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The Rescue

Donna Mazza
Edith Cowan University, donna.mazza@ecu.edu.au

A. Mickle

Rebecca Corps
Edith Cowan University

Tom Ansell
Edith Cowan University

Daniel Kus
Edith Cowan University

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The Rescue: Public art and learning

Dr Donna Mazza

Artists and students – Tom Ansell, Rebecca Corps and Dan Kus with mentor Alex Mickle

INTRODUCTION

In September 2014 City of Bunbury approached ECU South West's visual arts program with an invitation for our students to work on a public art project at one of the major entries into Bunbury.

The location (pictured below) was not very inspiring and the budget was not extravagant. This opportunity was exciting but terrifying. It is a big wall in a prominent place and a huge project for our students. It was risky.

For aspiring visual artists to have an opportunity to produce public art on such a scale at a major intersection is fantastic for their careers.



RESEARCH AND DESIGN

Three visual arts honours students were keen to make this project happen.

The South West Arts program recruited a mentor for the students, Alex Mickle, who has completed 21 major public art commissions.

In order to make this an authentic practice-led research project, the students independently researched the historic story of 'Old Bob', the ship's dog who purportedly helped rescue the crew of the Carbet Castle in 1897, which was wrecked in Koombana Bay in Bunbury. They found some contradictions in the research and incorporated the tensions between urban legend and local accounts into the design.

They planned to take their drawing up to the scale of the wall and produce a steel drawing, inspired by the work of David Oliveira (Lobos Series 2012).

They presented this research to City of Bunbury as a formal Expression of Interest to the City's Arts Director, Councillors and the City Engineer.

This process took the students' learning beyond university research and involved other stakeholders and experts, to whom they would justify their work.



In preparing our workshop studio for a project of this scale, the three students learned skills in steel fabrication and built an appropriate work bench that would allow them to bend and weld and cut steel rod and plate.



SKILLS AND MASTERY

The students had never produced sculpture of this scale before. They had never worked with steel, only wire. They worked hard to take these new skills and develop proficiency to create art work to exhibition quality. They needed to go from apprentice to master in a few months. Learning is normally a process that happens within the confines of an education institution but often in the arts, learning becomes a product in the public domain. This can be challenging and students need to develop confidence and resilience, as do most practicing artists.



IMPACT ON LEARNING

As they plan further projects in their Visual Arts honours study, the scale of work these students expect from themselves has grown, as has their ambition and confidence.

Authentic learning in visual art has provided these students with a range of transferable skills and a very public record of achievement.



Photographs by Jackie Watt, Tom Ansell, Dan Kus and Julian Bowron.