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## MARIJANA TADIĆ



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\* **Sculpture In New York** \* **Reviews**





Marijana Tadić with the wall design team (Mark Butcher, Neil Cranney, Robert Williams), **Gateway to Adelaide** (water feature, Adelaide, South Australia), 2000, pre-cast concrete, stone, water, lighting, 30 x 15 x 4 m. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.

# River Of Life

*Marijana Tadić creates sculptural works that embody environmental themes, ideas about belonging and 'unbelonging', movement, flight and nesting—and which speak powerfully to the 'layered' histories and identities of people, places, and cultures.*

By Christine Nicholls

Australian sculptor Marijana Tadić was born in 1955 in Brcko, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the former Yugoslavia, near the border of today's Republic of Croatia, where she grew up in a house alongside the banks of the River Sava. The Sava, a major tributary of the Danube, flows through the Slavic states and neighboring countries. "Most years the river would rise to within 20 meters of our front gate", says Tadić. "Each autumn the river would flood, and one year we had to use a small boat to get in and out of our house. Usually the floodwater would take some time to recede. In winter it would freeze over and become an ice skating rink."

Adjacent to the Tadić family home was the river harbor, where transport ships docked. Surrounding the docks were the river's beaches, used by the locals for swimming. Twice, Marijana Tadić came close to drowning in that river.

It was only natural that the young Marijana Tadić would absorb some powerful, if perhaps contradictory, lessons from the River Sava and its immediate

environment. The river framed her childhood and youth. Like life itself, the river was a source of immense pleasure, often thrilling, but unpredictable and potentially dangerous.

That environment shaped the child's consciousness. Today, many of Tadić's outdoor sculptures are located near water or other quintessentially liminal spaces—"the space between". Tadić is drawn to places where boundaries dissolve. Ideas of 'movement' and 'flow', both associated with water, permeate many of Tadić's visual artworks—whether it is a matter of her large public artworks or the smaller-scale sculptures that she exhibits in art gallery settings.

Another formative influence was the diverse ethnic makeup of Srpska Varos ('Serbian Town' or 'Serbian Quarters', within the town of Brcko), where Marijana's working-class Catholic parents raised the child and her younger brother. In terms of memories and associations, the harmonious multiculturalism of that 'first place' remains richly resonant for Tadić.

"The majority of people in our part

of town were Orthodox Serbs, who had been living there for a number of centuries after fleeing the Ottoman Empire's occupation of their Serbian homeland. A few people of Islamic and Catholic faith also lived in that part of town, but I did not realize, until my arrival to Australia in 1969, when I was 14, that our family was part of a minority. In fact, throughout my entire primary-schooling I was usually the only Catholic in my class."

The harmony and fluidity of ethnic identity in Brcko and Bosnia, more generally, have exerted a lifelong influence on Tadić in terms of her visual artworks and her life. The descriptor 'liminality' applies not only to Tadić's sculptures with respect to their physical positioning, but is conceptually relevant to her artworks.

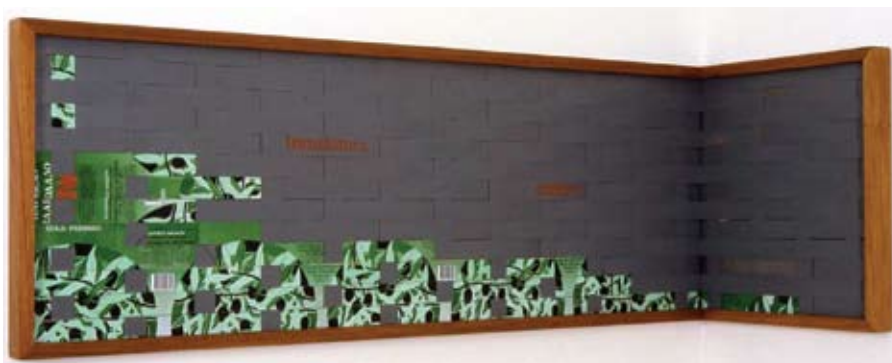
By and large Tadić's childhood, with parents Pavka and Joko and brother Ivo, was a happy time. That was a period of relative social and cultural harmony, neutrality, and rationality in the former Yugoslavia, preceding the turbulent times that would co-opt many 'Yugoslavs' into virulent expressions of ethnic nationalism.

