

KEN UNSWORTH

TRULY, MADLY

ARTWORK LABELS

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Ken Unsworth: *Truly, Madly*

Ken Unsworth is a senior Australian artist who draws on an extraordinarily diverse range of skills, techniques and devices. He is an enigmatic creator known for his conceptual sculptures, sculptural installations, mechanical works, land art and innovative performances that combine music, theatre, dance and art.

Ken Unsworth: Truly, Madly is the first major exhibition of his sculpture to be held in Melbourne and surveys significant aspects of the artist's more than sixty-year career. It includes his earliest static sculpture from 1968 along with recommissioned kinetic works produced during the 1980s, as well as recent works in which he brings together elements and concepts that have preoccupied him throughout his creative life.

Unsworth was born in Richmond, Melbourne, in 1931. He attended Melbourne Teachers' College and the University of Melbourne and later the National Art School in Sydney. From 1955 he worked as a secondary school art teacher then as a lecturer in art at various tertiary institutions until he retired from teaching in 1988.

Once described as a 'dead-serious clown' Unsworth is an intuitive artist who brings a particularly idiosyncratic and sometimes bizarre perspective to his work. He is constantly in his studio testing ideas and developing new works and possesses seemingly limitless energy and imagination.

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

In concert

1983–84

piano, circular saw blade, chair, wood, cane, steel,
electrical components, sound (looped)

Collection of the artist

For kids

Ken Unsworth often uses pianos in his sculptures. He learnt to play the piano when he was very young, and his wife, Elisabeth, was a concert pianist. When he was growing up his parents kept the piano in a special room in the house that Ken was only allowed to enter when he was to practise playing the piano.

What is different about this piano? Can you find another piano in this exhibition?

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

The Angel of the Lord came down

2010

piano, fibreglass resin, polyurethane foam, gold leaf
and ink on leather, wood, electrical components,
sound (looped)

Collection of the artist

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

Below the horizon

2017

steel, fibreglass resin, polystyrene, polyurethane foam

Collection of the artist

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

America

1980s

model train, steel, plastic, eucalyptus twigs on
composition board, transparent synthetic polymer resin

Collection of the artist

Body as sculpture

Ken Unsworth travelled to the United States in 1970 and was influenced by the Arte Povera ('poor art') movement, which embraced simple materials and unconventional processes. When he returned to Australia he commenced his suspended-stone installations and the first of his performance pieces, in which he uses his body as a key component.

One of Unsworth's earliest performances, or 'body as sculpture' pieces, was *Five secular settings for sculpture as ritual and burial piece*, 1975, which was a series of staged events at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Unsworth used his own body as a sculptural element in the performance, which consisted of a sequence of five parts in which theatrical lighting and a curtain were used to divide and reveal each 'setting'.

Unsworth continues to use the human form in his practice, but in a number of his new sculptural works, including *St Francis preaching to the birds*, 2018, and *Memory*, 2018, the living body has been substituted with life-size figures of the artist cast in resin. These new works continue Unsworth's fascination with the body and skeletons as objects.

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

Mind games

2014

plastic skeletons, aluminium, steel, wooden chairs, steel ball, electrical components

Collection of the artist

For kids

These two skeletons are sitting facing each other with a metal ball rolling back and forth between them. Ken Unsworth has called this sculpture *Mind games*.

What do you think he is suggesting with this title?

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

When snowflakes turn to stone

2018

resin skeleton, stones, polystyrene, transparent synthetic polymer resin, nylon, wood

Collection of the artist

'I realised that not only are river stones natural, but the human body is of natural material and that's what led me to my first exhibition. I saw the possibility of being able to use the human body as the structural element within a sculptural process, not like body art but something quite objective; that was in 1975. My use of the human figure, surrogate figures and skeletons are all part of that.'

KEN UNSWORTH, 2018

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

Memory

2018

fibreglass resin, polyurethane foam, steel, wood, blown glass, electrical components, halogen lights

Collection of the artist

'I like order and structure underneath anything I make. If there's a structure, the meaning, the idea, comes out more strongly and so for me it has been a balancing act between structure and form and intuitive impulse.'

KEN UNSWORTH, 2018

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

Kinkee bird in the drawing room

1968

leather, resin, fabric, steel, transparent synthetic polymer resin, wood

Collection of the artist

'I had a job teaching at Bathurst Teachers' College and I was struggling with painting and one day Elisabeth said to me, "Instead of drawing objects, why don't you make them instead?" *Kinkee bird* is the first sculpture I made, and I still have the original set of drawings.'

KEN UNSWORTH, 2018

Sound and movement

Sound and kinetic elements have been a key feature in Ken Unsworth's sculptural practice throughout his career. *Silent thoughts*, 1983, incorporates sound that appears to emanate from a sculptural head immersed in water and that becomes audible through speakers suspended from the ceiling.

Alphaville, 2018, a new installation that makes use of audio recordings and mechanical effects, has been created as a 'conceptual habitat'. In this work urban sounds such as a baby crying, a couple arguing and dogs barking are familiar, but the overall effect is disconcerting. Here Unsworth presents us with an environment that hints at a utopian ideal but on closer inspection becomes increasingly surreal and foreboding.

His recent performative works, which include *Seven impossible pieces for four dancers*, 2017, were presented as events in Unsworth's studio in Alexandria, Sydney. They combine human movement and musicians with specialised lighting and sculptural elements in a choreographed mix of music, theatre and art.

Unsworth's performances begin as a series of conceptual drawings, which aligns with the developmental process he employs in his sculpture. Working collaboratively with the musicians and dancers, he uses these drawings as the basis for composing the events.

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

Silent thoughts

1983

synthetic polymer paint on plaster, steel, sound (looped)

Collection of the artist

Silent Thoughts makes use of both audio and visual components and is one of Unsworth's earliest soundscapes. The sound of chanting coming from the suspended gramophone horns appears to emanate from the submerged head. In the 1980s Unsworth made two trips to Korea where he obtained recordings of Buddhist chants, which he has used in this work.

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

Alphaville

2018

composition board, silk, electrical components,
sound (looped)

Collection of the artist

For kids

This sculpture is a model of an imaginary town called Alphaville. If you listen you will hear many different sounds coming from inside parts of the sculpture.

What are some of the sounds? If this was a real town do you think it would be a happy place to live? What does the artist want us to think by making a sculpture like this?

Ken Unsworth

born Australia 1931

Saint Francis preaching to the Birds

2018

fibreglass resin, polystyrene, polyurethane foam, electrical components, wood

Collection of the artist

For kids

St Francis of Assisi was the patron saint of animals. In a story from the Bible he is described as having a special connection with birds, who would gather around him and often sit on his shoulders to listen to what he had to say. In this sculpture, which Ken Unsworth has called *St Francis preaching to the birds*, Ken has used a model of his own body.

What do you think he might be saying to the birds?