

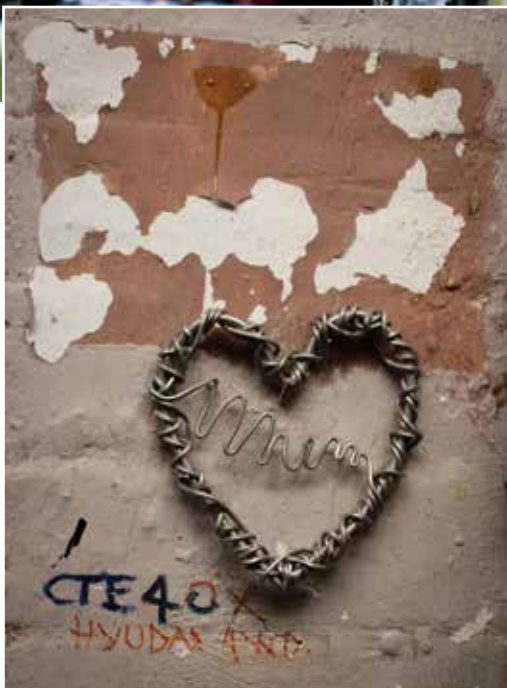
Sunbaked Neoprene shoes on mosaic floor

# PETER BROOKS

## Life is an Artwork







## A FORK, A HORSE AND A CHOOK

Peter Brooks interviewed by Elizabeth Walton

The role of the artist is often that of the outsider looking in. We seek from artists some form of meaning—it may be a signal or an interpretation of the world we live in—some clue to what it's all about.

*EW*









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For many artists that may mean shifting the brush from ink to canvas in a deft stroke that hints at the shape of our lives. For Peter Brooks, it means invoking the complete maverick, questioning and overthrowing every principle of contemporary life in the search for a way to embrace, as he calls it, 'the whole charisma, the privilege of life'. And that point of view is present in every form of art he touches, from works on canvas, to sculptures, installations, musical instruments and even handmade housing, all made from reclaimed materials.

The Peter Brooks story comes alive with historical connections to Henry the Eighth, the Butcher of Cumberland and the Battle of Waterloo. Tales tell of alternative interpretations of the King's Bible, Knights Templars and the Clanwillian Battle of 1641. There's the Huguenot forebears being chased to Dorset by the Catholics; his great-grandmother laying claim to the throne of England, and the whole family being sent into exile or dying in the Black Hole of Calcutta.

It's a story of an outcast born in India, smuggled back to the motherland in a tea-chest only to become a famous doctor in London, doing house calls in a horse and carriage. It's also a story of altruistic pioneering town planners who invented the quarter acre block so communities could grow their own food in hard times. It's the story of dreadnoughts and ten pound Poms making their way across the high seas to found a new existence in Australia, and Millie the teenage tycoon with her window full of scarves down on Market and Elizabeth Streets in Sydney.

Peter's father was an architect who left behind his dreadnought days cleaning the supply ships in England and travelled to Australia, landing a job as a commercial artist at Grace Brothers. Both parents were accomplished painters who quickly established themselves in the arts world of Sydney, selling things out of suitcases down around Coogee until they found their feet.

When Peter was old enough to make his way as an artist, he was appointed as Artist in Residence at the first Sydney Festival in 1975. From there he developed his career working with influencers who were planning the rail link with rolling stock connecting the Chinese Gardens, Walsh Bay and the Old Powerhouse, at a time when he pushed heavily for the Powerhouse to become a museum.

*OK*



Although he is a respected fine arts painter, his true passion is for a complete reframing of contemporary life, particularly in the area of urban planning. 'My dream is to establish a revolutionary estate where we could modify the amazing bonanza of resources thrown away by contemporary society.'

That involves not just a lifetime pursuit of reclaiming junk, but a passionate cry for a place in our world for the outsider, the artist, the bohemians and the poor - a far cry from the neoliberalism that reigns over our present world.

'Moses said that which is cast down upon the land must be left for the poor and the struggling,' Peter says. When harvesting wheat, he explains, farmers ought to leave the grits that fall for the poor. 'It should be surrendered for the people. We should let the wealthy take what they need and leave the rest for the poor.' Moving fully into his philosophy is Peter's truest art form.

During his early years in inner city Sydney, he was unable to manage conventional work due a range of health issues that plagued him after dentists plugged his mouth full of mercury fillings. 'I never really had a chance to be anything other than an artist, with all these electrical signals going to my brain - I could never get to a meeting or hold down a job.'









Peter found whatever form of work he could and landed a stint working at the ABC as a pitcher of water and a carrier of wood. He found an old derelict house down around Forbes Street, with a door blocked by a white-ant nest which he needed a ladder to get over. He was granted permission to live there in exchange for opening the house up.

Once he had removed the front window and cemented it with back to back 1960 Holden windscreens, he only needed a few more adjustments before the renovation was complete. He bottled the top up with Mercedes Benz hubcaps and created a space that was revered as a handmade house. Inside he bricked up the arches and ripped out the flooring to complete a rainforest underneath the enclosed windscreens. He built a kiln for welding his sculptures from reclaimed nickel, bronze, silver, brass and anything else he could find.