“At that time,” Tadić says, “a vast panoply of Western-style hats, turbans, and fezzes could be seen in Brčko.... Such cosmopolitanism was very much part of my formative years.... Mosques and churches coexisting, peacefully. That’s how I remember it. Religion was a private matter and we always celebrated Christmas *and* Ramadan with our neighbors.” Thus Tadić absorbed another powerful, early lesson: that it is possible to be part of a minority within a heterogeneous national state and to prosper. Transcending simple ‘Yugo-nostalgia’, this approach continues to inform Tadić’s approach to life and art today.

But Tadić is well aware that memory can play tricks on people, particularly on children. “As children, regardless of our different backgrounds, we saw ourselves as Tito’s pioneers and we were raised to believe that all people were equal, that our country was good, and that it looked after its citizens in a benevolent way. For my parents, I don’t think it was quite so rosy. However, they never complained or even raised any religious or ethnic issues with us.”

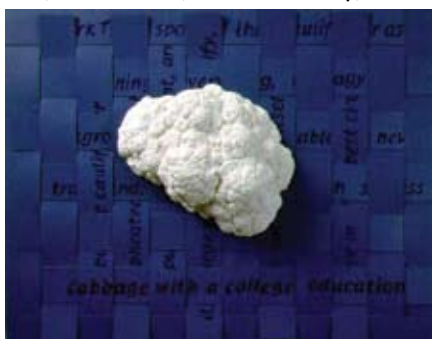
**A**pprehension about her minority status did not become an issue for Marijana Tadić until 1969 when her parents made the life-altering decision to migrate to Australia. The family’s migration was driven, ostensibly, by economic rather than political considerations. Tadić believes that her parents did not foresee what was about to unfold in their homeland.

But already, by that time, according to historians, the writing was on the wall.



**Marijana Tadić, Social lubrication – Translators, traitors, 2001**, laminex strips, olive oil tin, text, timber frame, 40 x 120 x 40 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Mick Bradley.

There were telltale signs of the emergent, toxic ethnic nationalisms that would lead, eventually, to conflict on a massive scale, war, loss of life, and ultimately, to the



**Marijana Tadić, bon ton – cabbage with a college education, 2001**, laminex strips, and hydrostone, 30 x 50 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Mick Bradley.

‘Balkanization’ and continuing obduracy of the separate states that had comprised the former Yugoslavia.

Arrival in Australia as a migrant in 1969 came as a shock to the 14-year-old,

bringing the outsider status of Marijana Tadić’s migrant identity into painfully sharp focus. The Polish-born Australian poet Ania Walwicz, who emigrated to Australia in 1963 as a 12 year-old, expresses emotions not unlike those experienced by the young Marijana Tadić. Walwicz uses forceful, uncompromising language to describe her profound sense of displacement. *Australia*, her prose poem, begins as follows:

*You big ugly. You too empty. You desert with your nothing nothing nothing. You scorched suntanned. Old too quickly. Acres of suburbs watching the telly. You bore me. Freckle silly children. You nothing much.*

*With your big sea. Beach beach beach. I’ve seen enough already. You Dumb dirty city with bar stools. You’re ugly. You silly shoppingtown. You copy. You too far everywhere. You laugh at me. When I came this woman gave me a box of biscuits. You try to be friendly but you’re not very friendly.*



**Marijana Tadić, Balancing Act, 2004**, pre-cast concrete, cast glass, computerised LED lighting, stainless steel, spheres: 150 cm, 130 cm, and 110 cm. Mobarra Park, Mawson Lakes, South Australia. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.



