

Found About: art in public places

an essay by John Jenkins

Exploring eleven works in the Nillumbik Art Collection with location guide

Assisted by: Tony Trembath

John Jenkins

John lives in Kangaroo Ground where he presently works as a freelance journalist, poet, editor, reviewer and teacher. He is a valued member of Council's Literary Reference Group, conducts creative writing workshops, is the author of several books, and has wide-ranging experience as a journalist, both in-house and as a freelancer. Although his main personal interests as a writer has been in areas of Australian literature and art, he has extensive commercial experience, which gives him a very practical and applied understanding of the art of communication. His more recent books include *Travellers' Tales from Old Cuba, Arias: Recent Australian Music Theatre*, *Days Like Air*, and in collaboration with Ken Bolton, *Nutters Without Fetters*.

Tony Trembath

Tony is a highly regarded and valued artist living in Panton Hill. The former Shire of Eltham commissioned Tony to create a public sculpture at the entrance to Edendale Farm, Gastons Road, Eltham. This major work titled *The Fencing Act 1968*, has been declared 'of regional significance' by the National Trust of Australia. Tony was invited to be a selector for the 1996 Nillumbik Art in Public Places Award and to judge the first ephemeral sculpture competition conducted as part of the 2002 Nillumbik Festival of Arts, *art: caught in the act*. He lectures in sculpture at Monash University.

Found About: art in public places

Nillumbik includes several townships set among undulating hills, open grazing land, broad-acre farms and boutique vineyards. It also has places of high conservation and heritage value, in scenic valleys and river flats carved out or deposited by the Yarra River and its tributaries.

The shire's outdoor artworks are accessible by car and foot and all can be viewed within a single day, taking you to unfamiliar parts of the shire and fostering greater enjoyment of the richly varied landscapes they help to mark and articulate.

Reading about these works and viewing reproductions can be useful, but visiting them is vital for a complete experience. They invite a kinaesthetic and sensual exploration of their textures, shapes, solid mass and volumes. The places in which they are set, and to which they refer, are often an integral part of the works themselves.

At special parts of the Yarra River, beautifully arranged piles of stones can still be seen, the remnants of fish traps built by the shire's first inhabitants. Beside the winding roads are many old cattle yards and sheds, rusting farm machinery and trucks rotting into the soil. Windmills and water tanks appear stark against the sky, while dams and other earthworks have become part of the unfolding contours of the land. You will see recent structures, too — radio-towers and telephone spires supporting delicate satellite dishes, while high electricity pylons march across the hills.

As you discover the formal works of the collection, you might be reminded of these structures — which also have rich 'sculptural' aspects. You might also begin to perceive the shire as a ready-made sculpture park, in which formal works harmonise or contrast with these 'found' ones.

_

Our tour begins with *Not Just a Pretty Place* by Aleks Danko, a two-metre bluestone form resembling a giant river pebble, set beside a walking trail near the confluence of the Yarra River and Diamond Creek in Eltham. The artist tells us this work refers to Aboriginal message sticks and coolamuns (carrying baskets) and to its site, a traditional meeting-place.

It is approached via a walking track beside the river where, after a few bends, you see an enigmatic object ahead, surrounded by grass. Covered with rain or morning condensation, its shiny black surface glistens mysteriously, like a beached seal or dugong. In full sun, casting a hard shadow, it looks like a canoe that has been turned, hull-side up. Walk closer, it has a slightly threatening look, like an unexploded bomb or torpedo. Closer still, it looks less metallic, also friendlier and softer.

It marks the ground with a sign of prior habitation, just as a message stick would do. Feeling its surface, you notice it has the smooth precision of a torpedo. Although able to be read as a natural form, it is obviously man-made — very regular, new and finished.

Some people have used the work as a seat, evident from a line of bare soil alongside, where feet have rested. There is a conventional bench nearby, which walkers may have taken as a cue

Although many readings are possible, the shape most obviously represents a giant river pebble, worn smooth and rounded by the action of water, so its place beside the Yarra is appropriate.

The work is an example of super realism. It may look just like a worn river pebble, but one that has been magnified or 'blown-up' by many thousands of degree. It is the unnatural scale that makes it distinct, as well as baffling.

Weathered by wind and rain, it will become increasingly smoother and rounder and acquire a timeless appearance. Bluestone has given it a very solid presence — very heavy and compact — and the work is hard and durable, as though resisting change.

