

A Walk Through the Program

By Keith Ward

Queensland's spectacular natural environments have been the inspiration for the Great Walks Art and Environment Program. It has been an ambitious program, presenting artists' interpretations of a diverse range of environments, from the world's largest sand island to tropical rainforests.

The program presented a unique opportunity to extend the Queensland Government's Public Art Policy, *Art Built-in*, to include temporary environmental works and artists' workshops on an unprecedented scale as a statewide regional arts development program.

In total, the program sponsored 7 residencies by nationally and internationally recognised Queensland artists, 7 masterclass workshops, 3 workshops for local children and 3 workshops for local emerging and aspiring artists. Artworks created through the residencies and masterclass workshops were exhibited in 8 regional public art galleries, with a final exhibition of the resident artists' work in Brisbane.

At the completion of the project, the Great Walks Art and Environment Program will have engaged with more than 10,000 people. This includes more than 8,500 visitors to exhibitions. In total, 58 practising artists participated in the masterclass workshop program. Around 300 children have had the opportunity to explore art and the environment, and more than 25 emerging artists will have been involved in the community workshop program.

The Great Walks of Queensland is an initiative of Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS), a division of the Queensland Government's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). At 6 sites across the State, QPWS has developed walks catering for all ages and interests, from wheelchair-accessible tracks to long-distance adventure walks. They are the Wet Tropics Great Walk of far north Queensland, situated on the Great Dividing Range between Cairns and Townsville; the Whitsunday Great Walk and Mackay Highlands Great Walk of central Queensland; the Fraser Island Great Walk; and in the south-east corner of the state, the Sunshine Coast Hinterland and Gold Coast Hinterland Great Walks.

The creation of these walks was budgeted at \$10 million with 2% of that budget going to the public art program, as required by the *Art Built-in* Policy. This provided a budget of \$198,600. To this Powerlink Queensland (a government-owned corporation responsible for the development, operation and maintenance of the state's high voltage electricity transmission network) provided \$272,000 of unexpended *Art Built-In* funds and an additional \$15,000 to create a funding pool in excess of \$485,000.

These additional funds enabled the program to be expanded from the initial concept of an artist-in-residence and one artists' workshop in the locality of each Great Walk to a much broader program, creating opportunities not previously considered. The first of these was the expansion of the artist-in-residence program to include a second artist residency for the Wet Tropics region. This allowed a response to both the rainforest and tropical savannah country traversed by the walk. Introduction of this additional residency made it possible for the program to have a strong presence in both Cairns and Townsville, the major centres of north Queensland. Additional workshops in the Wet Tropics, Mackay Highlands and the Gold Coast Hinterland were provided, extending participation to emerging artists and children.

The additional funding provided the opportunity to commission a photographer to document activities across the program and create a suite of photographic artworks interpreting all of the Great Walks. These images, featured here with images of artworks created by the 7 artists commissioned for the residencies program, significantly expanded the scope of this publication.

It was considered at the outset that the program required a clear guiding principle binding all activities to a common goal. In response, Beth Jackson was commissioned to write the curatorial rationale, *Habitus-Habitat*.

To facilitate the program at a regional level, partnerships were negotiated with galleries local to each of the Great Walks regions. Because of the nature of the program, these negotiations were exclusively with the publicly funded 'regional' galleries rather than commercial galleries. ARCIMIX employed Julie Foster-Burley, who had considerable experience with the Regional Galleries Association of Queensland and their statewide network, to develop this

aspect of the program. Her knowledge of this network contributed greatly to the success of the program.

This has been a truly collaborative process, which evolved into a structure that engaged 8 professional artists, 6 regional galleries and their staff, a documentary photographer, and upwards of 20 EPA and QPWS staff. Approximately 60 people have been directly involved in its delivery, with many more having indirect involvement through business logistical support and services. This program has been a significant employment generator across the state.

Program delivery

The program was guided by the Public Art Steering Group (PASG), which included major stakeholders, the EPA and Powerlink, and advisors. The PASG was based in Brisbane and referred decisions to a Public Art Advisory Group (PAAG), regionally based for each of the 6 Great Walks. Each PAAG included local QPWS and managing gallery staff, and in some cases local advisors such as representatives of the Traditional Custodians. The PAAGs provided advice to the PASG on the impact of decisions at a local level.

Artist selection followed the normal merit-based *Art Built-in* process, with advertisements for expressions of interest in statewide and regional newspapers, as well as contact through artist databases and arts organisations' bulletin boards. All forms of contemporary arts practice were considered, with a broad representation evident in the ensuing workshop and exhibition program. It was essential to the success of the program to select established artists of national and international standing with strong local connections. The PASG was able to do this, with 5 of the 8 chosen being regionally based.

The first round of artist selections was conducted in January 2004, with artists selected for the Wet Tropics, Whitsunday and Fraser Island Great Walks. The artist photographer, along with artists for the Gold Coast Hinterland, Sunshine Coast Hinterland and Mackay Highlands Great Walks, were selected in January 2005, after the Powerlink sponsorship had been secured and the program scope had been significantly widened.

The galleries dedicated their own team to support artists during their residency. They coordinated local activities including selecting artists for the masterclass workshops, other workshop activities where they applied, and organising local media liaison and publicity. They also staged the local exhibition of works resulting from the resident artist and masterclass workshop participants. Many of the artists who participated in these workshops had no direct experience of art and the environment. This meant they were taken well outside the bounds of their existing art practice, which was reflected in the sometimes eclectic local exhibitions.

Each artist approached the residency in their own way, and their methods varied considerably. Liz Woods was one of the first to go to site. She endeared herself to Sunshine Coast Hinterland QPWS rangers who commented on her creation of a 'home away from home' with Persian rugs adorning her campsite. Fiona Foley came into the project as the obvious choice for Fraser Island. As one of Australia's pre-eminent contemporary artists and a Traditional Custodian of the island, she brought a considered, but provocative and incisive response to *Habitus-Habitat*. Jill Chism undertook to walk from Wallaman Falls to Henrietta Gate, taking more than 4 days to traverse and immerse herself in the environment of the Wet Tropics Great Walk. Brian Robinson meshed cultures and technologies at a grand scale and provided a framework for strong individual responses to the diverse physical and cultural environments of the tropics. Shane Fitzgerald not only camped on site, he took to the air, chartering a helicopter to develop his feel for the bird's-eye perspective, a response to the diversity of life on the wing he encountered on the Whitsunday Great Walk. Craig Walsh gave of himself for his art, subjecting his body to the leeches that proliferated in the wet conditions on the Gold Coast Hinterland Great Walk at the time of his residency. Each approach was as individual as the work created.

The Great Walks Art and Environment Program had a clear focus on marketing and promotion allied to the overall promotion of the Great Walks. A detailed marketing plan was established early in the planning phase to assist the galleries and with that came the development of a range of printed material. The graphic design component of the program was tendered in mid-2005. Liveworm Studio, a commercial design practice staffed by lecturers and students of graphic design at Queensland College of Art, Griffith

University, was selected through the competitive tender process. This aspect of the program resulted in integrated printed materials, including brochures, invitations, postcards, exhibition posters and this documentation of the program as a whole.

Artist residencies in national parks are not new. A number of successful programs have been run in Australia and internationally over many years. The Great Walks Art and Environment program differs from these programs in the extent of its geographical scale, and the diversity of its outcomes. It has also engendered a high level of enthusiasm and commitment from those involved, and allowed many creative linkages to be made along the way. The program has successfully achieved its objective of bringing an awareness of art and the environment to a large cross-section of the community.

Keith Ward

Director, ARCIMIX craftArts+design

Project Manager

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