One day the vicar called by and asked him how long he had been living there.

'About four years, I'd say,' Peter said.

'Well that's four years too long. Time for you to go,' the vicar declared.

By this time the house and his artworks had become so popular that a quick mention in the Column 8 of the day created so many complaints that the vicar was forced to back down and Peter was allowed to stay.

Peter had a friend who was a glassblower in the New South Wales Central West at a place called Home Rule. To say Home Rule is a one-horse town would be a complete exaggeration – there's definitely a few horses in the back paddocks, but there's no trace of any town. It's more of a little lull in the bends between Mudgee and Gulgong, a place where you could easily imagine the few locals at one stage really may have quit the State and invoked 'home rule', declaring this as their own place where they made up their own legislation and to hell with all the rest.

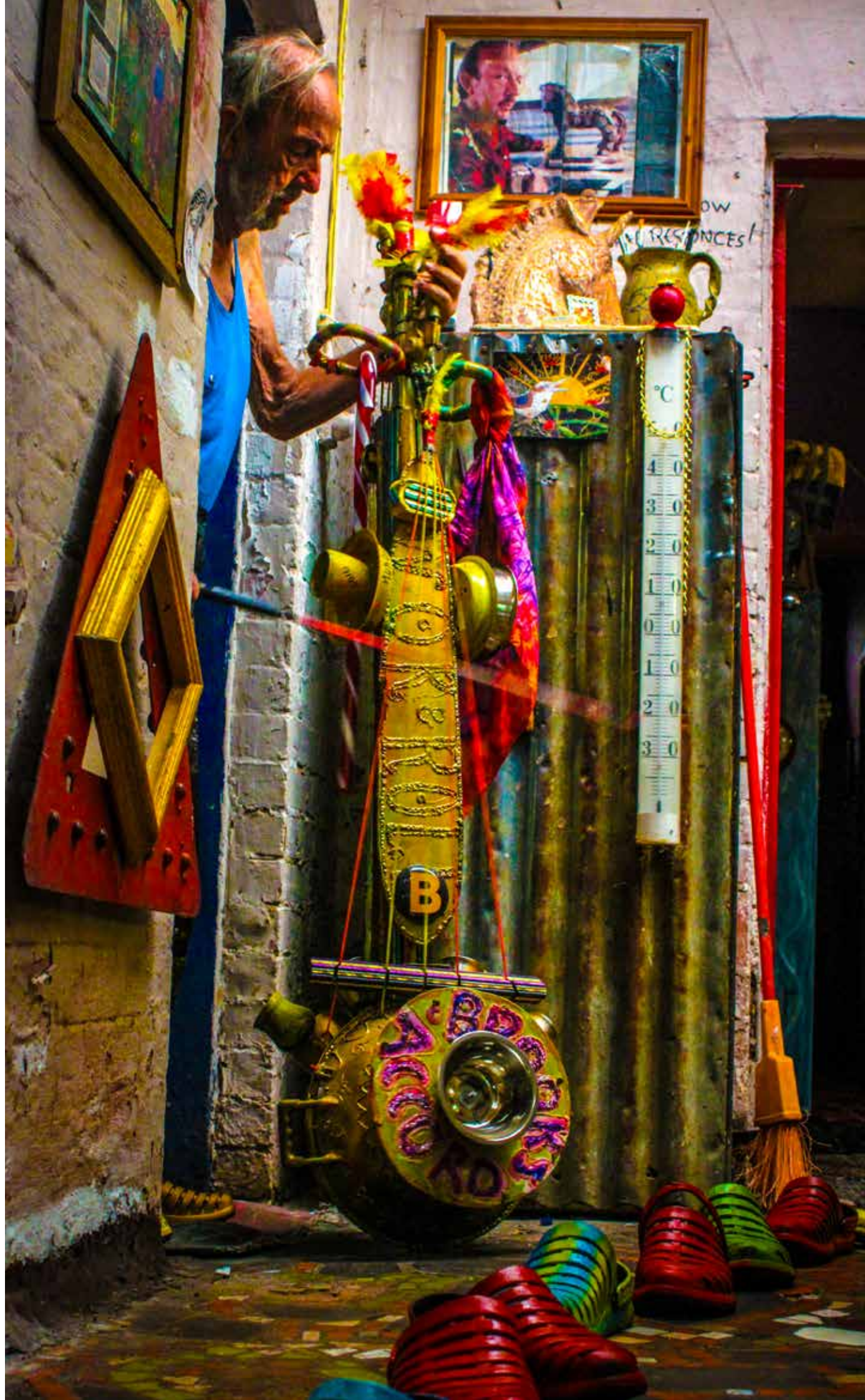
While he was there a visitor recognized Peter and recalled his work from Canberra exhibitions. He invited him for drinks at the Windeyer pub - up on the sunburnt hills on the far fringes of the western Divide. Peter saw Lyle Hundie's place for rent at \$5 a week. And the rest, as they say, is history. Peter moved to Windeyer, met his bride Cheryl, mother of his two children, and has remained at Cheryl's house in Mudgee ever since.