The force of gravity seems to 'hug' it to earth, so it looks right to be simply lying on the grass, unsupported by a base.

Not far away is the confluence of the Diamond Creek and Yarra River, where Aboriginal people camped, held meetings or traded with neighbouring groups. Later, when this area was farmed, it became the confluence of two cultures. A sense of mystery seems appropriate here, with this highly poetic object surrounded by a deepening yet 'articulate' silence. We know little of the former inhabitants of these river flats, and there are few signs of their impact. The object seems to confirm this, as part of a wider meditation on the site and its meaning.

The work could also be interpreted as an object of trade or exchange, valuable in itself, with the exchange being 'open', depending entirely on your response to its enigmatic, 'whispering' presence.

Classical Landscape by Cliff Burtt is set inside Alistair Knox Park again in Eltham. A large steel structure, it has a monumental quality, softened and domesticated by surrounding trees, lawns and large pond complete with splashing ducks.

This imposing work takes the form of five tall rectangular columns, which enclose four Romanesque (or rounded) arches. They frame sections of park beyond, inviting you to explore further. Repeated arches also mirror the structure of a nearby trestle bridge, on the rail line into Eltham.

At the top of the work is a constructed landscape, inverting the normal order of things. Instead of a landscape supporting architectural structures, here we find a supported 'model landscape', which -mirrors the contours of the park and makes a far-ranging reference to the shire's vast landscapes.

This arching work makes reference to the viaducts of classical architecture and, by extension, with classical ideals of civic culture and aspiration, appropriate to its placement near a library. It seems to declare a harmonious relationship between the built and natural environment, culture and nature. Here, culture literally holds up nature — as an object of aesthetic contemplation.

The four arches establish an ordered symmetry (the realm of culture), while asymmetry is emphasised at the top by the model landscape's uneven contours, mimicking the natural world.

Burtt has described mild steel as "the most democratic of metals", and the piece has rusted to a deep orange. It seems to gently smoulder in summer, glow in winter, and echo the tones of autumn. Rust and ageing gives it an aura of time — or perhaps, of timelessness.

The form has been carefully sited, inviting the viewer to circulate around it. If you do, you soon discover there is no position from which you can see all of the model landscape at the top. To comprehend it fully, you must walk around the piece, looking from several vantages, building up a composite picture from memory.

Nearby is *Surveyor of Public Environs* by Ernst Fries, an abstract piece in polished stainless steel, set atop a grassy knoll. About the same height as a standing person, it has a generally organic or biomorphic form.

A central motif represents the viewer's eye, placed on a pedestal — a slender steel column with an undulating contour towards the base and rippled edge on one side.

The eye-like element has an aperture for the pupil. Part of the metal has been cut away, leaving a rough interior surface — so you can 'see into' the material structure of the piece.

The work engages any alert observer who walks here, by addressing itself to the human scale. The message seems a direct and simple one. "Look at what I have made and put here, then look around and enjoy the park."

Surveyor addresses its surrounds in only the most general terms, marking the knoll as a pleasant viewing area and punctuating the viewer's experience of walking here. The title reveals its main idea.

A walking trail crossing the Diamond Creek takes us to *Recycled Fictions of Being* by Terri Bird, sited in parkland on the western side of Alistair Knox Park. Launched in March 2003, it is the most recent piece in the shire's Art in Public Places series.

A site-specific sculpture, it is set in an open and elevated position, a little to the right of an informal walking track across the park's rolling, rounded contours.

The setting is important, as the work makes reference to the site's history as a former garbage disposal area.

The attractive contours of the reclaimed park, now lush with grass, have been subsequently landscaped, 'sculpted' and shaped by earth-moving machinery. Bird's sculpture marks, completes and celebrates this transformation.

The piece, roughly rectangular, with squared-off ends and long sides cut at a slight angle, is made from a great many strips of 'unimould' recycled plastic, laminated together into a low, flat shape about 60 cm thick.

The plastic, which is of a bold yellowish/orange colour, has been strengthened with interior steel bolts running longitudinally and concealed by end panels. This invisible infrastructure is attached to steel members anchored to a concrete, sunk base below the work.

The entire piece is slightly elevated, projecting just above the line of the grass.

The yellow plastic, just like this section of park, has been recycled and given a 'second life', suggesting broad themes of ecological responsibility, conservation and sustainable use of resources.

