

## URBAN LEGENDS

# Yellow Peril paved the way

The much-maligned *Vault* dragged us out of our comfort zone, writes **Jenny Brown**.

**R**EMEMBER this? The sculpture for which Sydney artist Ron Robertson-Swann ran the gauntlet of public derision for daring to introduce abstraction to the philistines of Melbourne in 1980?

He was invited to do so by a Melbourne City Council requiring a striking centrepiece for the new City Square. As soon as it was put up, it was put down in a campaign of public criticism.

The construction workers who assembled its origami-like steel planes dubbed it "Steelhenge". Even the Queen, who opened the square, wondered whether it could be painted "a more agreeable colour".

Nameless at its unveiling, it quickly became "The Yellow Peril" and within seven months was banished to boggy Batman Park on the Yarra, where it sat, often vandalised, for 22 years.

In 2002, the work the artist eventually christened *Vault* was welcomed at the equally abstract Australian Centre for Contemporary Art at Southbank.

Robertson-Swann's piece



Ron Robertson-Swann atop his Yellow Peril.  
PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER

hardly stands out in the pageant of contemporary public art, especially when precincts such as Docklands, which has spent more than \$15 million on aesthetic installations, can make prominent John Kelly's *Cow Up a Tree* and nobody bats an eyelid.

While it was banished, *Vault* remains highly significant because, as art critic Sebastian Smee decided, it can be credited "with almost single-handedly establishing a place for abstract sculpture in Australia".

Robertson-Swann now reflects that what in 1980 was such an

awful personal experience has become "a controversy that was part of the history of Melbourne". He realises he had dragged us too far out of our comfort zone and that we "didn't get it".

That the sculpture is more famously "The Yellow Peril" puts it into a reasonably large category of Melbourne public art that has earned a nickname. The temporary 2001 Federation Arch on Princes Bridge became "Pick-up Sticks"; Denton Corker Marshall's *Melbourne Gateway* on the Tullamarine Freeway became "The Cheese Stick". The lime-

green ribbon of steel at a Templestowe roundabout is officially *River Peel* but is better known as "Apple Peel".

Callum Morton's 20-metre-high faux hotel on EastLink Freeway is still *Hotel* but was daubed with graffiti within weeks of the road's opening.

We can, as Smee has noted, be awfully recalcitrant when it comes to accepting public art graciously.

The Yellow Peril is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Sturt Street, Southbank. Melway 2F G10.