

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF PHYSICAL SCIENCES

The Stromlo Orrery Project Phase 2 - Yale Columbia



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY



Project Background

During the summer of 2003 The ACT experienced the worst bushfires in recent history and amongst much other damage, the Mt Stromlo Observatory was almost completely gutted. As well as the obvious setbacks to scientific programs, several large historic telescopes were destroyed. None of these telescopes can be restored, but it seems fitting that their remains continue to serve some useful purpose.

The National Institute of Physical Sciences, ANU, is commissioning artist Tim Wetherell to construct two outdoor sculptures from the remains of the Yale Columbia telescope. At this point, it is envisaged that one sculpture will be located near Questacon in the parliamentary triangle.

The Yale Columbia was a 26 inch refractor built by Mason lab at Yale University in 1924. It spent time in Johannesburg before being relocated to Canberra in 1952. Until its destruction, it was the fifteenth largest refractor ever built. As recently as 1998, the Yale Columbia was used in a long term project measuring stellar parallaxes to calculate distances and proper motions of nearby stars. Over its lifetime, it provided much valuable information about the structure of the southern skies.



Then (top) and now (above), the yale columbia telescope

The Proposal

The proposal is to use the great setting circles from the Yale Columbia to create one or possibly two large outdoor sculptures that encapsulate something of the feel of the telescope and also to preserve part of the instrument essentially intact. Originally the sculpture was going to be abstract but two factors have influenced us to reconsider this. Firstly, the Right Ascension drive gear was damaged in removal to the extent that the original design was impossible. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, watching crowd reaction to Tim's giant hand at Sculpture by the Sea 2004, it became quite apparent that these riveted iron figurative works have a strong public appeal. By incorporating such a figure into the new design, we hope the work will be accessible to a wider audience than an abstract work.

The pose and gesture of the iron figure will speak of astronomy and examining the heavens, whilst the riveted plates give strong ties to the appearance and "flavour" of the original 1920's telescope. From an artistic standpoint, the iron man on a tall pole has overtones of the famous English contemporary sculptor Antony Gormley's work. In this way, the piece aims to find a balance between a historical monument and an artwork that sits comfortably within the broader framework of contemporary sculpture. The rusted, riveted construction also enables a seamless blend of historic and new components and makes reference to the current condition of the burnt out remains.

The National Institute of Physical Sciences (NIPS) chose Tim to undertake this work because of the success of other NIPS projects he was involved in (Art/Sci 2003) and his scientific background.



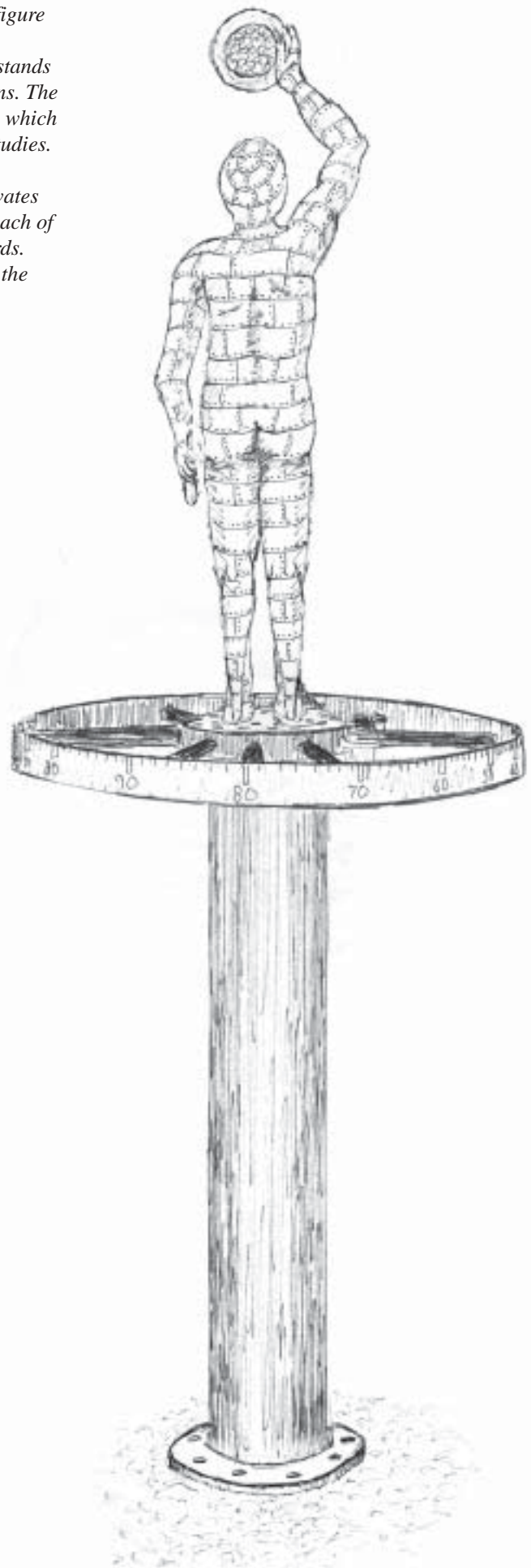
The original concept (top left) and damage to the RA wheel and drive gear that only became apparent on removal and which render this design impractical

Tim's giant hand at Sculpture by the Sea 2004 proved popular with the general public



The proposal is to create a slightly larger than life sized figure from riveted steel plate. The figure is holding part of the telescope skyward as though examining the heavens. He stands on the declination wheel which is marked in 360° divisions. The concept ties in with the primary use of the Yale Columbia which was making stellar position measurements for parallax studies.

The pole base serves a number of purposes. Firstly it elevates the figure into clear view. It also elevates it beyond the reach of vandals and climbing children thus reducing safety hazards. Finally, it projects the figure skyward and adds drama to the work.



DIMENSIONS:

Total Height approximately 5.5m
Footprint 2m x 2m at wheel 1m x 1m at base
Approximate weights,
man: 150kg wheel: 150kg support pole: 250kg



Two views of the one third scale study for the Yale Columbia Sculpture, showing plate details and a perspective view simulating the appearance of the work when viewed from close below



National Institute of Physical Sciences - Stromlo Orrery Project

Artist's Background

Tim Wetherell is a Canberra based sculptor whose work has been featured in the National Gallery of Australia (2003 sculpture prize) Sculpture by the Sea (2004 show) National Science Festival (2004) and many other venues. Tim's original background was in physics and as well as being a practicing artist, Tim currently works in science communication.



Some of Tim's other works in rusted, riveted steel