

# Australian artist John Kelly brings cows home to mark humble beginnings

In the industrial suburb where John Kelly grew up there was no gallery or arts community. It was his working class mother who had a creative idea that kick-started his successful career, and who he pays homage to in a new sculpture at the heart of his home community.

By [Margaret Burin](#)

Updated 20 Aug 2016, 2:38am



PHOTO: John Kelly at his childhood home in Sunshine, where his parents still live.

(ABC News: Margaret Burin)

Every time John Kelly drives to the airport for his return flight to Ireland, he passes over the quarry where his father worked his guts out until he was in his 60s.

Kelly and his six siblings grew up in Sunshine — a pocket of Melbourne's western suburbs that at the time was often dubbed "Scumshine" by outsiders.

The year 10 excursion at his tech school had comprised of a bus trip across the river to Kew and Toorak, to see how "the other half" lived.

His cricket pals would slag him off about his art.

"I do remember people saying 'you'll never get a job', 'you'll never amount to anything'," he said.

"When I came and told my mother that I went and got into art school and this was quite difficult to do and I really wanted to do it, she kind of just explained to me that there was no way that she could afford to send me to art school."

Not long after this conversation, Mrs Kelly entered a "win a wish" competition on the side of a milk carton.

Her wish was to send her middle child of seven to art school.



PHOTO: The artist has his mother, Margaret, to thank for being able to go to university.

(ABC News: Margaret Burin)

Mr and Mrs Kelly did not really understand their son's art, but they supported him nonetheless.

"She wrapped the whole empty carton in Christmas paper, and obviously it stood out," Kelly said.

The family did not have a phone, so the message that her wish had been granted came via the local shopkeeper.

"That's how I got my start."

This week, as a crane lifted his 2.4 tonne bronze cow into the main street of Sunshine, he again has his mother to thank.

Her newspaper clipping of an advertisement calling for local artist submissions started a conversation between Kelly and the Brimbank City Council, which eventually led to the commissioning of Man Lifting a Cow.



PHOTO: John Kelly: Two Men Lifting a Cow, 1995, oil on canvas.  
(Supplied)



PHOTO: John Kelly's Man Lifting a Cow sculpture gets installed on Hampshire Road, Sunshine.

(ABC News: Margaret Burin)

## Cow takes Kelly to greener pastures

Kelly's famous cow sculptures and paintings have taken him all over the world – from the Champs-Elysees to the Glastonbury Music Festival.





PHOTO: John Kelly's Cow Up a Tree sculpture in the Docklands, Melbourne.

(ABC News: Margaret Burin)

The concept originated while he was working at RMIT library and began researching the use of camouflaging in the Second World War.

Of particular interest was William Dobell, one of several famous Australian artists, who had been ordered by the government to make paper mache cows in the hope of tricking Japanese pilots into thinking military bases were in fact farms.

"There's no photographic evidence of those cows," Kelly said.

"Dr Edward McMahon who was writing the obituary said something along the lines that Dobell had said he thought the authorities had really underestimated the eyesight of the Japanese airman.



PHOTO: John Kelly: Camouflaged Cow 1995-96, oil on canvas.  
(Supplied)

"This just really appealed to my sense of humour."

During the war Dobell had shared a hut with artist Joshua Smith.

"As far as Dobell's cows, there's no real reference to them," Kelly said.

"The reason I make the cows with long necks and small heads is simply because they're based on the Joshua Smith portrait that [Dobell] won the Archibald Portrait Prize with."

These iconic full-bodied cows not only reference Australian art history, but the art world's battle with modernism.

While Kelly's works were being widely celebrated in contemporary art circles abroad, and by outside the box thinkers like MONA's David Walsh, he said it took a lot longer for his art to be recognised in Australia.

"Some people in the art world would have been resistant to the idea of these works being accepted," he said.

"Structurally the art world hasn't really modernised. You have this really stable art bureaucracy... and I kind of think until there's instability in the bureaucracy it will always be the way it is because they move so slowly.

"I've found this all over the world, no matter where you go, you go to any city and there's probably half a dozen key people who actually make the decisions or control what's exhibited and what's not."

## A lasting legacy



PHOTO: The artist says *Man Lifting a Cow* is a marker of his mother and father and their family's life in Sunshine.

(ABC News: Margaret Burin)

*Man Lifting a Cow* continues to draw inspiration from Dobell, but it also pays tribute to the artist's humble beginnings.

Over the last month Kelly's mornings were spent at Fundere Studios, the local foundry where the sculpture was made, and afternoons at the local hospital for his father's radiotherapy sessions



"The Jungian symbol for mother is a cow actually. The man in the overalls I would identify very much as a memory of my father working in the quarry in his overalls," he said.

"All the kids have moved away, and I'm pretty pleased that that'll be there long after our family have moved from the area.

"It's an acknowledgment to my parents."

The striking sculpture in Sunshine's main street is a marker of his family's life here.

And the milk carton-shaped cow will be a lasting reminder of a small wish that once came true.



PHOTO: "I'm very proud of him," John Kelly's father, Ben says. (ABC News: Margaret Burin)

**Topics:** contemporary-art, sculpture, sunshine-3020, melbourne-3000

First posted 19 Aug 2016, 11:05pm

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