

# tiny folk



MEL ANDERSON, DANGAR ISLAND, NSW, AUSTRALIA

*What do you do when the community you've created is made up of little people only 15cm tall? Mel Anderson was faced with the possibilities of connection, of getting to know each member of her community intimately, of allowing for imperfection and joy and sharing to take place in unexpected places and unexpected ways. Here she shares about her sculpture project on Dangar Island.*

The Tiny Folk were conceived as an adjunct, an afterthought, an exceptional add-on to complement my current exhibition in the Dangar Island Depot Cafe. At first I just sat in front of the TV whenever I could and made little heads. Each head was different, I just started making. The first few were very large as I played around to find my groove. Like all art, you start with an idea and you just need to follow it through until the real stuff comes through. The focus changed, the heads became more resolved and unique. They started to feel 'right'. And they were, each and every one, remarkably different. I felt like I was building a population! I was not relying on any individual I know in my life, they were their own people. But, I was building a community. For my community.

Community is extremely important to me and I wanted to create something to give back to the local people, especially the little ones, the children.

So, after 50 heads I started to make bodies, little gumboot feet, hands and other body parts. I started with little bottoms but the work evolved to be more simple. I bisqued a kiln full of little people parts and laid out the work to put together once my cyanotypes were off to the framers. Putting them together was fun and I worked by instinct. I incorporated natural objects like leaves and flowers and made them make sense visually. My particular favourite at this time was Lucy. But it was Owen I made first and he is as messy and imperfect as any of the little people.

This measure of imperfection became important to me. Putting them together, taking three days to hide them around the island and document their locations, walking thousands of steps to do so and being completely exhausted; they became very familiar to me and started to take on their own characters. I had to write their stories.

Owen started it. His story just exploded from my brain, it was like I was describing a friend I knew. It was also me. And how I was feeling. I realised I had to write stories for all of them and I sat up one night to write 19 stories in the dark hours between 11pm and 3am. I

needed another 26 but they would have to wait. These first 19 stories were beautiful. I recognised humanity in them. After many years not wanting to share my work until it was 'perfect' I have finally learned to just keep it moving, better to put it out imperfect than not at all. And I also realised that their stories are imperfect. They are imperfect.

This imperfection was key for me. The stories uncovered this. We, as humans, are all imperfect. As I edge closer to 50 I realise it is this imperfection that is so important to being alive. Being human. And it is ok. There are some dark and sad things in the stories. Life is not always kind. But I hope that the stories are positive none the less. They are not based on any one person, but rather on 'everyman'. They are reflective of life experiences and personalities but they are not single individuals I know, just elements of all people. In some ways they are also all elements of me. My feelings and struggles.

I hope that the words show great love and acceptance of even the difficult stuff and I would also posit that without suffering or struggle we don't find those beautiful perfect imperfect parts of ourselves that are difficult but vital. We need to be challenged by life to know who we are, what we want or feel and to take us places we may be too afraid to go.

The work itself is about :

- Connecting community - using art to bring people together
- Engaging community
- Giving back to community
- Creating/spreading joy through art
- Reflective of real people and the shades of grey we contain.
- Bringing joy to others through my art.
- Play

I have loved watching the young people on the island scrambling to find the little people, so excited, with back packs on for the day's outing looking!

One of the most surprising things has been that the older people can't always see them. Twice I have been told of groups who went looking and didn't find one of the 47 sculptures around the island. They are talking too much? Not paying attention? Not observing the world around them? It was very interesting.

There is a thing about creativity and spirituality. They are intertwined for me with life. This is the magic of my life and it is more real to me than anything. And it brings people together. And love is the other real magic in life. Love of self, love of family, love of community - even when it's hard!

