

# Sculpting the 'Northern Spirits'

Acclaimed artist and sculptor Ron Gomboc was chosen to commemorate the devastation caused by Cyclone George with a beautiful 12-metre-high sculpture named 'Northern Spirits'. WORDS BY BECKY WILSON



**O**n March 8, 2007, Cyclone George whipped itself into a furious, high-end category 4 cyclone, and touched ground at Port Hedland in Western Australia, causing destruction to South Hedland and several isolated mining camps around the town. As the most powerful cyclone to hit Port Hedland since Cyclone Joan in 1975, Cyclone George resulted in the tragic death of three people, injuries to dozens more and millions of dollars worth of damage to Port Hedland and the surrounding areas.

Representing Fortescue Metal Groups Ltd, one of the camps affected by the cyclone, Andrew Forrest commissioned local artist and sculptor Ron Gomboc to design a sculpture to be erected in De Marchi Park, South Hedland, to commemorate the loss of life of two Fortescue employees during the devastation of the cyclone. The sculpture is also part of an ongoing program to rehabilitate the areas that were heavily affected by the storm.

For Gomboc, it was an honour to be approached by Andrew Forrest (who has some of Gomboc's work in his private collection) and asked to put forward his ideas for the design of the sculpture. When speaking of 'Northern Spirits', Gomboc conveys considerable pride about the fact that he was selected to work on this momentous project, because of what it stands for: "commemorating the lives that were lost" and the "development of northern Western Australia".

The 12-metre-high sculpture was constructed over a period of 25 months "from design to dedication". It is made from two enormous hunks of Cor-ten steel that have been manipulated so that they twist and stretch gracefully heavenwards, expressing two concepts: "an organic shape to show new growth – and it has a twisted sense because, after a cyclone, nothing is straight anymore". The sculpture is loaded with symbolism. As Gomboc explains, "its central void is shaped like a candle flame, representing eternity. The top of the stems can be interpreted in two different ways; firstly, as two spirit/birdlike shapes that represent the two lives lost; secondly, as a dual reminder of the storm's impact, with the lower stem symbolising the lives lost and the taller one symbolising the spirit of the company, "continuing and reaching excellence".

Due to the sheer scale of the sculpture, it was beyond the capabilities of Gomboc's normal studio and was constructed at Sabre Engineering Fabricators, of Picton, Western Australia, under Gomboc's supervision. It was a mammoth task requiring many processes, with considerations that were foreign to Gomboc. "Following the approval of the design of the sculpture, a lengthy process of engineering and structural planning was required by the Port Hedland Council [to ensure that] the sculpture [would be able to] withstand cyclonic conditions – winds of up to 350 kilometres."

'Northern Spirits' was installed in De Marchi Park on October 28, 2008 and the landscaping of the park was then worked around the sculpture, which was dedicated on May 21, 2009. Rob Gomboc is a highly acclaimed, widely admired artist who co-owns the Gomboc Gallery Sculpture Park with his wife Terrie Gomboc. The gallery, just 30 minutes' drive from Perth, is one of the oldest privately owned galleries in Western Australia (and the only privately owned sculpture exhibition space in the state). It provides a platform for local and national artists of all calibres working with a variety of techniques; a space in which artists and viewers can enjoy each piece without constraint.

After a couple of wonderfully successful years, national and international recognition of Gomboc's beautiful sculptures has arrived. It's the culmination of 30 years of dedication, passion and focus. His hard work has paid off but thankfully, Ron has no plans to rest on his laurels. Indeed, he expects to go on creating sculptures the world can enjoy for a long time to come.

Look out for Ron Gomboc's work at:

- Gomboc Gallery Sculpture Park  
[www.gomboc-gallery.com.au](http://www.gomboc-gallery.com.au).
- Sculpture by the Sea exhibition at Cottesloe,  
Western Australia: March 4 – 23, 2010,  
[www.sculpturebythesea.com](http://www.sculpturebythesea.com). ■

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The space between the two upright stems symbolises the emptiness that has been left in the families and the company that has endured the loss. ☺☺

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