Art Gallery of SA departing director Nick Mitzevich with The Life of Stars sculpture by Lindy Lee. Picture: Tait Schmaal

ARTS

Art Gallery of SA director Nick Mitzevich to shine on in sculpture tribute on Adelaide’s North Terrace

Patrick McDonald, Chief Arts Writer, The Advertiser
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CELESTIAL sculpture The Life of Stars will remain as a permanent installation in front of the Art Gallery of South Australia on North Terrace as a tribute to its departing director Nick Mitzevich.

Gallery chair Tracey Whiting announced that it had purchased the $550,000 work as a farewell “present” for Mr Mitzevich, who finishes today after eight years in the role to take up a new job as director of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

“The dedication was a big surprise,” Mr Mitzevich, who also turns 49 in a few days, said.
“The work reflects the city in the daytime and, in the night-time, it illuminates the city. In some ways, they are two metaphors for what the gallery does to the city.

“The work is symbolic of what I tried to do here, and that’s why it’s perfect.”

The Life of Stars by Brisbane-born, Sydney-based artist Lindy Lee was installed in February as part of both the gallery’s Adelaide Biennial exhibition for this year’s Festival and the Fringe’s Parade of Light illuminations.

The 6m high, stainless steel sculpture weighs a tonne, is supported by a four-tonne base and is perforated with thousands of holes that are lit from within to resemble a map of the galaxy.

“From the very beginning I started using North Terrace to do all our big events out there ... it’s a way that we connect to the city, Mr Mitzevich said.

If he could take one other work with him, Mr Mitzevich said it would be his controversial 2013 purchase of a $300,000 pair of headless horse torsos titled We are all flesh by Belgian artist Berlinde De Bruyckere.

“It’s such a monumental work about the world now, and it’s become so emblematic of my time here,” Mr Mitzevich said.

“What I loved about that work is that everyone had an opinion, and people were talking about it. My job is to make art relevant and encourage people to think about art, and that work did.

“That work spurred me on to be ambitious because we just got such an extraordinary reaction. Two per cent of the audience hate it — but I don’t program for two per cent, I program for the other 98.”

During Mr Mitzevich’s eight-year tenure, almost $50 million was raised through philanthropy, the gallery acquired 4200 new works and annual attendances rose from 480,000 to nearly 800,000. He delivered record-breaking blockbuster exhibitions Turner from the Tate, Fashion Icons and the current Colours of Impressionism, and introduced the Tarnanthi national indigenous art festival.

He still has “lots of tricks up my sleeve” for his new Canberra posting, which begins in July.

“The art of being a director is not to reveal them until you are ready,” he said. “If you work me out, nothing is off-the-cuff, nothing is just spontaneous. I don’t work that way — I’m methodical, I plan things.
“Yes, I take advantage of opportunities — but hopefully there is a sense of logic to what I’m doing.”

The decision to go to Canberra was not simply about leading a bigger gallery with a larger budget.

“Here, it’s about elevating a gallery within a metropolitan city. There, it’s a destination gallery that has the remit to speak to a nation and to drive a cultural agenda that’s beyond the city-state.”

Artist Lindy Lee with her sculpture The Life of Stars at night outside the Art Gallery of South Australia.

Picture: AAP / Matt Loxton