



Costumes and sets designed by Philippa O'Brien for 'As You Like It', staged in 1973 at the Octagon Theatre, University of WA

PHILIPPA O'BRIEN – PUBLIC PROPERTY

Lacy columns of steel, inlaid marble paving, colourful tapestries and energetic line drawings of theatre sets would not at first appear to be the work of one artist, yet they all come from the hand of Western Australian Philippa O'Brien. Profile by Dr Dorothy Erickson.

THIS former teacher, theatre designer and historian has exhibited her paintings and drawings and published a book on the artist Robert Juniper, but today Philippa O'Brien is best known for the striking and elegant public artworks she has created for a satellite city north of Perth, for the West Australian icon King's Park and for the Family Court of Australia in Perth. Philippa Henderson, who was born in Perth in 1941,

spent much of her childhood in Wyndham in the strong and steamy north-west of Western Australia. Here she was imbued with a love of the Australian landscape. One of a small number of white children in the school, she became close friends with a number of Aboriginals, 'Flowering White Gum', tapestry, wool, 3 x 6 m, made at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop from a cartoon by O'Brien for Challenge Bank. Collection: Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Perth



PHOTOGRAPH VICTOR FRANCE



Ellenbrook, 1995, main entry sculpture with banksia Menziesii frieze, laser-cut steel



Marble paving and steel seat at Woodlake Village, Ellenbrook, 1995

in particular with Frank Chulung and Reg Birch who are now prominent in Aboriginal affairs.

With few options for women at this time, she used a teacher's bursary to take an English degree, majoring in poetry and drama at the University of WA. Painting and drawing were also studied at Perth Technical College primarily for her own pleasure. They proved useful however when she joined the University Dramatic

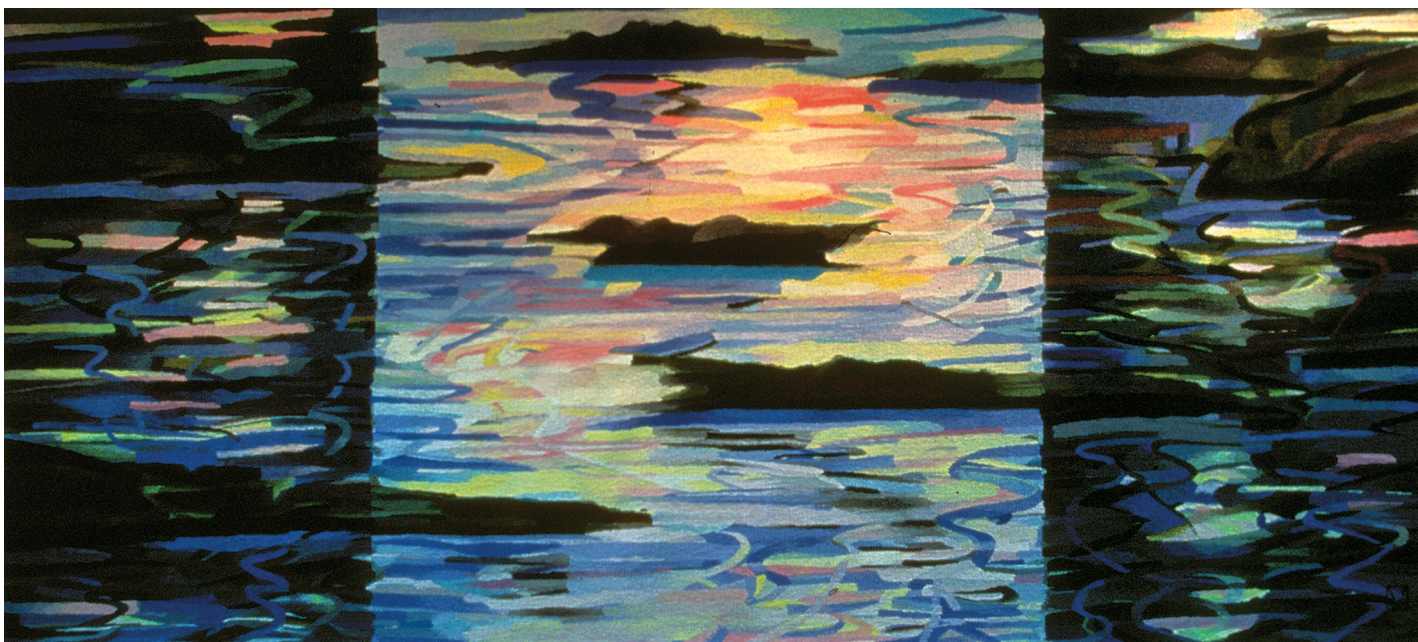
Society and commenced designing sets, costumes and posters for productions in the university's Dolphin Theatre. These ranged from contemporary European plays to the classics, providing variety and an introduction to numerous design styles.

