

Sculpture on the Farm

A not-for-profit community art event in Dungog, NSW, is giving back in many ways to both the local community and Australia's artists.

STORY + PHOTOS KEN EASTWOOD

A mountain biker slogs up a hill dotted with grey and spotted gums on Dungog Common. He's watched by a small group gathered around a sinuous steel sculpture, installed the day before. While he goes on to ride and jump over some of the 22km of bike track in the 260ha common that was founded in the 1890s, the group will discuss artistic form as they visit other artworks in the park.

Artist of this piece called *Sorwele Two*, Jen Mallinson, from Pambula, NSW, says she created it with corten steel, which should last forever. She treated it with a hydrochloric wash to create streaks that look like timber from a distance. Standing twice as high as her, it's based on an ancient runic symbol that stands for wholeness, energy, life force and potential. "I've always loved organic forms, and my works have always been curvaceous," Jen says. "I wanted to make a form that curved in every direction. It's a nice size. My tools are large – I can manipulate the steel quite well in this size, and it has a presence, but physically I can't go much bigger than this."

Just down the hill, within sight of Jen's work is another sculpture called *Entwined* by Bob Teasdale, of Bowning, NSW. An ephemeral work by Newcastle artist Gavin Vitullo – an improbably upright log in the common's creek called *A Thought is a Ripple* – can be discovered by those who know where to look. At the visitor centre, a bronze kelpie by Central Victorian artist Jimmy Rix is being installed, and on a hill across town Braddon Snape's large installation, *Nothin' but Sky*, is available for everyone to stick their head inside and see 1.7 tonne of steel vanish so you see "nothing but sky".

All of these works are the result of a four-year-old not-for-profit venture called Sculpture on the Farm that has seen some of Australia's greatest sculptors exhibit their work in the small Hunter Region town. After each exhibition, the Sculpture on the Farm committee offers to buy one work each for the council and Dungog Common.

"Sculpture on the Farm has three aims," says founder and chair, Philippa Graham. "To provide an excellent art exhibition, to donate works to Dungog and to provide education about the arts to the region."

The first exhibition was on the October long weekend in 2018, and held on Fosterton, the 65ha Angus property owned by Philippa and her husband John, who is the treasurer of Sculpture on the Farm. "I hadn't realised how

difficult it was going to be – getting the farm looking schmick," John says with a smile. While Philippa oversaw the show, including getting more than 50 artists on board with 100 artworks, John occasionally had to hop on the tractor to help install some of the works. "From the Friday morning, at 7am, it's this military exercise of signing people in," he says. "If a work weighs 2 tonnes, you're looking at serious equipment to get it in place."

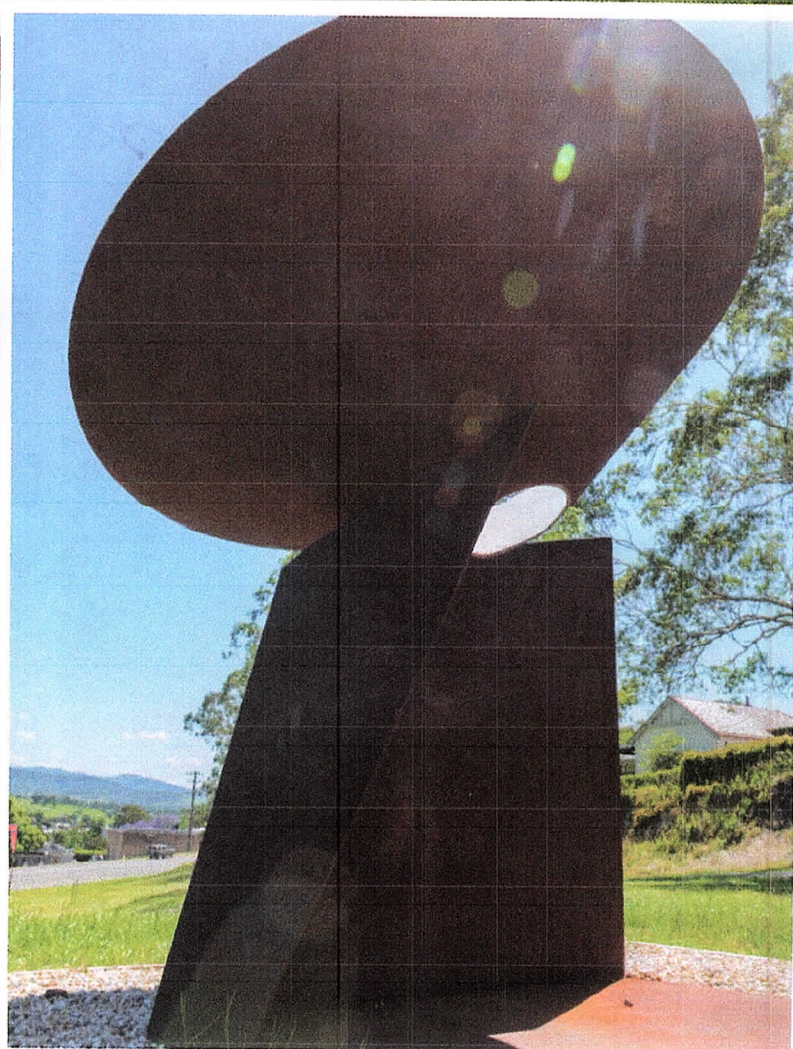
A maze was mown into one paddock, with a Rudi Jass kinetic sculpture in the middle, and all the artworks were identified by cattle tags. Philippa says the "full spectrum of people in the sculpture world" was represented, with everything from classic fine bronze works to Braddon's cutting-edge works of inflated steel, and from intimate, small pieces to large. "While we have works that represent some of Australia's best sculptors, we also want to have emerging artists," she says. "We want people to brush up against works and say, 'Well, I could have welded that,' but then they see other works and they learn about art."

A roaring success, the exhibition saw more than 2000 visitors that first year, and more again the following year, and was supported each time by a Destination NSW grant of \$20,000. Walking tours were held so people could meet the artists themselves by their artwork. "It's intimate, but not intimidating," Jen says. All the works were available for sale, with Sculpture on the Farm taking a commission on any sales – which not only helped pay the substantial costs of putting on the exhibition, but also gave them the resources to be able to donate works to Dungog.

The exhibition wasn't held in 2020, but last year a slightly revised format was envisaged with three venues in town adding to the displays on Fosterton. However, COVID restrictions saw the whole event go online. The website (www.sculptureonthefarm.com) not only has a growing catalogue of sculptures to view and buy, but also has videos and biographies of many of the artists.

Philippa, who is full of energy, says she's always been involved in building communities, "whether the school or the local church" and was looking for a way to contribute to Dungog. She is the niece of famous sculptor Inge King and also a sculptor in bronze and timber herself. "But since Sculpture on the Farm I just haven't had time," she says.

In 2022, the event will remain online, with Dungog's next physical Sculpture on the Farm planned for October in 2023.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Visitors enjoy the artworks at Sculpture on the Farm, Dungog, NSW; Braddon Snape's large installation, Nothin' but Sky; Jen Mallinson with her work Sowelu Two on the Dungog Common; Braddon Snape (centre) with Philippa and John Graham.