow local artists Angus Nivison, James Rogers and Ross Laurie – an early boost in the 1980s and 1990s. Walcha Shire may have a population of just 3021, but it harbours an impressive rollcall of creative talent, and their impact on the town is unmistakable. At last count there were 41 pieces of public art on display, including large roadside sculptures marking the four entry points, an abstract steel construction dominating the main roundabout, intricately carved verandah posts on various

shopfronts, and a smattering of mosaics, murals and street furniture throughout the centre of town.

The move to turn Walcha into an open-air gallery began in 1996, when Stephen approached the council to ask if it would collaborate with him to create a fountain sculpture in a small park. The installation of *Weather Signs*, which depicts the relationship between the people of the bush and rain, was the start of an ongoing public-art program involving both locally sourced works and pieces from further afield. By 2003, the collection was so impressive that John McDonald, formerly a curator at the National Gallery of Australia, and longstanding art critic for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, organised an exhibition showcasing "Walcha: City of Art" at his Newcontemporaries gallery in Sydney. In his notes for the exhibition he wrote: "For a modest investment of taxpayers' funds, the council has given the town a special place on Australia's cultural map."

These days the artists no longer have to push for new works to be installed, and the art-strewn townscape has become a tourist attraction. "The community tends to ask the councillors, 'When's the next piece of sculpture going in?'" Stephen says.

Fallout, Stephen's winning Sculpture by the Sea entry, has been acquired by the prize sponsor Macquarie Group, and may take up residence in the foyer of their building in central Sydney. His most abstract work to date, it is a 6-metre x 4m tripod construction inspired by the 2011 Fukushima disaster and the media coverage of the self-sacrifice shown by the nuclear power-station's workers.

Another notable piece, *The Eight*, has found a home with West Australian mining magnate Andrew Forrest. Created during the time Stephen's three daughters were rowing for Pymble Ladies' College in Sydney, it depicts the grace of the crew as they shoulder their boat. High praise for the sculpture came from John McDonald, who described it as the work of "a poet with a chainsaw" in his review of the 2009 Sculpture by the Sea.

Stephen uses a variety of woodworking tools, but chainsaws do feature prominently. He has three, in various sizes. "There's a tiny electric one that I love, especially if I'm using Australian cedar with the maquettes," he says. "I work with that while I'm thinking. Then there's the Farm Boss, the middle-sized one. And if it's a long saw-down slog, I'll bring out the biggest one."

Stephen's work over the past 30 years will be the subject of an exhibition at Tamworth Regional Gallery in May.



SIMON SCOTT



CLYDE YEE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Eve* watching a misty sunrise on Blackfellows Gully; *The Eight*, depicting the moment just before the stroke-side and bow-side rowers part to shoulder the boat; Stephen King beside his piece *Fallout*, at the 2013 Sculpture by the Sea.