A British Council Scholarship in 1967 saw her tread the traditional path to Europe. She studied at Hornsey College of Art in London which was the "in" college at the time still frequented by Brigid Riley and David Hockney. Her place however was in the film and television school rather than the painting school as she had become a self-taught film-maker while in Perth. The time was an expansive and exciting one in London. It was the "Swinging Sixties" and London was the centre. She found the experience invigorating.

Henderson married Western Australian drama academic Collin O'Brien in London. They returned to Perth in 1969 where he took up a tutorship in the University of WA English Department. Philippa O'Brien juggled two full-time positions: a teacher at Perth Technical College and resident designer at the National Theatre – the Playhouse. The Playhouse position meant a new production every three weeks. Despite the pressure she enjoyed it for she had a full costume department to work with and could concentrate on the designs. The birth of a child in 1972 saw her reduce her workload to some part-time designing of sets for the Hole in the Wall theatre while continuing group exhibitions.

O'Brien's first solo was an exhibition of paintings at the Dolphin Theatre in 1965. She followed this with another of her theatre designs at the newly opened and popular Old Firestation gallery in the suburb of Leederville in 1974. Over the next six years she had a number of solo exhibitions at the even newer Gallery 52 in Claremont. In 1989 she was appointed Head of Cultural Studies and Drawing at the Mt Lawley campus of the newly created WA College of Advanced Education, now Edith Cowan University. Here she enjoyed camps in the bush with the textiles students and lecturers and began turning from subjects based on her classical education to those exploring Aboriginal history and culture, albeit through the eyes of a European. She also became a member of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council (1984–87).

'Black Swan', tapestry, wool, silk, linen, 1.6 x 2.4 m, made at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop from a cartoon by O'Brien. One of a pair for the Family Court of Australia, Perth, WA, 1986





Detail of paving in the King's Park Banksia Garden

During this time, through Wendy Rogers at Gallery 52 and Gary Giles of the architectural firm Forbes & Fitzhardinge (now Cox Howlett Bailey), she received her first commission for a public artwork. This was to design a tapestry for the main banking chamber of the new Challenge Bank to be made up by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. Having enjoyed the tapestries seen in Europe and connected with the degree of abstraction the technique brings to a work, she approached the project with much enthusiasm. The work depicted the marri trees so common around Perth, with their purple trunks stained with red gum, dense foliage and opulent cream flowers against the brilliance of a blue sky. The project shifted her practice into the public arena. At this time the Percent for Art scheme was being introduced to all WA government projects and opportunities began to open in this field for artists.

In 1996 O'Brien was selected with Robert Juniper, Doug Chambers and David Walker to make the Percent for Art component of the new WA Federal Family Court, a Forbes & Fitzhardinge project. Juniper was making a sculpture for the forecourt and Walker the crest for the building, so she nominated to design tapestries. The scale was appropriate for the space and the depth of colour tapestry can bring to an artwork was particularly appealing for her. As tapestries also assist in absorbing sound the suggestion was greeted with enthusiasm by the commissioner Gary Giles. The brief requested a tranquil atmosphere so she based the work on the Swan River peacefully flowing nearby. It was a response to the history of the site and, as was her wont, she combined this with general social comment. The two finished tapestries depicted the view across the Swan River. One is a composite view of recognisable segments of the long, low river horizon. The other is a long view down the river to the port of Fremantle, doubling also as a dream image of a journey down the river of life. The two tapestries were paired with two small panels of painted wood inlaid with stainless steel engraved with images of black swan feathers referring to the State emblem and again signifying the passage of time in this place.

These projects led to further work on major public projects. In particular she has created a considerable body of work for Ellenbrook, a new township with six neighbourhoods capable of housing 35,000 residents, currently under construction north of Perth. These streetscape works – marble paving, seats and large entry statements in specially rusted steel incorporating local

Marble paving with steel and banksia wood seating, King's Park, Perth, WA, 1996



Entry sculpture for The Bridges village at Ellenbrook, laser-cut steel and glass mosaic