*You never ask me to your house. You insult me. You don't know how to be with me. Road road tree tree.*

Tadić and Walwicz (who do not know one another) are roughly the same age. Moreover, the two girls emigrated, as adolescents, at much the same time. Later, in the same poem, Walwicz writes:

*You never accept me. For your own. You always ask me where I'm from. You always ask me. You tell me I look strange. Different. You don't adopt me. You laugh at the way I speak.*

*You think you're better than me. You don't like me. You don't have any interest in another country. Idiot center of your own self. You think the rest of the world walks around without shoes or electric light.*

In *Australia* Walwicz deliberately deploys hyperbole, linguistic excess, and biting parody of 'wog-speak' as instruments of denunciation of her new land. Like Ania Walwicz and many other migrants who arrived in Australia in the 1960s, Marijana Tadić found it to be an unwelcoming place, and the almost universal monoculturalism and monolingualism of its (white) inhabitants stultifying and limiting.

**T**adić also experienced the powerlessness of the child migrant. While Walwicz over-compensates for the child migrant's voicelessness with words of helpless rage, Marijana Tadić's response to her new country was a feeling of overwhelming sadness, coupled with a sense of loss and

confusion. Stricken by homesickness and longing to return home, she struggled to make sense of it all.

Tadić's father Joko found work at Chrysler's Adelaide plant as a tradesman (rather than having to accept menial factory work, which was the fate of many skilled and even tertiary-qualified migrants at that time). The family settled in Adelaide, staying for a while at the Glenelg Migrant Hostel, close to the beach. Nevertheless, after several years of living in Australia, the family decided to return to Yugoslavia. Their return was short-lived.

Once back in Australia, Marijana Tadić took up office work. By then she had well and truly put her early migration experiences behind her and felt absolutely at home in Australia, which had changed considerably from the place it had been in the 1960s.

As a primary-school child in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and during her secondary studies in Australia, Tadić had demonstrated considerable artistic aptitude. While a number of teachers encouraged her to pursue this talent, it was not until 1983 that Tadić took the plunge and enrolled to study at the University of South Australia's art school, majoring in sculpture.

This led to the inclusion of Tadić's works, at first in an art school group exhibition, then in her first solo show in 1987. Her 2001 solo exhibition *Salacious Offerings* at Adelaide Central Gallery, in Norwood, marked a turning point in Tadić's career. In this she exhibited two standout works: *Bon Ton*, *Cabbage with a College Education*, evincing an obliquely Marcel Duchampian influence, and the more serious, harder-edged *Social Lubrication*, *Translators*,



**Marijana Tadić, *Make a Wish*, 2004**, stainless steel, glass, and LED lighting, 90 x 30 x 30 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.



**Above left: Marijana Tadić, *Seasonally Adjusted*, 2004**, ceramic, cast glass, stainless steel, diameter 33 cm. **Above right: Marijana Tadić, *Cradle*, 2004**, ceramics, glass, stainless steel, 30 x 50 x 20 cm. Photographs: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.

*Traitors*. Both works contain the seeds of what would follow: for example, Tadić's use of accompanying text in certain works. The written text serves to ironize, politicize, or simply to add another dimension to her work, allowing audiences to appreciate it on a number of different planes.

Later, solo shows of Tadić's sculptures were mounted at Adelaide's Hill Smith Gallery and Sydney's Soho Gallery, as well as in Croatia: at the National Sculpture Museum in Zagreb and Arsenal Gallery in the ancient city of Zadar. Tadić has also realized a number of significant public art commissions in Australia.

In 1983, Marijana Tadić became the first South Australian woman to be granted a commercial builder's licence and she continues to practice as a builder. This facilitated her inclusion in multidisciplinary projects and opened up opportunities for working with urban planning teams.

Tadić's germinal collaborative public artwork, *Gateway to Adelaide* (2000), created in conjunction with a wall-design team comprising Neil Cranney, Mark Butcher, and Robert Williams, marks the entrance to the city of Adelaide from the southeast. *Gateway to Adelaide* comprises a freestanding sculptural work as well as "three major walls, paving insets, bus stops and bus shelters, a water feature ... and [a] screening wall called Fossil Forest.... All are located in the intersection precinct" (Fazakerley and Bonham, 2001: p. 354).

