

# Metallica

text: Louise Martin-Chew

Before cookware became designer posh there was aluminium. Renowned Australian artist Donna Marcus takes the humble jelly mould, colander and patio planter of yesteryear into a new realm.





In the mid-20th century, aluminium became one of the most ubiquitous materials of modern life. In her studio on Queensland's Mt Tamborine, Donna Marcus has collected tons of it – “critical mass is everything,” she says.



Old aluminium kitchenware may not initially project extensive cerebral or aesthetic possibilities. However, artist Donna Marcus began to look more deeply at aluminium's place in modernity and was intrigued by its qualities and history. She has developed intuitive formal arrangements of these discarded objects to create robust large-scale sculptures that are at once flights of imagination and repositories of memory. This work has brought her significant public art commissions and garnered national and international interest in her art practice.

Marcus began working with aluminium serendipitously, with the purchase of some old jelly moulds at Queensland's Eumundi markets. She was attracted by their tonal qualities, and also the lightness of material. “Initially I thought I might draw them. I was attracted to their industrial yet domestic aesthetic. While they came from the kitchen, there was an aeronautical element to them.”

After the birth of her son Felix, home alone one day, she was drawn to the jelly moulds and started to put them together with Blutac, “mucking around with shape”. This first sculptural piece she called *In Flight*. “There were nine moulds. Put together they became like silver spaceships, but I had the sense that these objects came with their own baggage and stories.” →

# Profile



photograph: Studio Sept

Ryde, 2011, ceramic, silicon, stainless steel, 42 cm diameter, courtesy the artist and Diane Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne. **opposite page top** Dissolve, 2012, aluminium, 190 x 117 x 4 cm. Courtesy the artist and Diane Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne. **bottom left** Earthed, 2011, aluminium, ceramic, 100 x 100 x 6 cm, courtesy the artist and Diane Tanzer Gallery. **right** Dozens, installation view, aluminium, courtesy the artist and Diane Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne.

She began to research aluminium and was further intrigued. "This very modern material allowed the twentieth century to realise Jules Verne's prediction that one day men would fly. It was to become one of the most ubiquitous materials of modern life, used to build not only spaceships but humble everyday objects that defined the modern home – jelly moulds, vegetable steamers, saucepans, cake tins and patio planters."

"I am intrigued by the way such simple objects have come to me, decades later, discarded, yet embedded with stories. I've collected tonnes of this material – critical mass is everything! Initially I began layering them, and placing objects in simple formats, in particular square grids, and I became intrigued with the way they lost themselves in this formal setting. In one sense they changed entirely and at the same time they were still very much themselves. I continue to be interested in how, with little intervention, they transform into something else altogether, through a process of rearrangement."

Yet Marcus's source materials trigger memory and audience response that is heartfelt, direct and personal. Layered with an interest in language, her titles become part of a journey also strongly associated with the collecting process itself.

"People tell me their stories – of place, people, and other times. The provenance of these pieces, in individuals' memories, reinforces the historical importance of aluminium, making it personal as well." Her work is also imbued with a sense that the excess of modern life has forced a rethinking of the materials available to the artist. Marcus's concerns about issues of production, consumption, waste and sustainability are embodied in her sculpture. She has also created millennium domes, inspired by the design principles of Buckminster Fuller. His understanding of global problems in the 1930s and 1940s was visionary.

Marcus's studio is dominated by her collection. She works in an old Queensland building, another example of re-use, relocated to be adjacent to her home in Mount Tamborine. While she and partner, architect Fred Cehak, thought that their residence "on the mountain" might be short-term after their relocation to Queensland, the area's pristine natural environment and diverse community continues to sustain them some 20 years later.

This year Marcus and family have moved to Brisbane in part to extend her ongoing role as senior lecturer at Queensland College of Art, but the studio remains the place where she creates. →





# Profile

*Trickle* for 400 George Steet, Brisbane. Artwork curated and managed by Jacqueline Armistead in association with Cox Rayner Architects.

Marcus's public art is in spaces in Queensland, Melbourne and Saudi Arabia. In May 2012, *True North*, a major public sculpture that brokers the relationship between a new shopping centre and the Pioneer River, was launched in Mackay. Inspired by the nautical term for north and the location of sub-tropical Mackay, it represents Mackay's function as a working port and recreational marina.

In Brisbane Marcus is best known for *Steam*, an iconic work inspired by aluminium vegetable steamers. It dominates Brisbane Square at the river end of the central business district. *Trickle*, another public work in Brisbane, located in the foyer of 400 George Steet, is a dramatic aluminium congregation, stacked to form stalactites and stalagmites that grow inorganically within the pristine corporate entry.

For Marcus, it is the blend of industry and the domestic that drives the heart of her work and makes a virtue of her collection of vintage waste. In her studio, surrounded by aluminium, classified and stacked according to colour, object and shape, she has space to dream. While in recent years she has also fabricated sculpture and utilised new prototyping technologies, she remains compelled by her collection. "I really value the beautiful worn pieces that are literally inscribed with use. I do like that these objects have an unshakable past which they happily yield in their new formations."

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