

Sunshine Coast and Tatebayashi City Artist Exchange

Sunshine Coast and Hinterland artists have just returned from an art and culture exchange in Tatebayashi Japan. The focal point of the week was an exhibition of art works by both Australian and Japanese artists with a two metre sculpture designed and created by Maleny artists as the centrepiece.

The Sunshine Coast Regional Council and Tatebayashi City Council have a sister city agreement. Tatebayashi is a city of approximately 170,000 people about two hours north of Tokyo. Each year there is an exchange of sister city representatives that usually includes local councillors, sister city personnel and a group of artists.

Practical workshops and demonstrations in jewellery making, western calligraphy, hand-made books and patch working were all part of the week long artistic collaboration. As part of the exchange artists and other Sunshine Coast Regional Council representatives also took part in many cultural, promotional and social events organised by Tatebayashi City Council.

Over many years Palmwoods artist Christine Elcoate has worked hard to make art a key part of the annual exchange. Each year Christine works voluntarily to coordinate the activities of interested Sunshine Coast Region artists. Eight Sunshine Coast Region artists, including Christine, paid their own way to make the trip to Tatebayashi to participate in the collaborative week. Three local Maleny artists, Fiona Dempster, Noela Mills and Barry Smith, participated in the exchange.

Noela received a grant from the Australia-Japan Foundation which allowed her to participate in the Tatebayashi exchange.

As well as exhibiting a range of artist's books Fiona Dempster taught western calligraphy and book making to a group of enthusiastic Japanese. Noela Mills taught her jewellery making techniques using recycled teabags, and explained her passion for 'wabi sabi', a concept reflected in her aged and 'found object' exhibition pieces. Barry Smith exhibited small sculptures created from recycled and salvaged materials including wood, rusted metal, stainless steel and wire.

Jewellers Christine O'Reilly and Chantelle Fischer taught a 'wearable art' workshop to Tatebayashi high school students and both exhibited exquisite pieces. Nicky Taylor and Merle Wagner spent a day on a project involving the internationally renowned Tatebayashi Quilting group and exhibited their own work. Christine Elcoate exhibited silk felted wall panels with extensive machine embroidery.

Barry Smith designed the collaborative two metre sculpture which features four strong pillars that make up an imposing sculpture two metres high and 800mm square. Fiona Dempster assisted Barry to construct the sculpture which needed to be created in situ in two days. Material and equipment requirements were both a challenge and a great experience in international communication, good will and cooperation. A local builder, Kanda-san, provided all the recycled timber cut to size. Local artists such as Tombow and friends such as Bessie supplied a range of tools. A trip to a great local hardware store resulted in all the glues and screws required. Barry and Fiona so loved the hardware store, more an Aladdin's cave, that they had to return to make purchases to bring back home. There was a great sense of support for the sculpture to become a reality and Barry was mightily relieved when the four pillars were manhandled into the exhibition space with a couple of hours to spare.

But the final sculpture was much more than the wooden structure as its ledges and niches accommodated about twenty small art pieces contributed by the eight Australian artists and eight Tatebayashi artists including the local Mayor's wife's pottery. A truly collaborative sculpture was created.

During their visit members of the exchange took part in a range of events including; Zazen meditation at the Fusaiji Temple- and learnt something about the rituals and traditions of Zen Buddhism; an ancient Indigo dying 'factory'; the new Gallery of Modern Art with its sweeping architecture; a local sake factory where we got to sample the produce; the ancient local azalea park with thousands of mature flowering azalea, some of

which are 800 years old; and an international community picnic in the park, under a canopy of freshly blooming wisteria and azalea.

In 2010 Tatebayashi artists will visit the Sunshine Coast and Hinterland for another exchange building on the friendships and understanding of each other's culture, way of life and artistic expression.

Noela Mills Art Exhibition and Workshops in Tatebayashi, April 2009

- article by Noela Mills

I was asked to be part of a 'Sister Cities' Cultural Exchange project between the Sunshine Coast Regional Council and Tatebayashi City Council. My role was to exhibit and teach during a week long artistic collaboration the last week of April.

I am a professional artist from Maleny, Queensland and have always loved the traditional Japanese aesthetics of creating balance, harmony and understatement in art, nature and life itself. My love of the Japanese feeling of 'wabi sabi' [finding beauty in aged, worn and everyday things] seemed to be a logical fit to the exchange. I use old and weather beaten objects in most of my work – rusty tin, antique watch parts, delicate pieces of driftwood, old and patched scraps of fabric and even teabags.

Little did I know that most young, urban Japanese people have never heard of the term 'wabi sabi'. It was quite strange trying to educate young people about their own culture. The more mature people just smiled and nodded when I enthused over my finds of porcelain shards on the beach and faded kimono remnants at the markets. Fortunately, there is great emphasis today on reusing and recycling, so creating art and jewellery from old metal washers, teabags and watch parts was approached with interest and enthusiasm.

Living in Australia with English ancestry, I often feel the lack of connection to my heritage. Travelling to Japan gave me a huge sense of awe at the depth of aesthetic and spiritual sophistication of ancient Japan. I am very grateful to the AJF for helping me to exhibit and teach in this noble and historic land.