Throughout the past decade, the sculpture's elegant curves and sensuous surfaces and the accompanying water



**Marijana Tadić, Sensing the way 3, 2010**, marble dust, cement, stainless steel, granite base, 100 x 25 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.

feature have collectively come to constitute an admired landmark for motorists exiting the freeway and entering the city of Adelaide (or *vice versa*). Not only is *Gateway to Adelaide* positioned at the junction of four major roads but it also marks the entrance to and exterior walls of a religious community of Carmelite nuns.

Ruth Fazakerley has described this collaboration with architects as incorporating "... the design of new walls and gates which attempt to reflect heritage concerns (in the choice of materials used)". She goes on to write that the work constitutes "a sophisticated approach to contemporary design" (Fazakerley, 2000: p. 50). Indeed, the work evinces a European cosmopolitanism that is very much a reflection of Marijana Tadić's approach to visual artmaking.

Because public artists must work, more often than not, as part of a team in which disparate disciplines and practices are melded into a complex matrix, there is a need to balance a host of diverse factors. *Gateway to Adelaide* was no exception. The government transport authority (Transport SA), engineers, artists, architects, and designers all made contributions to this massive project. Tadić was, like the others involved in the project, compelled to juggle competing demands. In addition, because we live at a time when boundaries between private and public space are becoming increasingly permeable, such projects run the risk of becoming politically charged.

In a review of David Hockney's book, *Secret Knowledge*, Martin Kemp gives emphasis to Hockney's point that "... works of art are physical products



**Marijana Tadić, Contemplation, 2006**, entry to Marion coastal walk, Marino, South Australia, precast concrete, recycled turpentine timber, steel, granite, text and lighting, boat 10 x 2.7 x 1.5 m, deck 8 x 2.4 x 0.3 m, mast 6 x 1 m. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.

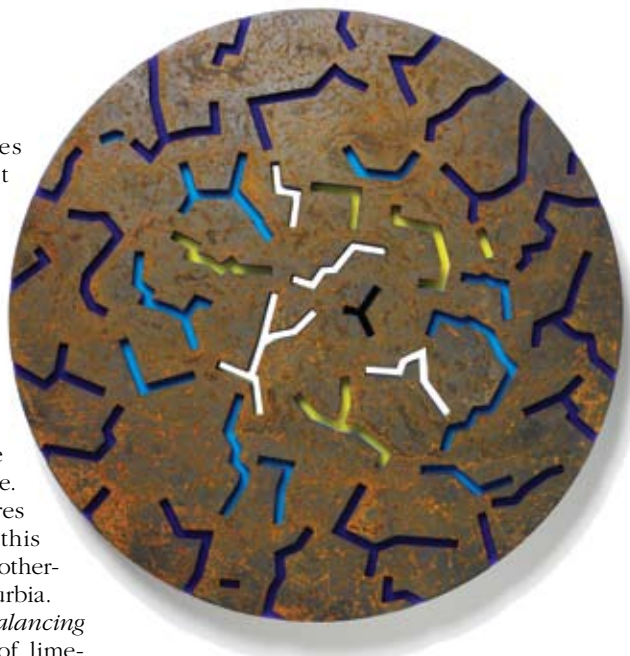


made by executants who face real challenges, and do not come ready-made from the heads of their makers. Whether he is right or wrong, in part or whole, it also reminds me ... that many of our concerns may be driven more by the internal dynamics of our industry than by acts of hard looking and intellectual adventure” (Kemp 2003: 37).

Place is always a defining context or condition for Tadić’s outdoor sculptures. For reasons undoubtedly dating back to childhood, she is drawn to border zones, be they physical, psychological, or existential. Enshrining this philosophy is Tadić’s conceptual work *Balancing Act* (2004), situated in the Mobarra Park Japanese Gardens at Mawson Lakes. Until 1987, when the government proposed it as a ‘multifunction polis’, or kind of futuristic village, Mawson Lakes (previously called ‘The Levels’) was a largely non-residential suburb in outer Adelaide.