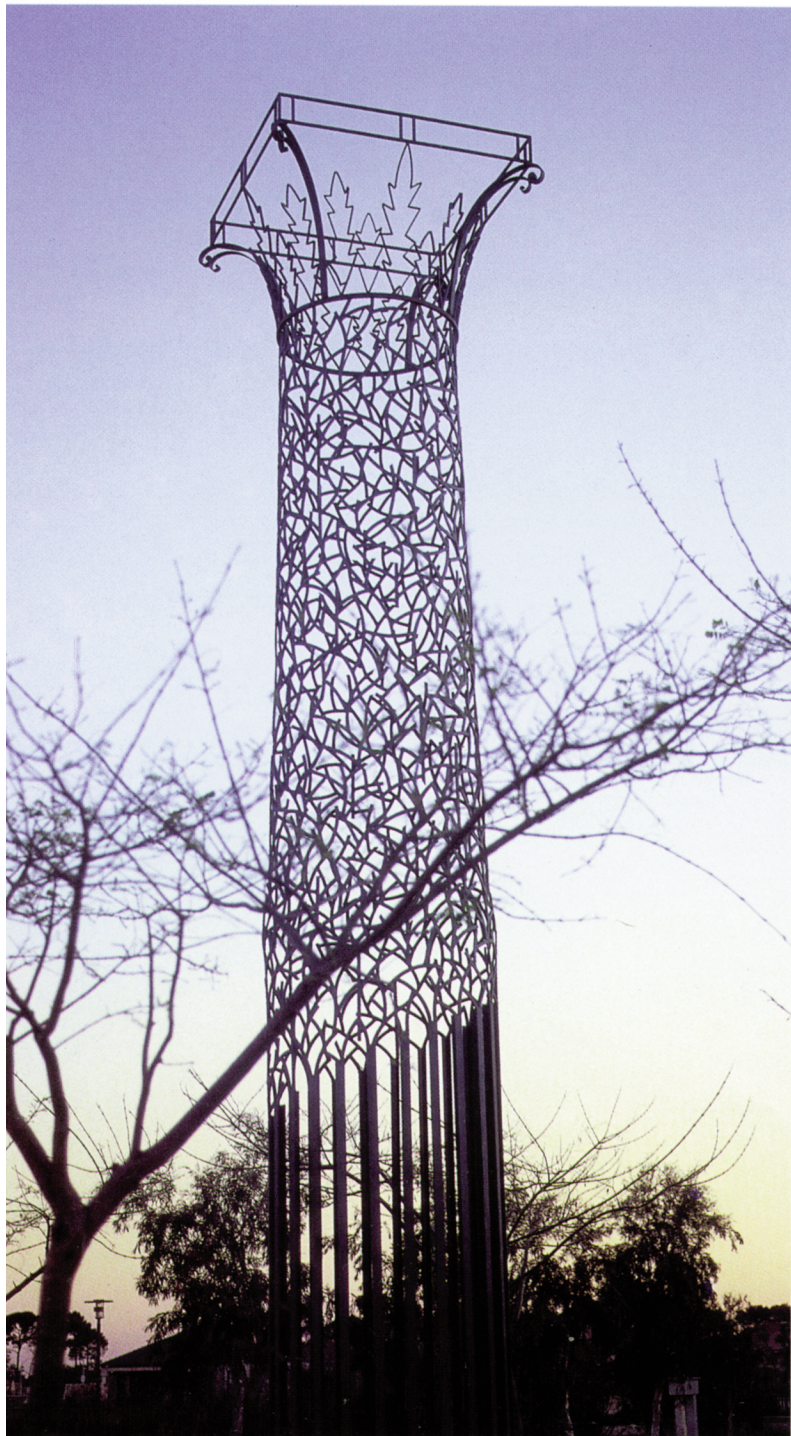
'Wattlebird', detail of the King's Park Banksia Garden paving

flora and fauna – tie the built structures of this new residential development to the heritage of the land. The artworks give a patina and create links with other histories. Unusually they are an integral part of the whole planning process, even to the extent that her artworks in the second stage, The Bridges, are the focus and identity of the entire subdivision. This early involvement has paid dividends and the design team, of which





Ellenbrook's Woodlake Village, entry sculpture of eucalypt leaves, laser-cut steel



'Classical Column', long view The Bridges at Ellenbrook, 1997
she is part, has won two national urban design awards.

