

A body of work taking up arms

SCULPTOR WILL COLES LIKES TO TAKE THE ART WORLD BY SURPRISE, WRITES ELIZABETH FORTESCUE

SCULPTURE 2000: IN THE ELEMENTS

- Brenda May Gallery, 2 Danks St, Waterloo
- Today 11am-6pm, until February 9
- Free
- 9318 1122

For those who have ever been to see the popular *Sculpture By The Sea* under a cover of darkness, they might have spotted one of Will Coles's cement television sets somewhere on the cliff-top between Bondi and Tamarama.

Coles, 35, was rejected from the seaside exhibition in 2005, and every year since he's taken delight in the guerilla tactic of installing six or seven of his televisions alongside the authorised sculptures.

In the first year, Coles says, organisers took a while to notice his renegade activity. But now they're on to him. Every year, before a single seagull can settle on one of the TVs, security cart them away. But the TVs have done what Coles intended: they have swum up underneath *Sculpture By The Sea* and given it a bit of a sting.

"I just thought [*Sculpture By The Sea*] was getting pretty dull," says Coles, at Brenda May Gallery where some of his work is included in a group exhibition of new sculpture. "David Handley [founder of *Sculpture By The Sea*] hates me."

In fact, Handley chuckles with delight when reminded of the cement TVs.

"I find it hysterical when artists do that, but I hate the fact that I've got to be so grown-up about it," Handley says. "We have 450 or more artists each year that we don't select for exhibitions, so if we allow [unauthorised] work to just be deposited on the site, it really undermines the process that other artists adhere to."

With jagged rocks and foaming seas a feature of the annual Bondi coastal walk event, organisers are also understandably safety-conscious and don't want artworks to become tripping hazards. So every year the concrete TVs go into storage, and Coles is perfectly happy for them to remain there.

When he was in the UK for Christmas last year, Coles gave one of his TVs to the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich. Typically, he didn't take an orthodox route. Instead, he arrived at the Sainsbury Centre at midnight, dumping the TV at the front door before fleeing from security.

Coles's return to the UK was sparked by a need to visit his maternal grandfather, the distinguished designer and engraver Norman Sillman. Coles had some technical questions to discuss with his grandad, who taught Coles how to sculpt.

In a long association with the Royal Mint, Sillman has designed 200 coins for 35 countries, as well as commemorative medals for Prince Charles's investiture as Prince of Wales and for his marriage to Diana.

As a younger man, Sillman fed his family by designing and making model toy soldiers, which the

famous manufacturer, Britains, turned into miniatures. Coles remembers the thrill of the finished product arriving in the mail from Britains.

Coles was born into a creative family in Nuneaton, Warwickshire, but grew up in the countryside of Norfolk and Suffolk where he lived in a succession of Tudor farmhouses. His father was a builder and his mother a teacher.

He studied art in Wimbledon and Glasgow, moving to Australia in 1996, where he now lives in Enmore.

Coles's work is diverse in subject matter and materials. For one body of work, he used disturbing, real-life photographs of war casualties with ironic captions that emphasise the inhumanity of their plight. Then there are his cartoon-like illustrations in which he uses schoolboy humour to skewer prominent members of the art world such as British shock-artist Tracey Emin and Australian art critic Robert Hughes.

Coles has also sculpted some heroically beautiful human torsos, which strongly evoke the ancient Greek marbles about which he is passionate.

The sculpture which is included in the Brenda May Gallery

exhibition is titled *Parthenon Piece*, and is of a fallen soldier. Like many of the Parthenon sculptures, the figure is mainly torso. Coles sculpted the soldier in fibreglass, then had a car repair shop spray-paint it blue. The result is a giant-sized toy soldier, not unlike the ones Coles's grandfather made.

Coles will have a larger exhibition of his work at Brenda May Gallery in April-May. Meanwhile, he is joined in the current exhibition by 19 other sculptors, including Peter Tilley, Jim Croke, Jonathan Leahy, Linda Bowden and Amanda Schulz.



Guerilla tactics ... Will Coles with his toy soldier sculpture at Danks St, Waterloo.

Picture: KATRINA TEPPER