At one stage Peter had an award-winning cottage style garden that was photographed by Valerie Swain as an example of fabulous country style. But then came a dispute over roosters in town, and although Peter won the battle to get the noisy birds out of town, he did not

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Disheartened but not discouraged, Peter turned his creative attention to his home. He removed the architraves and formed a handmade archway that is now the feature of the house.

He even turned his car into a gaudy hand-painted work of art with life-sized fake monkeys strapped to the seats inside and rubber snakes on the windscreen - which he calls The Viper Blades.

win the war, and those seeking vengeance set upon him to remove his garden, which he had planted on the verge. So he bricked up his abundant garden with crazy pavers, and planted thickets of bamboo at the front of his house - now so dense it could well be a jungle in there - you certainly can no longer see the house from the street, set amongst a row of traditional Mudgee cottages.

By and by he started a two-year stint as artist in residence at the local tip. Cleaning up the tip and reclaiming many materials, he installed sculptures and ran a beautification program for the dump, bringing new life and his gentle sense of humour to the wasteland of our culture. He created birdbaths, windmills, gardens and a famous sculpture of a bee. 'I made the bee because it is the symbol of unity and cooperation,' he says. It was the perfect placement for his desire to 'get this alternative culture together'.

'I've seen some unbelievable things thrown away in my time. At one stage I saw a Landseer portrait of dogs that just had a tear, but just like so many antiques and other treasures, it was thrown out by people with incredible ignorance,' Peter says.

Not everyone agreed with his vision for the tip and one day he arrived to find they had begun to bulldoze his artworks. They kept his symbol of unity, but they knocked over his birdbaths and all the installations. 'I tidied things up and left,' he says, still heavy-hearted after all this time.

Every single element of his house renovation is reclaimed and salvaged from what would otherwise be refused as junk. 'We are destroying forests for housing - and that's something I would really like to see simplified. We should never be laying our forests flat for resources,' Peter says.

The bathroom and the kitchen are completely hand rendered surfaces made from broken tiles and ceramic chips, and there is a white wall that is made of local clay from Long Valley, where Henry Lawson used to go to write his stories. The fridge is covered in reflective mosaics. The bathroom is built around sculptures and other artworks. He has recently taken to spray painting bouncy neoprene shoes in bright colours to match the ceramic tiles in the kitchen floor.

The kitchen drawers are fitted with bush handles fashioned out of roughly cut wood, and the entire cottage is a living work of art, with boomerang trusses leading to the backyard. The house is cool in summer and warm in winter, with just the warmth of a fire enough when he closes the handmade doors.

The lounge room is one interconnected musical instrument that can be played. He has welded a piano frame to one wall which has a basket full of piano hammers sitting nearby for anyone to strike up a tune. Above the piano frame is a map of Australia made out of bottle tops and a range of handcrafted instruments such as the Beatle - a sort of mandolin made out of VW hub



caps. He has connected microphones up to gramophones and record players with speakers, and everywhere you look is a different instrument, some sitting beneath his handmade coin featuring Henry Lawson which he has put forward as an alternative currency.

The room is furnished with regal chairs made from horseshoes welded in the foundry down in the backyard, which looks over the fence to his recent neighbours at the Aldi supermarket. To entertain the Aldi customers, Peter has built a windmill which they can view from the cement paddock over the way. He has also created a hat block which he uses to make ranch style hats from old Aldi catalogues. The shape is good but they make surprisingly heavy reading. The

house renovation is completed with sculpted gates and weather beacons that have won many art prizes. Themes of roosters, forks, spoons, and particularly horses, dominate his works, with a strong Asian influence in the representation of horse heads that Peter feels stems from his ancestors' days in Asia.

Peter's vision for the future involves reclaiming the wasteland next to the tip and turning it into a demonstration village for handmade housing. 'It would have enormous benefit for people who feel they have no future. They could come here and get their ideas working and learn really great skills, and learn how to work together.' Peter's vision includes making dome-style housing out of local earth which would

be insulated from the harsh conditions in the west.

As a seer and a visionary for our own culture and times, Peter is often the voice in the wilderness making the most sense. Even when he has been at his lowest from the rejection he has received constantly by those who have no hope of understanding his work or his purpose, he refuses to get down or to give in. 'We spend our lives chasing money and chasing a dream - making a name for ourselves - but what's really in a name? We are not a name, we are not our things that own us when we spend our lives thinking we own them - we are spiritual entities. Here we are at this moment in time - and when things are looking wrong, I look into it not with a prayer, but just an acknowledgement of that vibrant force within and that tingling you get right through the body when you know you are truly creating something magnificent and your whole being fully comes to life.'

For the real Peter Brooks, life is his artwork, and his artwork is certainly his life.

**Words and photographs  
Elizabeth Walton**







This page  
 Top: Sketchbook  
 Right: Viper blades for the car  
 Below: Peter's car— a gaudy hand-painted work of art with life-sized fake monkeys strapped to the seats inside

Opposite page:  
 Aldi hat made from the store's  
 brochures