There may be an added irony that plastic is a by-product of the oil refining industry, and oil, in turn, is the residue of ancient plant life subjected to immense pressures below the earth's surface. That is, the earth has already recycled plants into oil, and human beings have recycled the oil into plastic.

This piece just further elaborates the cycle — recycling thousands of discarded items of plastic into art.

But it is also making some additional, very subtle allusions to its site. These references may be quite conceptual and philosophical in nature, and perhaps not obvious at first glance.

In some works of art, ideas can be often be just as – or even more – important than the work's sensual qualities (its look and feel) or structure (its form and materials). This is the case here. Indeed, the title *Recycled Fictions of Being* is the key to a semi-

conceptual work such as this.

The top of the piece is not flat, but exactly mirrors the undulating contours of a section of the nearby walking track.

The artist describes the piece as "air given form", and we are to imagine it as representing a volume of air above the track — a slice or section of space through which people wander as they traverse the park.

So far, so good, but the next step requires a leap of the imagination.

We must imagine time as well as space: people daydreaming, and thinking about what they are doing and where they are going – and generally being absorbed by their own metal life and subjective 'worlds' — as they make their way along the track and through the park.

It is these personal motivations and impulses that decide the trajectory they have chosen, following 'desire lines' that have shaped the path beneath their feet. The inner lives of visitors to the piece are the elusive 'fictions of being' referred to in the title.

Of course, we do not need to think of 'fictions' as meaning an untruth or a lie, or something false. Perhaps a better — and less potentially misleading word — would have been 'stories', rather than 'fictions'.

Everyone has his or her own stories. There are stories we tell each other. There are also ones we tell ourselves: our 'inner narratives' or 'self speak'. By telling stories about ourselves, and to ourselves, we emerge more fully into being.

Like air, which is invisible but vital for life, these inner stories are vital to our mental existence and sense of place and identity.

A slice of these stories, like the slice of air above the path, is represented by this piece. But the stories are not written down. We have to imagine them. And if we do imagine them, they are again 'recycled' in our minds.

We might find it challenging to spend time to investigate all the ideas implied by this piece. At first, it might seem to confront us with a conundrum or a puzzle, but if we respond with curiosity, rather than hostility, we might find the effort a stimulating and rewarding mental exercise on our walk through the park.

NB. This work has been destroyed by vandals

At the base of the Eltham library steps is *Alan Marshall* by Marcus Skipper. This life-size bronze of the Australian writer and former Eltham resident shows a strongly naturalistic treatment of subject matter and formidable technique with this most traditional of metals.

Propped up jauntily by a crutch under his right armpit, the author is depicted holding an open book against his upper torso, while his right arm is fully extended, summoning into being the world of imagination and literature for readers entering the library.

The author is 'down amongst us,' not set on a plinth, or outside ordinary human concerns. He does not belong to a more refined plane, yet is entirely comfortable with the world of books, ideas and culture.

Marshall had the rare gift of being able to write equally for people of all ages. A humanitarian, socialist, and spontaneous story-teller, he was renowned for his unbridled curiosity, and for his rapport with people from all walks of life.

The sculpture has a canopy of three large trees, softening the piece and increasing its sense of approachability. The warmth of the bronze accentuates this — and it would be difficult to imagine it made of any other material. The cuff of the left trouser leg is shown rolled casually over the author's old shoe. Texturing also suggests the weave of the sloppy jumper he is wearing. To discover the modelling was from Marshall's own clothing imparts both historical accuracy and greater poignancy.

Nest is a structure by Helen Bodycomb and Enver Camdal, at the Luck Street and Main Road roundabout in Eltham. It resembles a large bird's nest, with three egg-like forms of fibreglass

covered in a pebble render, set on sand. The nest shape has been created out of stiff, coarse indigenous grass, periodically trimmed so the view is not obstructed. The eggs are a brown-speckled, creamy yellow, like those of the spotted quail thrush, a ground-nesting bird of the shire.

When you drive past *Nest*, it flashes into view then is just as quickly gone.

In contrast to the Danko, which prompts a puzzled, leisurely meditation, this piece has the bold immediacy of a highway sign. It can be grasped in a single glance, without distracting drivers. It simply says: 'Here is a giant nest containing three eggs.'

As it recedes in your rear-view mirror, or perhaps with the luxury of reflection, it discloses more subtle meanings. Formally, the piece is an extended essay in circularity. The roundabout is a circle. Within it, is the smaller circle of the nest. The three eggs are arranged in a ring, with the narrow end of each pointing to the

large end of the next, again in a circle. Around these elements, traffic flows continuously, in the same direction as the eggs.

