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Rockhampton Art Gallery's Brendon Tohill turns the making of moving boxes into an artform

ABC Capricornia / By Rachel McGhee and Erin Semmler
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YOUTUBE: Thinking outside the box to relocate thousands of precious artworks

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With a cutting knife, hot-glue gun and cardboard, Brendon Tohill is crafting special housing for one of 3,000 pieces of artwork in his care.

The nationally significant collection, valued at more than \$18 million, will soon be loaded into trucks with temperature, humidity and security controls for relocation to its new home in Rockhampton.

Most of the renowned collection, established by former Rockhampton mayor Rex Pilbeam and other community leaders in 1976, has been in storage for decades in the city's existing art gallery, which does not have enough space to display every piece.

However, the new Rockhampton Museum of Art will be almost six times the size, enabling the majority of the artworks, sculptures, photographs and artefacts to be on show when it opens later this year.



Each piece from the collection requires individual packaging in hand-crafted boxes for the move. (ABC Capricornia: Erin Semmler)

But preparing the large collection for transfer between the old and new galleries has been a mammoth effort — even though the new art space is just 1.5 kilometres away.

As the gallery's technician, Mr Tohill, whose background is in engineering, has spent more than two years packaging each piece individually.

Gallery director Bianca Acimovic said Mr Tohill and the gallery staff had dedicated thousands of hours to preparing the artworks for the move.

"It doesn't matter whether we are moving two city blocks or two cities, for the artwork it's the same sort of pressures and changes that it takes," she said.

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"They go into these very special trucks so they are all climate-controlled with temperature and humidity, special security and what we call 'air ride' — so if it goes over any bumps and grooves it just cruises along on a nice little journey down the road."

With both two and three-dimensional pieces of different shapes and sizes, Mr Tohill said the time taken to create housing for each piece to be transported safely — even over such a short distance — varied dramatically.

"The one I'm doing at the moment, the bone assembly, you're looking at a good day to make a wooden box and then put the cardboard in ... then to put the foam in and nest it," Mr Tohill said.



Mr Tohill ensures that no piece of any artwork can shift and become damaged inside its unique packaging case. (ABC Capricornia: Erin Semmler)

"That's already taken one day, so maybe three, three and a half days just for the one piece ... On a good day, you might get six done if they're an easy object."

As an artist himself, Mr Tohill appreciates the significance of every item he handles.

"You're not thinking about the value, you're thinking every object has got to be treated exactly the same, [with] the same amount of care," he said.

"Some of the artworks have many parts — it's a lot of problem-solving."

Where mechanics and artistry meld

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Mr Tohill is one of about 150 technicians who work specifically in arts and recreation services in Australia.

"My background is engineering, fitting, turning and welding ... and a little bit of construction," he said.

"I didn't think I'd ever be doing anything like this, so it's a total change to what I thought I'd be doing."



Gallery director Bianca Acimovic says Mr Tohill's unique skills make him perfect for the important but "tedious" job of preparing the artworks for transport. (ABC Capricornia: Erin Semmler)

Mr Tohill completed an internship with the University of Queensland art museum to learn the unique skills needed to house, care for and prepare the collection for transportation.

"Every day is different, every artwork is different," he said.

"You meet artists, you're around artwork all the time and you get an appreciation for different pieces, it's a great job."

Ms Acimovic said Mr Tohill's niche skills were rare in regional Australia.

"He brings his unique skills in metalwork, in woodwork and in artistry himself as a fabricator, that we can sort of build museum skills onto that," Ms Acimovic said.

"Brendon does the job that we all thought we would get to do when we decided that we wanted to work in a museum of art.

"He's tactile, hands-on with the actual artworks, he's caring for them, thinking about them, troubleshooting them.

"Yes, it is tedious, but it's a tedious job that you deliberately choose to become part of."



Rockhampton's nationally significant collection is "one of the finest found in regional Australia". (ABC Capricornia: Erin Semmler)

One of nation's finest collections

The Rockhampton Museum of Art will be the only regional gallery in Queensland to hold a representative collection of mid-20th century Australian art, featuring works of the "greats" of the Australian modernist era, including Brett Whiteley, Russell Drysdale, Margaret Olley, John Brack and Sidney Nolan.

The nationally significant collection is described as "one of the finest in regional Australia".



Stealing the spotlight from Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk during a 2019 visit to the city are John Olsen's *Life drawn towards the void*, 1976 (left) and Arthur Boyd's *Woman in a jinker*, 1976 (right). (Supplied: Rockhampton Regional Council)

The collection was expanded in the 1970s when Rex Pilbeam — whose colourful and visionary 30-year reign as Rockhampton's mayor was almost derailed in 1953 when his mistress shot him in the chest — took advantage of a Federal Government scheme to assist contemporary artists, whereby galleries received a 70% subsidy for each piece of art they bought.

Under the scheme, a committee led by Cr Pilbeam purchased \$500,000 worth of artworks for the Rockhampton Art Gallery for just \$60,000.

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The collection today represents a cross-section of interests and influences in the areas of modern and contemporary Australian and Aboriginal art, Japanese and British art.

"It captures the modernist period, so this is post industrialisation," Ms Acimovic said.

"This is the period when we started to remove the confines and constructs that we had created around more of a post British empire, so it was a coming about of Australia and what it meant to start creating suburban society.

"What it meant to start owning a house and all the ethos that we've carried through to contemporary society ... those moments in time are reflected in the artwork we have here."



Construction of the new Rockhampton Museum of Art is expected to be completed by April. (ABC Capricornia: Rachel McGhee)

The artworks' new home, the Rockhampton Museum of Art, will be the largest art gallery in regional Queensland.

The \$31.5 million riverside project was funded by the federal and state governments and the local council and is expected to be completed by April.

It will feature two large gallery spaces, three multi-purpose education rooms, increased collection storage areas, a restaurant, shops and a top-floor function