

# ROCK STAR

## APPEARANCES DECEIVE IN THE MARBLE-MAD WORLD OF SCULPTOR ALEX SETON.

THE appearance of a large shipping crate shrouded by a tarpaulin on the Bondi-to-Tamarama Sculpture by the Sea walk last year prompted many to wonder a) what the sculpture inside was and b) why the artist didn't unpack it. Nevertheless, Alex Seton's *Sculpture No 23* took out the AGNSW Director's Choice Award for the 2003 exhibition.

"Sculpture by the Sea is perfect because you have people going up and touching," Seton says of the annual Sydney event. Without touching, the fact that Seton's crate has been hewn out of solid marble might not be immediately obvious. "Some of my friends say, 'Alex, you shouldn't do it. [Sculpture by the Sea is] just a populist event.' But that's the point – I want to use that ... I'm not so fond of having my sculpture on a plinth and [people] not touching it."

Seton, who grew up in the marble-rich Southern Tablelands, loves a good old-fashioned optical illusion. In his dusty Newtown studio he points to a clothing rack burdened by a single hanger holding a black pullover. It's an artwork titled *Wear*

Me, and both garment and coat hanger were expertly fashioned from a single piece of glass-brITTLE Yass black marble.

He's currently working on an entry in this year's *Sculpture by the Sea* (which will coincide with the 27 year old's debut solo exhibition). *Modern Panopticon* takes its name from the circular prison envisioned by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham – a design enabling a guard to watch all prisoners simultaneously without being seen. Seton's sculpture is in the shape of a comfy couch. Positioned on a sandstone lookout, the marble two-seater – complete with Homer Simpson-size backside imprint – will face not the ocean, but, maddeningly, directly into a grass embankment, requiring the sitter to twist around for a more interesting view.

"I like setting up a bunch of little contradictions that make you think, hold on, where's the artist going with this?" Seton explains. "It's as simple and playful as that. I'm finding the less I attempt to take on grandiose themes, the more it's genuinely an expression of my own joy of sculpture."

The piece evolved from a series of benches Seton conceived during a visit to Barcelona's Picasso Museum. "I was more fascinated by one of the white couches there – the soft ripples. I thought, I can make marble look like that quite easily." The trick worked so well that when Seton entered the couches in the Sculptors Society annual Darling Park exhibition, one judge initially dismissed them as found objects. "She said, 'Oh, there's hundreds of things like that in Japan.' She didn't even realise it was marble. I like the optical illusion, because it's quite cathartic to be able to go, 'Something's not quite gelling with what my eyes are telling me.'"

In keeping with the panopticon theme, Seton also enjoys hiding amid oblivious crowds as they view his work, monitoring their comments and tossing in a few of his own. "It's fun riling it up to the point of, 'What the hell's this artist on?' And then somebody gives the game away – someone rocks up going, 'Alex, well done, mate. It's great.'"

SCULPTURE BY THE SEA TAKES PLACE ON THE BONDI-TAMARAMA COAST WALK. OCTOBER 28-NOVEMBER 14. ALEX SETON'S SOLO SHOW RUNS OCTOBER 14-NOVEMBER 2 AT MAUNSELL WICKES @ BARRY STERN GALLERIES, SYDNEY.

*Karl Mayerhöfer*  
TEXT KARL MAYERHÖFER

