

Art from disaster



Timothy Horn's Gorgonia 15, Coral Works series. On display at Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, until January 2020.

- By **Bronwyn Watson**
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- *No Comments*

In 2008 Timothy Horn visited the Great Barrier Reef where he observed the damaging effects of climate change on the coral that forms the world's largest living structure. Then, three years later, he was further dismayed by the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster with its radioactive fallout and reports of contaminated water escaping into the ocean.

Horn was so affected by these environmental disasters that he created a series, titled Coral Works, which highlights his concern about the dangers of nuclear energy, climate change and human impact on the environment. One of the works from the series, Gorgonia 15, was recently acquired by the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences with funds from the bequest of Barry Willoughby and it is currently on display in an exhibition, Fantastical Worlds, at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

Gorgonia 15 is a wall sculpture of mirrored blown glass and nickel-plated bronze spanning more than two metres. It was made last year in Horn's American studio in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Horn, who is Australian-born and trained, now lives in the United States. In Australia he studied both sculpture and glass and works across several disciplines and with a wide range of materials.

At the Powerhouse Museum, curator Eva Czernis-Ryl says that Horn is well known for taking historical objects and images out of their usual context and altering their scale and also reimagining ornate objects from the past to create contemporary artworks. Gorgonia 15, she says, is "a marvellous work" that "mesmerises with its otherworldly aura and its extraordinary appearance that may bring to mind a prehistoric fossil with frozen water drops or an ornate jewellery piece one could imagine in Gulliver's land of giants".

For Gorgonia 15, Horn was inspired by a wide range of sources from diverse time periods. The title, for instance, refers to gorgonian coral, a soft coral named after the snake-haired Gorgons of Greek mythology. This coral is commonly known as sea fans due to its flat and branching forms. Gorgonia 15 is also inspired by a 17th-century French earring pattern by Gilles Legare, court jeweller to Louis XIV, and 19th-century studies of natural forms such as coral and lichen. Another inspiration was Old Plum, an ink drawing of an ancient tree across four panels by 17th-century Japanese painter Kano Sansetsu. Horn first saw Old Plum at the Metropolitan Museum in New York shortly after the 2011 Fukushima disaster.

Czernis-Ryl says that to create Gorgonia 15, Horn used Legare's earring pattern for the constellation of glass pearls. He also transformed the patterns of Old Plum into bony branches of gorgonian sea-fan coral.

"The distorted plum tree acquired a new significance for him, becoming a symbol of the calamitous effects of radiation upon organic life," says Czernis-Ryl. "And just as the victims of the snake-haired Gorgons were transformed into stone, coral bleaching has petrified parts of the reef and rendered it lifeless. Imaginatively conceived, designed and crafted, Gorgonia 15 brilliantly conveys Horn's environmental message through its terrifying beauty."

Timothy Horn, Gorgonia 15, Coral Works series, 2018. Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences collection. Purchased with funds from the Barry Willoughby Bequest 2018. On display, in exhibition Fantastical Worlds, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, until January 2020.