

Phoebe Tsakalos

Practitioner's Statement

As an exploration into what once was, I have chosen to paint two of Adelaide's iconic landmarks. Described as resembling everything from World War II anti-tank fortifications to a windswept canyon, the "Sculpture Garden" of sloping concrete pillars painted in geometric patterns in primary colours has been the subject of controversy ever since West German sculptor Otto Herbert Hajek was commissioned to design it for the Adelaide Festival Theatre Plaza in 1973. Officially titled *City Sign*, over the years, time has worn it down. Hajek meant for it to be the central feature of the Festival Centre precinct, seeing the space as an 'artificial garden'. Apart from Bert Flugelman's 'Spheres' in Rundle Mall, it is possibly Adelaide's best known public artwork, and it has polarised opinion like no other. He wanted it to be a walk-in sculpture the public could utilise as a meeting place, for entertainment and enjoyment. Hajek would be disappointed with the current condition of *City Sign*. He never wanted the various pieces of the sculpture to be separated from each other as he felt this would undermine the integrity of the entire work. He was also reluctant to allow modifications or maintenance to the work which would change it in any way. This possibly has contributed to its demise. My second painting features the recently demolished, Maughan Church. Built in 1965, this Neo Gothic church was named after the late Reverend James Maughan. Its design incorporated an octagonal, twenty-four-gabled roof designed by architect, Sir Eric von Schramek. I am a great fan of modernist architecture and felt compelled to make a statement with my artwork this year. I believe modernist structures of architectural significance often do not have the same heritage protection as older buildings and this is something I would very much like to see changed.

The theme of my works therefore involves mid-century modernist iconic Adelaide structures which have been removed. The Adelaide Festival Centre Plaza has been an important part of my life as I have always lived in this city and have fond memories of playing amongst it whenever my family and I attended shows at the Festival Centre. It has been a subject of many artists' works, including jeweller Peta Kruger and photographer Alex Frayne. They too felt a sense of nostalgia for this important landmark, which I feel is an important part of our city's identity and cultural heritage. Its form is remarkably striking and unique and there is nothing quite like it (to my knowledge) anywhere in the world. It is also thought to be Australia's largest public artwork. I entitled my painting *In its Youth*, as I used an old photograph of this sculpture when it was first installed in 1977. I did not want to show it how it is now as I want people to remember it when it was in its prime.

Maughan Church, formerly Adelaide's Franklin Street, built in 1965, was a mid-century architectural masterpiece and was listed by the Australian Institute of Architects' SA chapter as one of the state's most nationally significant examples of 20th-century design. It too was an important part of my childhood, as we would often walk past it when visiting the Central Markets and I would often marvel at its unique design. Even as a child I appreciated its modernist form and clean lines.

Painters as diverse as Jeffery Smart, Richard Maurovic, Howard Arkley and Anne Wallace have all played a key role in influencing the way I produced my works. My almost photorealist painting style is like Smart's in some ways. The smooth blending of tint and absence of visible brushstrokes was a technique I learned in-part from him. The bold, eye-catching colours used in his works are often colours of red yellow and blue, like *In Its Youth*. Adelaide artist Richard Maurovic's created a watercolour painting of City Sign in 1996 as he too saw it as one of Adelaide's iconic structures, and one which helps define our state's identity. Brisbane painter Anne Wallace's technique is also rather comparable to my own. The buildings she paints are very geometric yet flat and the lines are sharp and clean. Although Australian painter Howard Arkley often painted cityscapes and houses, his airbrush technique and bold, simplified style is somewhat different to mine. His works however are underpinned by a sense of deadpan humour, irony and pathos and this is something I have taken from his work. I hope in some way my works convey similar sentiments.

Both paintings are of images I sourced off Google Images as Maughan Church no longer exists, and the sculpture garden was surrounded by fences and in extremely poor condition. Using a variety of hues, I used oil paints as I find them much smoother to work with than acrylic and watercolour, enabling me to reach my desired look and painting technique. Each work I begun by painting the sky. I attained a softer finish by using the dry brush technique and scumbling with my brush to diffuse the hard edges edges. I then blocked in the largest areas of a single colour and continued to paint everything in stages. The process is rather time consuming and laborious, but this was necessary to achieve exactly the finish I desired in my work.

A constant difficulty that I encountered when creating each piece was getting lines and edges to be as straight and clean as possible. Initially, *In Its Youth* was all drawn onto the canvas without a ruler. The consequence of this was very wobbly lines which I struggled to correct as I painted. This meant that two months after starting (and not nearly finished) I began to use masking tape as I found taping off is an effective method of producing cleaner edges. Due to the complexity of the geometry I often became overwhelmed with the scale, proportions and position of many shapes. However, when starting my painting of Maughan Church, I had an unobstructed vision of the processes I would undertake to create it. This painting occurred much quicker in comparison as I had taught myself so much about technique with my first work. Interestingly, I feel this is my most successful work as it has a glow with the light falling on the structure which I feel my first painting does not.