*Balancing Act* comprises three finely balanced, precast concrete spherical objects made up of layered concentric circles of graduated, differing dimensions. At night, these apparently precariously balanced objects cast a magical glow over the restrained orderliness of the Japanese gardens. Lit by computer-generated interior lighting, the subtle illumination enhances the otherworldliness of this unusual site. Tadić’s magnificent rock-sculptures are beautifully integrated into this Japanese garden located in the otherwise bland outer Adelaidean suburbia.

The works that comprise *Balancing Act* are evocative of the strata of limestone rock formations and outcrops of the Dalmatian coast that were part of Tadić’s visual field during her childhood and youth. The related concepts of ‘strata’



**Marijana Tadić, Seismic Scan, 2007, mild steel, acrylic, diameter 40 cm. 1 of 6. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.**

and ‘sedimentation’ are recurrent themes in Tadić’s sculptures. ‘Sedimentation’ is a concept that the artist understands as having a physical dimension (as is the case with the quartz-mingled spherical sculptures at Mobarra Park) but also as powerfully metaphorical. Marijana Tadić, a child of both the northern and southern hemispheres, conceives of her own identity as comprising ‘layers’—itself calling for a ‘balancing act’.

Rather than comprehending the world or life from the periphery, Tadić regards herself as perpetually walking a ‘fine line’, constantly and consciously striving for balance. “I feel that I occupy a zone somewhere between Australian and European, the East and West, women and men”, Tadić says.

**M**arijana Tadić has also created a number of sculptural works located contiguous to large stretches of water, where bird life proliferates. For Tadić, water has symbolic meaning, as do birds, with their peripatetic migratory and nesting patterns, their connotations of flight to and from unknown destinations, their resistance to terrestrial resting places, and their connections with, and dependence on, aqueous environments.

*Contemplation*, arguably Tadić’s finest public artwork to date, brings together all of these themes. Located on a small cove at Marino Rocks, on the South Australian littoral, this work inhabits what had become, post-colonization, an unprepossessing site. A once beautiful place, it had been despoiled by insensitive developers, unattractive building practices, and other unsightly interventions. *Contemplation* has transformed this site back into a tranquil, meditative space.

Wendy Walker writes that



**Marijana Tadić, Eucalyptus Ablaze, 2007, aluminum, steel, computerised lighting sequence, 210 x 160 x 30 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.**



Marijana Tadić, **With the Flow** (detail), 2010, acupuncture needles, resin, MDF board, installation set of 2 at 300 x 45 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.

*Contemplation* entails “three discrete, but complementary elements [that] are abstracted interpretations of a ship’s mast, a boat deck, and an overturned hull of a boat” (Walker, 2007, np). These works look out to sea but also make reference to that which lies inland. Distributed across the three integrated elements of this bravura set of sculptural works is a brilliantly understated, liminal-place-poem. Written by Tadić’s childhood friend Miroslav Mićanović, a celebrated poet in his homeland, this short, untitled poem expresses the complexity of the migrant experience: *I’m quiet with / the land I come from. / Just as I don’t say the name / of the sea to the boat.*

In that same precinct there is evidence of earlier Aboriginal occupation and ancient geological formations, again evoking layered histories, layered identities, represented in *Contemplation* by means of the white, layered structure near the seashore, resting like a strangely formed, ridge-backed, beached rock-creature. Making dual reference to the dry stone walls of white rock along the Adriatic coast, and to the vertically layered rock formations found in the Hallett Cove area near Marino, this sea-creature seems to be conducting a silent conversation with the other elements of *Contemplation*.

*Contemplation* is a visually pleasing, harmonious work of consummate artistry, the unobtrusive nature of which encourages viewers to reflect upon the different mysteries of time and place. The unique quality of Australian light has strategic significance in the realization of this work, too.