This circular flow recalls the revolution of the seasons, and nesting cycles. There is a tall light pole above the eggs, shining down at night. The effect is of a giant incubator. Enrichment and nurturing can be associated with eggs, a feminine form linked with the larger environment, which also sustains life. The piece might be saying: 'What goes around, comes around. If we take sufficient care of the environment, our lives will be enriched.'

Like the Danko work, the egg shapes are also hyper-real 'blow-ups' of real objects. What distinguishes them from actual eggs is their giant scale. This life-plus scale gives 'Nest' an affinity with naive, vernacular or kitsch objects, such as 'the big lobster', 'the big pineapple', etc. This perhaps explains why the piece has attracted pranksters.

Art in the public domain invites interpretation, which is a form of dialogue. The limits of this dialogue — how far it should be taken — is uncertain. In this sense, *Nest* has, literally, become part of a two-way street.

The Spirit of Nillumbik by artist Deborah Halpern and her metal-worker husband Malcolm Laurence, is a suite of design and sculptural motifs intended, in Halpern's words, to "enhance existing elements of the Eltham Town Square".

The work includes a series of decorative metal-filigree panels set into the walls along a footpath leading to the Town Square. It incorporates panels on balustrades and back-rests, behind an imposing stairway descending from car parks and supermarkets. There is also a finial (ornamental wrought-iron chocolate lilies) capping the peaked roof of a pavilion. Finally, a mosaic of brightly coloured tiles depicts a rainbow-coloured snake, uncoiling from the pavilion floor.

The snake, perhaps the mythological rainbow serpent, recalls Aboriginal habitation. The panels depict the shire's wildlife, from birds to insects, butterflies to reptiles. Below them, creepers have been planted, which twine over pilasters and among the lattice-work.

The square's walls and parapets are rendered with warm yellow and creamy ochre to resemble mud brick and celebrate Eltham's mud brick aesthetic. In combination with the architecture, the works create warm, welcoming spaces and a sensual, unselfconscious mood, softening the more strident Commercial Place nearby.

Small gardens planted with rocks, native plants and grasses create more private enclaves. A tiled fountain enhances the mood, with light playing on splashing water. A central amphitheatre can be used for small-scale performances. The

decorative, multi-use design of the square is clearly intended to bring people together and provide pleasure.

Younger people, particularly, seem drawn here, along with workers, shoppers taking a break, or people watching performances. The public realm is not unitary, but made up of people of different

ages, genders and varying material and social circumstances. People will always have different priorities in their lives, which will determine their use and perception of public art. This is particularly true of this square, a friendly place that has been positively embraced by the community.

A large structure titled *The Fences Act 1968* by Tony Trembath is the entrance to Edendale Farm Eltham, a former English gentleman's residence and now a community environment centre. A functioning gateway, the work consists of a series of lopped tree trunks, used as posts and linked by rails, supporting a farm gate. A small structure, representing an isolated farmhouse, is built into the fence at one side.

The piece explores the iconography of the rural countryside, referring to elements in the wider Australian landscape and to ones in the shire. Stumps recall the severe pruning regimes carried out on avenues of trees in Victorian country towns.

The posts have truncated branches, capped with large chrome-nickel salt pots shaped to fit the blunt branch ends. From these caps, multiple sprays of thin, curving steel rods represent regrowth of new foliage after fire.

Bracketing the piece, at the ends of the fence, are two larger, sentinel-like stumps with flame-like steel wings. They support the most vigorous sprays of rods, which leaps above the work in an energetic arch formation, leading the eye back to the central gate.

The title refers to a government act pertaining to disputes between neighbours over the placement of fences and boundaries. The piece could be broadly interpreted as taking a wry swipe at a community becoming divided by trivial local squabbles.

The work extends mildly the vernacular sculpture of capped straining posts. (Straining posts on farm fences are capped with a sheet-iron, to prevent the timber from rotting.) It also celebrates the tradition of 'ad-hocism', making-do and rural inventiveness. An aspect of this can-do ethos is the pleasure of seeing what can be cobbled together from limited resources and materials immediately to hand.

Found elements here also attest to an informal curatorial project. These materials are not simply junk, but have inherent heritage value, as well as formal properties that make them valuable in their own right.

A two-metre-high sculpture of red painted steel, *The Breeze* by Edward Ginger, is sited on a small island of bushland above an embankment, at a side road to the Eltham Little Theatre, Research.

