

Jade Oakley's winged wonders

By [Sarah Berry](#) ArtsHub | Monday, November 28, 2011

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Image credit: Mike Baker Photography.

Out the back of an old warehouse in Sydney's Inner-West a few months ago, 168 aluminium winged creatures and organic leaf-like forms were sprawled over a blue tarpaulin.

Jade Oakley carefully scooped several up and, one by one, hung them from a finely balanced steel fulcrum. In the breeze, the figures started to come alive, shifting mercurially, their bright colours flashing in the sunshine and splashing down on to the concrete below. She looks relieved as she's been working pretty relentlessly on them since May last year.

The creatures now float above the forecourt of Melbourne's New Royal Children's Hospital. The mobile artwork, a commission for the hospital, is by far her biggest and most high-profile job to date. It is also her riskiest.

For starters, the hospital wasn't convinced that the relatively young (36 year old), unknown Sydney artist was up to the task of creating their new centrepiece.

"Originally the client approached us regarding a glass artist for the atrium space and when we suggested a Jade Oakley mobile they were concerned about the delicacy of her work and her limited experience in public art," says Rebecca Townsend, of professional art consultancy ARTSCAPE: The Nature of Sculpture. But, Rebecca, along with business partner, Merran Morrison, fought to secure the commission for Jade. "We had developed a close working relationship with her, having sold and commissioned Jade's domestic scale artworks for a number of years. So, we knew how talented she was and just believed strongly that she was the right artist for the project."

ARTSCAPE handle everything from strategic development to hands-on site-based project management. They have worked on numerous high profile projects and understand how to translate the language between developer, architect and artist. They have also previously commissioned Jade to create artworks for the Galaxy Casino and Resort in Macau China.

Jade however has always maintained only modest ambitions "Growing up, I didn't think I could earn a living from being an artist. I just enjoyed it and secretly hoped something would work out." After she left

the University of NSW College of Fine Arts (where she won the Gene Sherman award for sculpture), she worked as an assistant to renowned Australian sculptor, Jenny Turpin.

Seeing Jenny's success dared her to hope and she started looking a little further into the future: "I ultimately aimed for Australian Galleries [the country's oldest, continually running gallery with a stable jam-packed with high-profile artists], but I thought maybe I'd try for them when I was 56 or so."

But, arts patron (and Jenny Turpin's husband), Leon Fink watched Jade's work develop over a number of years and decided to take it upon himself to phone the owners of Australian Galleries. That was in 2009. Since then, she's had three successful exhibitions with them. "Her work is so refreshing," enthuses William Sturrock, Manager of Australian Galleries. "They are these lovely, organic fine-art mobiles that hang from above, harmonising with nature."

An organic, whimsical centerpiece was exactly what the hospital was looking for; something that would inspire children and that adults could also enjoy. Jade instantly felt her artistic bent perfectly aligned with the hospital's brief: "I thought 'this is me. This job is made for me'."

Her inspiration for the hospital's winged creatures came from children playing in nature. "They are crafted from photos I took of my niece leaping on the beach and babies swimming under water, for instance," she says. "I just added the wings."

"I [used] bright colours, as the primary audience for the work is children – and children respond to colour, recognising anything brightly coloured as specially for them. Paint effects like splashes and drips, watercolour effects...give the work a child-like quality."

But it has been the scale of the work that has been the big leap for Jade. At nine and a half metres across by four metres high and comprising five mobiles, the combined weight is more than 350 kilograms.

ARTSCAPE project managed the job. Merran explains that the work had to be very carefully engineered, as they were required to deliver a 25 year design life on the artwork. "So to move from working in fine wire and printed paper to stainless steel pipe and powder coated aluminum requires considerable experimentation and risk. It was a big team effort," she says.

Jade enlisted the help of Matt Crawford [of Crawford's Castings] and worked with an engineer, an architect and three graffiti artists. "And when the project was about to go over budget, dad came along every day for a month to help out with labour."

With a tight budget and space restrictions (she didn't have the nine metre high ceilings from which to hang the work); she had only ever done partial hangs from a gantry, that Matt hand-made for her, sitting behind the warehouse.

So, when Jade arrived in Melbourne in late October to install the work in the hospital she was a little nervous. "We had to winch it up and I had no idea how the mobile would lift from the ground," she says. "And then there was this amazing moment as it lifted up. It was so graceful and elegant. I was literally dancing on the ground going, 'Finally, I can't believe it, it looks exactly how I hoped it would.'"

Her work was unveiled at the opening of the new Royal Children's Hospital on 26 October, in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen. "The official opening was an amazing event," she says. "We were shown videos of the history of the hospital and interviews with patients, doctors and the hospital community."

"It gave me the sense of being part of something really meaningful and important and I am so proud of my contribution."

Visit www.jadeoakley.com.au to see more of Jade's work.



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