

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE3982

Halpern, Deborah

(1957 -)

Born 19570101, Melbourne Victoria Australia

Occupation Artist, Philanthropist, Sculptor

Summary

Deborah Halpern is one of Australia's most celebrated sculptors, known for her wildly colourful mosaic work. One of Halpern's biggest sculptures, *Angel*, stood in the moat of the National Gallery of Victoria for many years before it was moved to its current location on the bank of the Yarra River at Birrarung Marr.

Details

In her particular world view, Deborah Halpern was greatly influenced by her parents, artists Sylvia and Artec Halpern. Though her father, a Polish Jew, left when she was six years old, her mother would speak to her of the 'brotherhood of man', and Halpern came to see the planet as her family. As a teenager she was increasingly aware of the paradoxes and injustices of the world. She donated as much as possible to the Guide Dogs Association, Green Peace and Amnesty International, but felt that \$10 per week wasn't making enough of a difference. She felt that people with money were doing nothing to help.

Halpern began her artistic career training as an apprentice in ceramic works in 1976. In her mid-twenties, she was introduced to members of the Hunger Project, a not-for-profit organisation aiming to make a fundamental impact in the world's most poverty-stricken areas. The group had a policy of instigating programs only upon the invitation of communities to do so, and of initiating conversations with members of those communities to directly address their needs. The people behind the Hunger Project had been a part of the Landmark Forum, now a widely-known motivational seminar series operating worldwide, and in the mid-1980s Halpern decided to attend.

A sculptor and a potter by trade, Deborah Halpern had been commissioned in 1987 by the National Gallery of Victoria and the Australian Bicentennial Authority to create a sculpture for the south moat of the NGV's St Kilda Road site. She was intimidated by the scale of the project, and found the Forum helped her to realise her potential. With an original grant of \$25,000, the sculpture, *Angel*, became a far bigger project than was originally intended, and Halpern had to meet costs by fundraising.

Empowered by her success with *Angel*, Halpern pledged \$100,000 to the Hunger Project within one year. She and her then husband Malcolm took on as many commissions as possible until the money had been raised.

Today, with her sculptural pieces fetching handsome sums, Halpern donates \$5,000 to \$25,000 annually to any number of organisations including the Red Cross, Canteen, groups for osteoporosis sufferers, Amnesty International, World Vision and a Moon Bear rescue group in China. She sees the \$100,000 gift as having been a one-off challenge, and now maintains a trust account. Between 10 May and 23 July 2006, the Ian Potter Centre at the NGV held *Angel*, an exhibition of Halpern's work, to coincide with the relocation of that original public sculpture to the Yarra bank at Birrarung Marr.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Thesis

In Her Gift: Activism and Altruism in Australian Women's Philanthropy, 1880-2005, Lemon, Barbara, 2008

Site Exhibition

In Her Gift: Women Philanthropists in Australian History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/wiph/home.html>

Author Details

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