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Culture Art & design Art

A new, larger than life teaspoon sculpture lands on Sydney Harbour

By Linda Morris
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Spoon-bending "feats" of telekinesis and illusion are the inspiration for a new commission at the Museum of Contemporary Art as the gallery heroes contemporary sculpture on the harbour and tackles a multi-million dollar operating deficit.

Los Angeles-based Australian artist Ricky Swallow was fascinated by Uri Geller's so-called mind tricks as a young boy growing up in the pre-internet Melbourne, and has created four warped large-scale stainless-steel spoon sculptures for the MCA's terrace which appear to have been put through the same mind wash.

"I felt like Uri Geller was on an endless world tour with that trick," Swallow notes. "I remember trying to bend spoons having seen it demonstrated by Uri Geller on TV."



Ricky Swallow with his larger-than-life wax-printed teaspoons at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Credit: Steven Siewert

Swallow's *Bent Forms #1–#4*, scaled-up wax prints of actual teaspoons, are the first in a series of prominent sculptural commissions to be installed at the MCA over the next six months, the biggest being the inaugural Neil Balnaves Tallawoladah Lawn Commission to be unveiled late September in honour of the late arts philanthropist.

A work by British contemporary sculptor Thomas J. Price will be the first of three to be showcased over three years on the museum's prominent harbour-side verge.

The details come as the MCA revealed a \$2 million operating deficit for 2024. The loss, which it says is covered by cash reserves, has been attributed to the ongoing impact of the global economic downturn and rising costs of wages, energy, exhibition freight and construction. In January, it introduced admission fees for the first time in 25 years.

According to its latest financial results, the MCA is now self-generating about 85 per cent of its revenue from corporate partners, patrons and commercial activities including a new-look gala fundraiser, the MCA Artists Ball, which raised more than \$1.1 million.

Cost-cutting would continue throughout this year, its chair, Lorraine Tarabay said, its revenue measures moving the gallery closer to a balanced budget by end of the year with the benefit of full impact felt in 2026.



Spoon mimics bridge in Swallow's mind-bending sculptural work. Credit: Steven Siewert

MCA Australia's director Suzanne Cotter said the museum had in 2024 "made significant investments in transforming our business operations and infrastructure, strengthening our financial position for 2025 and onwards".

The MCA dedicates itself to showcasing the work of living contemporary artists from Australia and globally.

Swallow was 29 when he represented Australia in the 2005 Venice Biennale. His work, *Caravan* (2008), is in the MCA Collection. The former drawing student of Victoria College of the Arts moved to Los Angeles permanently in 2002. "It was for six months and then turned into the place I was living. It's allowed me to really focus on the sculpture," he said.

For the eighth Loti Smorgon Sculpture Terrace Commission, his first for an Australian public cultural institution, Swallow first bought a shoebox of spoons on eBay and settled on those made in America and Japan that graced tables in the 1970s as his models.

"Their decorative elements almost have an almost prescription-strength potency in terms of memory, like these starbursts on the vertical spoon, or double crescents," Swallow said. "People who have seen them have remarked how familiar they are. Going into this public sculpture commission there's something about starting with a subject for which there's immediate recognition."

Swallow selected the spoon over a knife and fork for its approximation to the human form. "It has a neck, a head and the handle is often referred to as an arm. I mean there are a lot of ingredients and elements in everything I make, whether that's humour, whether that's narrative, abstraction or formalism or minimalism. I never want to close off meaning."

Asked if public sculpture was having its moment in the sun, Swallow said: "I always hope for sculpture to have a bigger moment."

Linda Morris is an arts writer at The Sydney Morning Herald