Tadić’s *Reciprocity* (2008), a bipartite work positioned at the entrance to the Port River Expressway, makes explicit reference to the Indigenous *genius loci*, by the incorporation of emu tracks into the design by local Indigenous artist Mark Blackman. The nature of the collaboration is echoed by the work’s title. *Reciprocity*’s two distinct elements face one another directly, like extremely tall, beautifully curved, surfboard-persons engaged in a serious, formal conversation. As with Tadić’s other sculptural works, divergent understandings of ‘place’ exist in dialogue, rather than in opposition. Again, this reflects Tadić’s philosophic position with respect to the nature of identity, whether at the individual level or the identity of a particular place or locale. For Tadić identity always involves accretions or layers. It is never a case of sloughing off previous identities like lizard skins; one adds to earlier layers of identity. This is a view that closely accords with that of the Indian intellectual and Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, who writes convincingly about the “illusion of a single identity” and the fact that we humans have “layered” identities rather than a single, all-encompassing or all-defining one.

The works comprising *Reciprocity* are fashioned from granite, precast concrete-and-glass beads and, as is the case with other Tadić works, light plays a significant role. Interior lighting illuminates this work at night, casting a gentle glow, as if offering benediction to passing motorists and transient pedestrians.

Light also plays a defining role in Marijana Tadić’s earlier, dramatic work *Eucalyptus Ablaze* (2007), in which she seeks to capture the essential nature of heat and light generated by Australia’s bushfires. In this work Tadić, who in recent years has used



computerized-lighting effects in increasingly sophisticated ways, evokes the licking flames that, with devastating regularity, consume our native flora—but are also necessary for their regeneration. Tadić has used aluminum laser-cut tubes to represent stylized vertical trunks of burning Australian gum trees. The artist's proficiency with this technology is equally apparent in her captivating, mandala-like, laser-cut steel work *Seismic Scan* (2007), alive with small, vibrant flecks of color and light dancing along and through the work's surface like tiny, animated bolts of lightning.

In terms of Tadić's gallery work, she frequently makes use of ceramics, cast glass, and stainless steel to exhilarating effect. Examples of this include her marvelously tactile works *Cradle* and *Seasonally Adjusted* (both 2004), and her gracefully spiraling, equally accomplished sculpture, *Within 111* (2009).

Finally, in her most recent gallery work Marijana Tadić demonstrates her versatility through a genuinely new departure, which nevertheless clearly resonates with themes expressed in earlier work. The works that comprise the *Wandering Albatross* series are Tadić's most sophisticated thus far, at the technical, aesthetic, and conceptual levels. Into this work she has, for the first time, introduced the dimension of sound.

This Tadić does through the use of recycled acupuncture needles that reflect her fascination with energy flow and movement. The needles' flexibility allows them to move, engendering sound and shadow. The wall panels, timber-like screens, have been made from recycled



Marijana Tadić, *Till next year*, 2010, sea grass, resin, diameter 150 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.

Australian hardwood strips that double as light-filled crevices of the kind that might be glimpsed in large native trees. Each screen is equipped with a spectrogram that has been derived from a bird sound, evoking a natural bush ambience. This gentle bird song has the capacity to fill the gallery space. Each work is interlinked with and complemented by *till next year*, a small, lovely, sea grass- and resin-woven bird's nest.

Conceptually complex, beautifully realized at the technical level, rehearsing themes and ideas about migrancy, belonging and 'unbelonging,' navigation and the environment, nesting and homemaking, Marijana Tadić's innovative public artworks and smaller gallery sculptures contribute in significant ways to understanding the human condition. Tadić's public sculptures, located mostly at the borderlands (think, for instance, *Contemplation and Gateway to Adelaide*) honour Indigenous Australian and migrant Australians' lifeways. Speaking eloquently to the extraordinarily generative

effects of dislocation and relocation on cultures and identity, they also represent lasting monuments to such ideas. That Tadić is able to realize and express such complex and interconnected themes in visual terms is testament to her artistic originality and power. Δ

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Marijana Tadić, *Wandering Albatross Installation, Song 1*, 2010, jarrah hardwood, computerised lighting, sound, 30 panels, each panel: 120 x 45 cm. Photograph: Courtesy of Grant Hancock.