



Sunrise Road to fame

Life Stories

Acclaimed installation artist Bruce Munro's career had its genesis at Palm Beach – and he hasn't ruled out creating something special for his favourite home away from home...

Story by Rosamund Burton

Bruce Munro is in his home in Wiltshire, Long Knoll, the 16th century farmhouse, talking to me via Zoom. In the next month the artist travels to America, Australia and Japan. His work *Field of Light* has been on display at Uluru since 2016 and he has an exhibition at the Heide Museum of Modern Art in Melbourne. The world can't get enough of the work of this modest 63-year-old.

His extraordinary light works are inspired by his eight years in Australia from the age of 24, particularly the five years he lived at Palm Beach.

"They were really informative years. I feel it's where I really grew up," he says.

He established a small business in Sydney making illuminated displays, which he sold to a manufacturer in Dee Why. Bruce worked for that company, and he suggested to Serena – his now wife and also English, and with whom he was living – that they move to Palm Beach.

"Thirty years ago it really was quite an empty place," he says. "The great and the

good had their holiday homes there, but they were only there for special occasions and holidays. There was a little band of us who used to rent these houses around the neighbourhood, and there were the locals. Talk about halcyon days! It was absolute heaven."

From an early age Bruce was intrigued by light, spending hours looking through his mother's collection of transparencies, and mesmerised by Christmas tree lights. What captivated him most when living at Palm Beach was the clarity of the light during the winter.

"You get that really strong light at the beginning and end of the day. It feels like the air is vibrating in some sense. It's incredible."

After leaving school he did an art foundation course, before starting a fine art degree course at Bristol Polytechnic. But questioning why he had chosen this path and uncertain of the answer, he left after a year.

"I really missed making art and realised

I had a complete passion for it. It was a big test, but I needed to see if I had this truth in me to do it."

After 14 months he returned to art school and completed his degree.

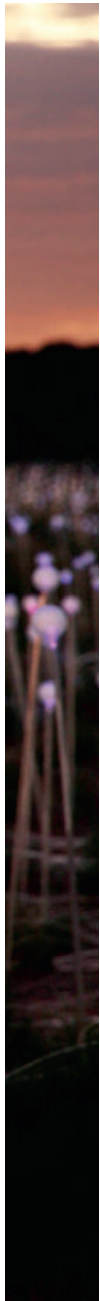
"I had no life experience, and I practically and instinctively thought I'm too young to do this [make art], so I put it off and went to Australia."

Bruce and Serena both acquired Australian citizenship and planned to make their lives here, after going back to the UK in 1992 to get married and spend time with their parents and friends. Little did they know it would be over 20 years before they returned.

They packed up their house in Sunrise Road, sold most of their belongings, bought an old Toyota Corolla estate and set off on a four-month-long trip around Australia.

"I was amazed when we reached Uluru. I had a palpable feeling that the place was vibrating. It really felt as if you were plugged into the mains and life was about

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to burst out of the ground,” he explains. While they were camped there he felt strongly that he wanted to create an artwork which people could visit “... that would bloom at night like dormant desert seeds responding to rain”.

Bruce and Serena married and their first child Millie was born in the UK in 1992, followed by Florrie in 1994. Bruce was keen to follow his passion but quickly realised that he was not going to be able to sustain a young family as an artist. He started a paint, tile and lighting business for homes and gardens, and gradually received commissions to create his unique lighting pieces. The Munros had another daughter Tink in 1996, and their son Tom in 2000.

It was his father’s death in 1999 which pressed Bruce to create the art of his dreams. Since age 16 he had kept a journal. He was reading some of the entries relating to his father and realised that many of his observations were about moments he had in landscapes when he felt completely connected to the whole around him.