This multi-faceted work alludes to flames, window-like spaces and the sun.

From the main road, the sculpture acts as a signpost to the theatre, marking a place of culture. The side road also leads to a small industrial area. The artwork integrates cultural and industrial spheres, reminding us of manufacture through its machined appearance.

Though specifically chosen for the site, *The Breeze* is site-specific only in a general sense. Dominating its roadside strip of remnant vegetation, it is hard-edged, with precise, clean-cut forms. Primarily an abstract work, *The Breeze* does, however, make clear nods towards content. It refers to a general idea of flame (bushfires), movement, speed of passing cars and shifting breezes at the site. There is a slight suggestion of an eye, fish or leaf shape at the very top, with a large circular aperture perhaps representing the sun.

The artist was born in Sri Lanka, where the fish is not so much a Christian symbol, but a sign of prosperity. The sun, of course, stands for fire, energy and life.

Made from hollow steel plates welded together, *The Breeze* conforms mostly to a formalist aesthetic. It is about formal play, geometry and dynamic balance in space.

Its complex geometry is drawn together by a single unifying colour — bright red. This also gives it a theatrical dimension, perhaps referring to the nearby theatre. Drama is reinforced, in the artist's words, by its "flame-like shapes fanned by the wind and leaping from the base".

The piece can be viewed from any angle, and needs to be closely observed to work out its jigsaw-like shapes. The piece gives the illusion of being about to move in the wind. Some shapes seem hinged, with framing devices cut out of larger pieces — suspended, rotated or swung around on their axes. Although it doesn't move, *The Breeze* has a strong affinity with rotating and hinged forms, such as weather vanes, doors and windows. They allow space to enter, and to circulate within and around, rendering the work semi-transparent.

This piece is about space, about energetically sucking space into its negative shapes, while boldly projecting its positive forms into the surrounding environment.

Sensory Integration Invention A by Cathy Smith is a painted steel construction set amidst trees, ponds and watercourses behind the CFA building, in Fergusons Paddock, Hurstbridge.

The approach is important. At first, you see just intermittent 'sparks' and patches of red between trunks and shifting foliage. From a distance, the top looks silver against the sky, catching the light as if made from threads of water. Coming closer, you discover an elegant, light structure, sixmetres in height. An open rectangular prism, it stands with one square end resting on the ground, forming a bright red tower. A smaller, silver cylinder has been fitted at the top, forming an apex: it consists of 32 stainless steel tubes welded around two steel hoops.

In this pleasant, grassy setting, there are good views of the sky. The tower leads your eye upwards, bringing the sky into view, and breaking the habit of looking at the ground, or straight ahead.

Its harmonious ratios imbue the piece with serenity and balance. With its pure geometry negotiating earth and sky, this piece might also be pointing to a calm, spiritual aspiration. Restful to contemplate, it shares with the trees the sense of a fine, light, open tracery through which space, light and air is able to freely circulate.

The open sides of the tower are like framing devices, into which various vistas slide in and out of view as you walk towards it. The cylinder seems to shift from solid to semi-transparent, as you walk around it.

Modelled on a fire tower, this piece is so deliberately constructed, it appears to have a practical use. Indeed, several hollow tubes at the top have been cut to capture the wind and produce sound — but only when the breeze is of a precise intensity and from a particular direction. The sound is very soft, and deliberately low-pitched, so as not to disturb wildlife and nesting birds. Consequently, it is extremely rare to hear any sound at all.

The effort of straining to hear something inaudible can produce imaginary sounds or, (like composer John Cage's famous 1952 work, *four minutes and 33 seconds of silence*), encourage you to discover and enjoy subtle ambient ones.

Of course, the work is not mean to be useful at all, at least in a narrow sense, making the cultural statement that artworks can have an inherent use, or be useful in themselves, as objects of pleasure and contemplation.

Nearby is a large windmill, its sails turning in the breeze. The red tower is a visual parallel to similar vertical structures in Nillumbik, drawing our attention to the shire's fire-viewing and hose-drying towers, its wireless masts and water tanks. A satisfying essay in formal elegance, the red tower helps us to appreciate the built form and heritage value of other spire-shapes in the landscape.

Benchmark is a curving 60-metre red bench by sisters Naomi and Susie Kumar, beside the Diamond Creek football field. Made of painted timber and stainless steel, it consists of timber rails, set end to end and successively bolted to stainless steel supports set low to the ground. Built on a slightly elevated area, it overlooks and provides a good view of the playing field.

