



Julie Squires with a penguin from 'Where's the Water'

Julie Squires

The animated trail of bronze penguins in Warrnambool has become an iconic part of the city centre. Australian public artist Julie Squires said the inspiration behind her work was to do something playful and intimate for a town that is on the coast but from the main street you cannot see the ocean.

She said she likes the idea of art being able to appeal across generations, because often public art is not directed towards children. "I also like the idea that the penguins become part of the street, they are tactile and people engage with them," she said.

"It was wonderful with the penguins, as soon as I installed them, I heard a woman behind me let out a squeal of delight, and I realised it was a local reporter who had come to look at the installation." She said one of the appealing things about the penguins is the intimate size and she is delighted that they are yarn bombed and Christmas bombed, with hats and scarves, decorations and tinsel. "You install the art and you have no control over how it is received, so finding them wrapped up with scarves and beanies is a lovely surprise. "I love that there is a sense of ownership by the community, that is the best form of community engagement, especially when they dress them up," she said. Julie said she has seen people on social media say they have to visit the penguins every day on their walk and creating that sense of belonging shows her that the idea has worked and made an impression. "That is the biggest win, when the work resonates within the community" she said.

Public art, she explains is an enormous risk and she is a mad risk taker. She began as a painter and drawer but used to become frustrated because she wanted to see the way all around things and view them from another angle. This desire to see the whole object began with a backpacking trip in Italy when she saw the statue of David. "I sat drawing it from every angle. It made a much greater impression on me than the Mona Lisa. I remember the hands, the veins in the hands, the carving was incredible."

She began making sculpture in Newcastle in 1988 and in 1996 during the bicentenary year, after a solo show, was approached to make some work on Newcastle's break-wall. "That was my first public art commission, it was like breaking out of the gallery and putting art out in the environment. People said why put it on the break-wall, people will never see them, but every day people walk out there and in 24 years they have never been graffitied," she said.

She said public art is also risky because people will always tell you what they think. "There is a responsibility that comes with it that you have to handle, it has to be as good as you can possibly make it because it is going to outlive you."



'Where's the Water' left: at Christmas; right: during winter



'Where's the Water', looking south on Liebig Street