In 2003, Bruce and Serena bought the rundown farmhouse, Long Knoll,

mortgaging themselves to the hilt. It had a four-hectare field with it, and Bruce began to make concrete plans for a large outdoor art installation. The same year Harvey Nichols, the London department store, commissioned a window display of 10,000 illuminated stems. Then the Victoria & Albert Museum invited Bruce to install a lighting work in the museum’s Perilli Gardens for the *Brilliant* exhibition. But he fully realised the concept he had envisaged years earlier in Central Australia, when he created the first *Field of Light*, filling the Long Knoll field with 15,000 stems of light. The venture put him £50,000 into the red, when Serena and he were struggling to pay the mortgage – but the gamble paid off as it generated huge interest.

It attracted the attention of Bath’s Holburne Museum, then was exhibited in the extensive gardens of the Eden Project, with its famous Biomes, in Cornwall, before Longford Gardens in Philadelphia invited him to illuminate the gardens there. Suddenly there was interest across the world in Bruce Munro’s art.

“It’s been a bit of a rollercoaster journey,” he reflects. “It’s ridiculous really.

I promise you I had no idea any of this was going to happen. I just went with it.”

When *Field of Light* was at the Holburne Museum, Bruce was contacted by a woman from the ABC in Alice Springs asking to interview him.

“I told her during the interview that my dream was to bring the *Field of Light* to the place that inspired it – Uluru.” Ray Stone, an executive at Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia, which operates Ayers Rock Resort, heard the interview and rang him. The idea became a reality when Qantas agreed to sponsor the project. In 2016, *Field of Light* opened to the public, with its 50,000 frosted-glass spheres on stems covering an area about 300 metres square, and the colour and intensity carefully orchestrated by the artist to ensure that it was not competing with the incredible night sky, but rather a gentle meditative piece in balance with its natural surroundings. The art installation was to be there for a year; however, six years later it is still captivating visitors.

Currently, at Melbourne’s Heide Museum of Modern Art, is Bruce Munro’s exhibition, *At Sunrise Road*. One artwork,

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Bruce Munro surveys his striking Field of Light installation at Uluru; Bruce and Serena at home in the UK with children Millie, Florrie, Tink and Tom; where the inspiration began – on a camping trip to the Red Centre in 1992; with Serena at Palm Beach in the 1980s.



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'Time and Place - Sunrise Road, 2019', is a grid of colour from three transparencies taken when Bruce and Serena lived at Sunrise Road. Another piece - *Time and Place* - was inspired by a walk at Palm Beach.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is *The Ferryman's Crossing*, inspired by Hermann Hesse's novel 'Siddhartha', and the idea is that the river is the whole flow of life. Four thousand CDs are lit, by flashes of Hermann Hesse's words in Morse code, onto the discs to create a "luminescent river".

Living in Sydney, if he felt homesick he used to go to the beach, and put his hand in the water, feeling it connected him to his father, who lived at Salcombe, a fishing village on the Kingsbridge estuary.

"It felt like a natural way to get home quickly. I was sitting on Nielsen Park Beach one afternoon, and the sunlight on Sydney Harbour mesmerised me. I went there feeling down in the dumps and came home feeling utterly at one with the world." To capture this feeling he created *CDSea*. With the

help of family and friends, he laid out 600,000 discarded CDs across Long Knoll field to form an inland sea and recreate the light effect, which had radically altered his emotional state all those years earlier in Sydney.

Bruce and Serena's oldest daughter lives in Byron Bay, and Bruce is working on a number of works in Australia, including a sound and light installation at Kings Canyon, which has been given the green light, and an installation at Mildura, in the planning stage, of 108 illuminated Hills hoists, each representing an orchestral instrument.

Earlier this year Bruce and Serena were back at Palm Beach. A conversation with a couple of locals planted the possibility of a project in Pittwater.

"It would be fun to do something in lovely Palm Beach," he says. "It all started here and it has inspired so much of my work."

***Bruce Munro: From Sunrise Road at the Heide Museum of Modern Art runs until 16 October 2022.**



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