O'Brien is not interested in street decoration as such, but in making artworks with the full metaphoric power and level of understanding that goes into her other work. This places it among the most intellectual and visually satisfying public artworks in the State. The Woodlake Village art aimed to establish both a sense of place and a coherent feeling of identity with core imagery drawn from indigenous flora, particularly the redgum or marri, banksia and menziesii. Native flora has been a primary icon of identity for WA since white settlement in 1827. Works focus on "revegetating" a former sandpit with 'metaphoric echoes of growth and regeneration redolent of both family life and a new community'. Softly hanging gumleaves create a screen and striking banksias make an entry statement. The rusted steel 'has an organic indigenous feel in our landscape'. Intimate seating environments were created with pavements depicting four popular eucalypts in hand-cut marble and seating based on the gumleaf motif. Magpies in the marri depicted in pavements tie in with grilles featuring the marri leaves in the nearby Community Centre buildings. An amphitheatre by the lake provides the opportunity for another pavement, this time based on a central banksia mandala with ever widening circles contained by the *Waugal*, the ancestral serpent of the Swan Valley.

In the first precinct the work had focused on the native flora and Aves. This particular work led in turn to a commission from King's Park and Botanic Garden in Perth for two pavements with seats for the new Banksia Garden. Coloured marbles were selected and inlaid to represent the various species which are indigenous to the region, while another pavement represented all the forms of prostrate banksia growing in the nearby display bed. To continue the theme, banksia wood was used for the seats of the iron benches, the design of which is based upon the structure of the bull banksia (*grandis*). The opening of the Banksia Garden occurred on World Environment Day in 1997. *Landscape Australia* wrote that 'the great success of the new Banksia Garden at King's Park and Botanic Garden in Western Australia has as much to do with its landscape artwork as it has with the important banksia collection it houses'.

The basic premise for The Bridges, the second village at Ellenbrook, engages in a discussion on the transference of culture – of European culture in another continent, of hearth and home translated into arch and

'Classical Column' at twilight, The Bridges at Ellenbrook, 1997



Detail of 'Trees, Posts and Columns', 1997, *The Bridges at Ellenbrook, terrazzo and brass, 14 metres diameter*

column and arch and column into bridges. However, through language and seditious thought these were translated back via hearth to the domestic scale for, as O'Brien says, 'It is, after all, a suburb where people go about their domestic lives.'

Not only are the pathways to view the works circular, but the thought processes involved in the artworks engage and circulate also. A cast bronze log, a terrazzo floor in an open space filled with an open column casting a shadow on a work based on reflection, the language taken and played within the artworks ending up beside a cast log – a reflection of a real one to be burnt on the nearby hearth, if the seditious playing with words has not already turned that object into something else. Similar associations of ideas are at play throughout the whole precinct.

The centrepiece is a vertical eight-metre steel classical column which becomes vegetative as it rises. The allusion to the myth of the nymph Daphne, who became a tree to escape the attentions of the god Apollo, is overt. However the symbolism of the classical column as an icon of status dispossessing the original inhabitants, both human and plant life, is more covert. Other works also tease the brain into action. In the nearby paving, embellished with dancing figures, are words to amplify the works based on reflections in all the word's meanings: reflect, mull, muse, meditate, reveal, ponder, think, wonder, mirror, imitate, show, consider, echo, reflect. The next development at Ellenbrook was called Coolamon, which draws its identity from nearby dated excavations establishing that human habitation existed

'Sunset Over the Ocean', 1998, *Italian glass mosaic tiles (a joint project with Sally Morgan), 4 x 24 m, Karrinyup Shopping Centre, WA*



'Bowl of Fruit', 1999, *cast bronze on granite plinth, ht 95 x 90 cm, Coolamon Village at Ellenbrook*

at Swan Valley at least 60,000 years ago. The artworks were designed to continue the theme of family and domestic life. Food sources in the Swan Valley were researched and used as a response to the site. Aboriginal artists made coolamons to place around the newly created lake, while European culture has been represented with bronze sculptures of domestic objects set in native plant gardens.

The city continues to grow and the next stage under construction has a new landscape architect, so O'Brien and the creative design team are responding to his more minimalist aesthetic in developing the ambience, architectural guidelines and artworks for this village. The advantage of a project of this length and magnitude has been the chance for all to grow and work together to develop attractive and cohesive village atmospheres in what were only recently pine forest and sand quarries. An understanding and appreciation of any artwork is mediated by the knowledge and experience a viewer brings to the exercise. Certainly, the level of enjoyment derived from the artworks of Philippa O'Brien depends on what the viewer can contribute to his or her understanding of the work. For some it may be the colour or the elegant line of the marble mosaic which touches them, for others the literary associations, the play upon words or the classical references; yet others may appreciate the local history or botanical detail. Response may be a combination of any or all of these for there is more than meets the eye in the works of this artist/designer who is enlivening the public spaces of Perth.

Dr Dorothy Erickson

Dorothy Erickson, who resides in Perth, exhibits her own artworks internationally and also has an Art, Design and Heritage consultancy, Erickson & Taylor.

