

# Leasing Art in The Grove

Words by Gail Robinson



In testament to the bold architectural vision of its community, 'The Grove' sits quietly in the midst of Stirling Highway's hectic consumerism.

Perth's first public building with a six star eco-friendly rating, this remarkable piece of architecture is home to the public library and community space of Mosman Park, Cottesloe and Peppermint Grove.

Brimming with public artworks and design furnishings, 'The Grove' is both a technological hub and environmentally first-class. The building also caters for the needs of Peppermint Grove's 1650 population by providing a base for their shire headquarters.

Given that the adjacent public spaces breathe fresh ideas into all areas of design it is a blow to discover that the council offices are a basic corporate cubicle affair. But, unlike the dry standard generally found elsewhere, this place feels welcoming.

This is largely due to the vision of the shire's Chief Executive Officer, Anne Banks-McAllister. Over many years in local government Anne has had "the privilege", she says, "of being involved with some amazing art projects". She cites her association with Stirling Highway's 6009, Anne Neil's feathers in Swanbourne and Melville's Piney Lakes Sculpture Walk.

In her role at Peppermint Grove Anne believes art has an important role to play. "For the shire offices," she says, "my vision is to reflect the vibrancy of the fabulous public areas."

Unlike bigger councils though, some with curators on staff, Peppermint Grove's limited resources required lateral thinking, she points out. "We didn't have a budget to buy artwork, so I discussed it with [The Grove's] architects Cox Howlett and they recommended Artsource and their ArtLease program."

This method of hiring artworks from artists while keeping them available for purchase or sale was ideal for Peppermint Grove's restricted budget. So Anne's brief to Artsource was to source and fill many of the council's white walls with artworks linked to environmental sustainability and which are by WA artists. "Knowing I'm supporting the local art community is important", Anne says. "I also like the broad spread of artists that Artsource have access to. To go to a gallery would have meant being limited."

For Artsource Consultant Helen Mathie it was a dream project. "It showcases art's role in our sustainable architectural future," she says, excited by the outcomes for the artists involved as well as the client. "I loved the conversations with Anne too; she doesn't mind giving things a go."

Helen contacted fifteen artists and proposed a series of works to the Council based on their suitability for spaces nominated. After a process of consultation involving all staff and councillors ten artworks by eight artists were installed throughout the offices and meeting rooms. All the works were chosen for their environmental concept or for the sustainable vision in the artist's practice.



**Left top**  
Minaxi May, *Pretty Boy*

**Left middle**  
Elizabeth Delfs, *Infinite Space*

**Left bottom**  
Toogarr Morrison, *Shadow of a Man*  
Photos: Eva Fernandez

## “Knowing I’m supporting the local art community is important...”

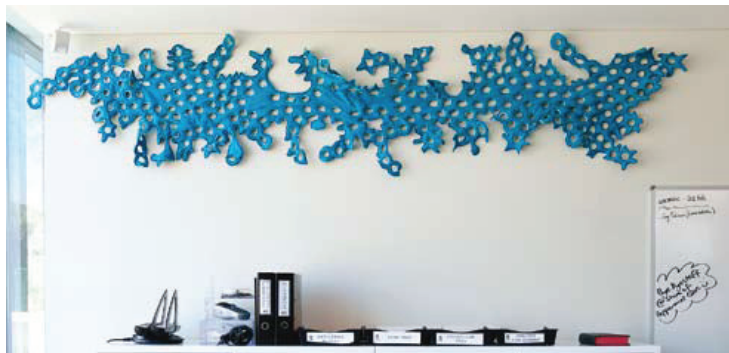
For example the artwork that Anne selected for her own office is *Pretty Boy* by Minaxi May, an artist committed to the use of recycled materials in her practice. Anne is thrilled with her choice. She laughs, “As one of only three female CEO’s in local government it’s lovely to have a male suit covered in pink flowers on my wall.”

In the office next door another of the management team, David, is as delighted with his choice. An occasional underwater photographer, he uncannily selected a painting by Jo Darbyshire, *Chandelier no.5*. “It’s what I see when I take photographs,” he said, “and I wanted it right where I could look at it all the time.”

After a tour around the offices with Anne it is evident how successful the process of collaborative selection and curatorial skill has been. “Helen advised us on possible placement of art and presented us with a selection of works to choose from,” Anne says. “I’d like to have even more artwork; there are so many more spaces.”

Artist Holly Pepper is delighted to have had two works chosen for The Grove. “For me it was a good opportunity to be on display in a prominent location,” she says. “It’s good exposure for my art that costs nothing and gives me a small income.”

Her first piece, *Blue Mat*, reflects in the window of a meeting room. This textile work was part of Holly’s first solo show, *Tread Lightly*, at FreeRange. Her other piece, *Crawling*, does as its name promises in metal fingers across the wall of another meeting room. Both works reflect growth, she feels, and were created around her continually developing design principles of craftsmanship and reuse of industrial waste.



The space reserved for big events and decisions, the Council Chambers, is flanked by two large artworks. Both are favourites of the councillors; one, *Breathing Pattern* by Eveline Kotai, and the other, *Shadow of a Man*, by Toogarr Morrison.

This isn’t the first time Toogarr has been involved in the region, as he designed the process for the Aboriginal public artwork at Minim Cove. But it is the first time he’s been involved in ArtLease, he points out.

“Artsource asked me if I wanted to be included and they picked this painting from the images I gave them. I’d rather the painting be out there than in my studio. If it’s out there it’s being seen by more potential clients. Who knows, it might lead to some commissions.”

Toogarr completed this painting in 2009 and previously exhibited it at The Moores Building. “It’s done in my traditional style,” he explains. “The viewer is looking at the environment in all its biodiversity... sky...fish...turtles...but you

need to look beyond the present dimension. Just emerging is the shadow of a man. Which means all this is in danger. Everything changes whenever you see the shadow of a man.”

Change also happens in the shadow of a motivated CEO. Which is why Anne is already planning the shape art will take in Peppermint Grove’s future. Firmly committed to turning the shire offices into “busy community spaces, full of comings and goings”, she would like some form of art exhibition for the public.

An innovative possibility arose while kicking around ideas with Helen, says Anne.

“The plan is that ArtLease will get us through the next two years and then we will lease pieces through the community. Our residents are renowned for the quality of their collections and Helen is helping us to work through a process to do that. The idea is a themed, congruent exhibition that, like our shire offices, is grounded in community intimacy and collaboration.” ☺

**Top**  
Holly Pepper, *The Blue Mat*  
Photo: Eva Fernandez

**Gail Robinson** is a freelance writer living in Perth’s hills. She combines her professional background in marketing and media with her practice as a poet and studies in visual art. Her creative works have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, and her articles on art and architecture have been widely published in Australia.

