

Connection

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Ron Mueck's 'courageous' composites commission

Internationally acclaimed Australian-born sculptor Ron Mueck is a purist, spending hundreds of hours perfecting the shape and form of each of his works down to the finest detail.

Distinctive resin odours permeate his UK studio, where he controls every step of the creative process, from the clay moulds to the fibreglass and resin lay-up; from the minutiae of the finishing touches to the pores of the skin and single strands of hair, using a mix of media including silicone and ceramic.

So, it was with some trepidation that Mueck accepted the National Gallery of Victoria's commission to create the artwork, MASS 2017, for acquisition through the Alfred Felton Bequest, for the gallery's current NGV Triennial exhibition.

Made up of 100 skulls, each 1.2 metres high, Mueck had to hand over two critical phases of his creative process – the mould-making and fabrication of the skulls – to people in Australia he had never met, let alone worked with.

Mueck designed and made the silicone patterns for two moulds, which he brought with him from London. Mueck then made three additional moulds

in collaboration with Weining Lin, Director of Idea Productions Pty Ltd in Altona, Melbourne. Working closely with Idea Productions, these subsequent moulds were modified for efficiency and usability.

After demonstrating the company's capabilities with photographs of diverse projects, followed by a telephone interview, the NGV and Mueck assigned the fabrication of 100 blank skulls to King's Fibreglass in Bayswater, Melbourne.

For four weeks, Director Glen King, Mueck and the NGV bounced around thoughts and opinions on the production process, in what Glen calls the R&D phase of production.

"Ron worked with us for two months on the project, visiting us regularly to check on progress. He taught us the art and craft of fibreglass and we taught him the commercial side," says Glen.

Mueck's input in the production phase included several techniques he had developed through experimentation, such as the insertion of thousands of

Kings Fibreglass was transformed during the time it took to fabricate 100 skulls.



expandable glass beads between the layers of fibre to render the bone structure as anatomically correct as possible. In all, there were 20 parts in each two-piece mould, to be laid-up for each of the 100 skulls, plus dozens of teeth.

The project so excited Glen's fibreglass technicians that one voluntarily gave up scheduled annual leave to be part of the project. The other three on the team willingly gave up their weekends, working seven days a week to complete the skulls in the required timeframe.

"Each skull took 25 to 26 hours to glass. Each one took over an hour to get out of the mould," says Glen. "Ron was a fabulous client. He was pleased for us to contribute to something like this and so appreciative of our work and skills, he would hug the guys each time he visited to check on progress."

Every week a batch of fibreglass skulls was delivered to a dedicated NGV workshop where a team of NGV technical staff, under Mueck's direction, added another 25 hours of labour to provide the detail that completed the artistic vision for each piece. The resulting piece - MASS 2017 - is a major feature of the NGV's Triennial exhibition and is unlike any of Mueck's previous work.

Mueck says he referenced Cambodia's killing fields, Paul Cezanne's Pyramid of Skulls and the Paris catacombs in his research.

Chairman of the Felton Bequest Committee, Sir Andrew Grimwade CBE, described MASS 2017 as "a most valuable, brave and courageous work. It is the NGV's 'Blue Poles' moment as it is sure to confound, confront and exhilarate visitors in equal measure."

NGV Triennial is a free exhibition and will be open until 15 April 2018 at NGVI, St Kilda Rd, Melbourne.



Australian-born sculptor Ron Mueck spent hundreds of hours perfecting the shape and form of each of his works down to the finest detail.



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