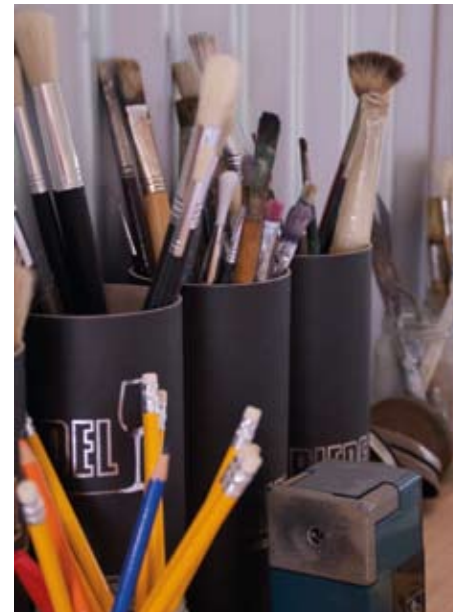


STORY COLLEEN DUNCAN
PHOTOGRAPHY ANNIE COCHRANE

Art = life

THE LOVE OF ART, FOOD, GARDENING
AND THE NATURAL WORLD ALL MERGE
IN THIS BUSH HAVEN.

Max with sculpture 'Shovel Dance' by David Teer



Opposite page: The house that Max built with Max and sculpture 'Shovel Dance' by David Teer in front.
Top left: Steel and sandstone sculpture 'Bat's Cradle' by Janik Bouchette looks perfectly at home in the garden grounds. **Top right:** Max with one of his paintings: 'Many were her Words'. **Above:** Some of Max's tools of trade.

Just a kilometre or so off a South Coast road is the home of artist Max Dingle. Surrounded by over 45 hectares of natural bushland dappled with grassy clearings is the house designed by Max's partner of 40 years, architect Gavin Hughes. Sadly, just a couple of months after they moved to live here permanently, Gavin passed away. "The house literally, is Gavin's great artwork," says Max. Gavin's ongoing legacy is in the house, his hand-crafted furniture, the garden and, significantly, their collection of contemporary artworks.

The art collection totals around 200 works from 120 artists – works on paper, etchings, oils and sculpture. Paintings by people such as Murray Overheu, Elizabeth Cummings, Grace Burzese, Margaret Dredge and more, recently Nicole Kelly, grace the walls of the house. In fact, Max purchased Kelly's painting 'Woman with Green Thigh' from her graduate exhibition and she borrowed it back to use as part of her successful submission for the 2009 Brett Whiteley Travelling Scholarship. Outside, large abstract sculptures wrought from iron and other materials sit in clearings among the scribbly gums.

Gavin and Max wanted to bequeath the works to an institution that would appreciate and develop the collection. They approached Shoalhaven Council with the idea of leaving the collection to the City. "I'd discovered, in fact, that the Arts Centre in Nowra was in the old TAFE building where I had my first art exhibition in 1972 when I was studying at Tech night classes," says Max. "So it seemed like the right thing to do because of our long association with the area – I'd been here since 1961 and we'd had the property since 1983."



Top left: Max looks small alongside the massive 'Detour at Four Mile Creek' by Miranda Parkes in the main living area of the house. **Top right:** Max in his welding studio. **Above:** Recent catalogues from the Shoalhaven Art Centre exhibition. **Left:** Max's bedroom features some of his favourite art pieces - on the left wall is 'Blue Water II' by Judy Overheu, the small lithograph centre is 'Unbounded No 9' by Virginia Coventry and the large oil on canvas above the bed is 'Minds Eye' by Melanie Howard. **Opposite page:** Steel sculpture 'Phaedra' by Max Dingle sits comfortably in the grounds.



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This page, clockwise from above: The house has an easy compatibility with the landscape. Cooking up a storm of muffins in the kitchen. Close to the house is steel sculpture 'Geisha' by David Horton

Needless to say, Shoalhaven Council is delighted with the offer and two shows from the collection have been presented so far, with the 'Personal Journeys' exhibition in 2009 and, this year, 'Black is the Colour ...'. Future shows will include works from found objects and a survey of Margaret Dredge works. As well as appreciating and collecting the works of other artists, Max is a practising artist himself. He worked in screen printing and ceramic sculpture until the mid-1980s, but then, with the pressure of his career, he concentrated on drawing in oil pastels and other media. Since he retired, he has worked on large abstract paintings and steel sculpture. In January 2011 he will show an exhibition of about 16 paintings and some sculptures.

Max Dingle's connection with art began years ago when he was stationed at Nowra as a member of the RAN. He enlisted when he was 15 and, even though he eventually felt he wasn't suited to the institutionalised life, he saw his service as an expression of a need to give to his community. When his time with the Navy was drawing to an end, he set about creating a whole new life and started spending more time in Sydney. "And that's when I met Gavin and bought a terrace with the idea that I would live there as soon as I finished with the Navy."

After moving to Sydney, Max did a graduate course at the National Art School, followed by studies in sculpture and screen printing. He then teamed up with ceramicist Diogenes Farri to produce a range of functional pottery under the brand name of St Albans. He eventually decided he needed to do something else to pay the mortgage and took up a job as a storeman at the Sydney Technical College co-op bookshop. Needless to say, 11 months later, he was the manager.

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Top left: Max likes to create fresh salads from his veggie patch. Top right: Max in his lounge room. The large painting behind is acrylic and beeswax on linen titled 'Temple' by Grace Burzese. On the coffee table in front is steel sculpture "Compression" by Angus Adameitis while the large 'Untitled' hanging piece is made of paper, cane and resin by Bronwyn Oliver. Below it and just in view is Campbell Robertson Swann's steel sculpture "Rear View". Above: Max in his library room.



This led to his being snapped up by the Australian Museum to develop its bookshop, followed by a promotion to head of community relations with the museum. From there, he moved on to the National Maritime Museum in Sydney as assistant director – a post he held for 16 years until he retired in 2008.

There are many aspects to this complex man, but his generosity shines through in so many ways. Firstly, there's the bequest of the collection to the City of Shoalhaven and, for the 2008 Jervis Bay 'See Change' winter arts festival, he threw open his home and grounds for busloads of visitors to help raise funds for the festival. This year, he's doing it again. Then there's his love of food and cooking that translates into fabulous meals for family and friends. As with so many people, Max's love of all things food is an extension of his creativity, but also an opportunity to be of service to others.

When I visit Max he serves up a delicious lunch of pomegranate chicken with roasted autumn vegetables, finished off with a delectable quince tart. What is even more impressive is he has grown most of the vegetable and fruit ingredients in the extensive and ordered garden.

And it's not only the human world that shares Max's life – while he's busy in the kitchen, a wallaby appears at the edge out of the bushes and stands hesitantly on a patch of grass. She's cautious, sensing a stranger in the house, even at this distance. So I make an effort to be quiet and still until she approaches, her eyes fixed on Max as he tosses her a handful of food. ■