Like a trace of fast-moving energy, the continuous curve of the bench follows the park's outline, defining its perimeter. Striking when seen from a distance, it mirrors the curves of an adjacent bicycle path and nearby railway line and roadway.

Benchmark is fully functional and could be easily interpreted as a novel way to seat a crowd, rather than an artwork. Casually self-effacing, it is content to be seen as just another object among objects, and to serve a useful purpose.

Unlike standard benches, which only seat a few, this one can accommodate large numbers, emphasising its community aspect. One end of the work remains unfinished, suggesting endless extension.

Bright steel supports are unevenly spaced below the rails, describing a complex pattern. The pattern acknowledges differences among spectators: the individual body types, outlooks and backgrounds of those making up the football audience. It also mirrors the dynamism and chopped rhythms of athletic displays on the oval.

As it becomes familiar to users of the park, *Benchmark* will become an integral and affectionately regarded landmark — quite literally, part of the furniture.

Transaction by Robert Baines, installed at the entrance to the Nillumbik Shire Offices in Greensborough, is a large cascading form in stainless steel. It faces a ramp lined with polished steel rails, and is integrated with the architectural features of its forecourt setting, for which it was designed.

The work consists of multiple rows of concave dishes set on long steel stems, which progressively increase in size as they rise in height. The work plays elaborately with perspective, and its repeated shapes are arranged in an orderly mathematical series.

The piece is sited in a small lawn area, in a space created for it between the council offices and a wheelchair ramp ascending to a second floor. The piece can be viewed from within the building's foyer and, in bright sunlight, its dish-shapes cast elliptical shadows across walkways and lawns, dappling the foyer carpet.

The title, *Transaction*, suggests the flow of civil and administrative procedures that take place daily within the shire offices. It also refers to the way the piece engages, in a formal way, with its surroundings.

Within its garden setting, the sculpture makes both a poetic claim on the imagination and sensual appeal to the eye. Like metallic blooms, the dishes thrust up on long stems, holding their multiple faces open to the sun. Flashes of light dazzle within these metallic cups as you climb the walkway. During heavy rain, water spills from their edges, as if from a fountain.

Baines is better known a goldsmith, and there is a filigree effect as this work progressively elaborates its forms. Like *Benchmark*, it could be infinitely extended, but has been resolved at the point where its principles have been adequately expressed and can be grasped by the viewer.

യു

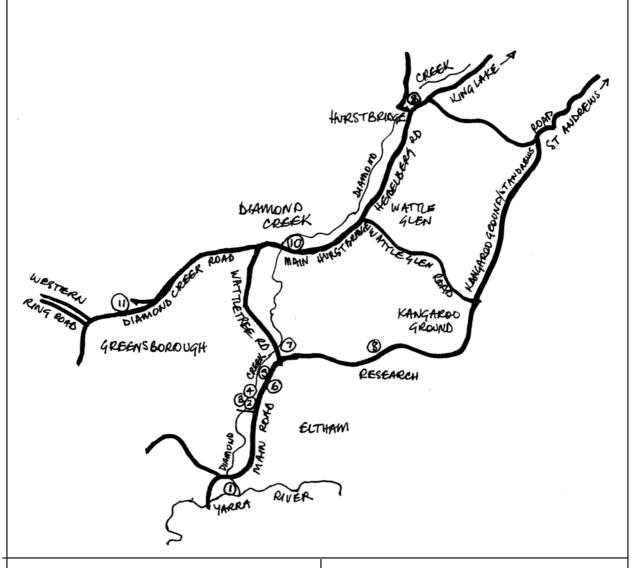
The shire's outdoor works show a great diversity of ideas, styles, materials and settings. Some appear initially puzzling or confronting. Others have simple and transparent meanings, or seek to beautify or enhance a given site and help us to appreciate it more fully. Their diversity accords with Nillumbik's long-held importance as a vibrant artistic centre; one in which there is broad acceptance of the arts and demand for public works by an interested and well-informed community.

Many works seek to be an integral part of their sites, while the sites themselves can be regarded as an aspect or extension of the work's larger meaning. In this way, the works help us to engage with the shire in a wider sense, and to discover its outstanding spaces and landscapes.

John Jenkins © 2002

Location Guide

Main Map showing works 1 - 11



Map 1 - Work 1

Map 2 - Work 2 - 6

