



Benjamin Shine in his O'Malley studio, all space, light and boxes full of coloured tulle which he uses to make artworks.

Photo: Melissa Adams

## Art's shining star

Using fabric to create portraits, joining in the world's biggest Easter egg hunt... this unusual artist stops at nothing. **Diana Streak** writes

Forget the paint-splattered clutter of a Margaret Olley studio. This is all space, light and neatly arranged plastic boxes containing hundreds of metres of coloured tulle, carefully stacked piles of fabric and, even more unusual, an ironing board instead of an easel.

Welcome to Benjamin Shine's design engine room in Canberra's suburb of O'Malley.

Shine has commissions flowing in from around the world but most of the work is done thousands of miles away in Britain once he has meticulously created his designs and compiled exact specifications.

At the moment he is working on a series of artworks to tie in with the New Zealand America's Cup for early next year and he has recently been commissioned to create an official portrait of British Prime Minister David Cameron.

One of Shine's trademark works is portrait commissions made from tulle fabric. "The David Cameron portrait will most likely be one of the tulle fabric portraits that I do, made from a single 10-metre long fabric which is scrunched up, pressed and pleated, and the pleats create the features in a sort of

photographic effect." Behind him on the wall is a grey portrait of Elizabeth Taylor. The other is a work in progress, with blue tulle cascading from the wall onto the floor. "Once the blue fabric is ironed onto the yellow backdrop, I then work into it moving and repositioning the tulle to make the portrait. That one is going to be Her Highness Sheikha Mosa of United Arab Emirates who is known for her bright colours."

But amid his high-profile commissions, Shine still makes time for charity projects as evidenced by his recent egg-scapade that hit the London headlines. But more of that later.

Closer to home Shine has become involved in No Sweat Fashions, a not-for-profit company which provides training and employment opportunities for migrant and refugee women in Canberra, and also supports the emerging local fashion design industry.

"We are trying to replicate the success of The Social Studio in Melbourne," he says. "I will give them some creative direction about what are they going to be making, things that will be appealing to people. I've had some experience in recycling and upcycling." Well, yes, just a bit. Shine designed the award-winning Eurostar Train Managers bag, made from

decommissioned staff uniforms and seat cushions.

So about that egg. What began as a fun commission for a children's charity ended in a high-profile London police investigation, provoked a British media frenzy and the eventual return of the brazenly stolen artwork.

Shine had been invited to decorate a 60-centimetre egg sculpture for the Faberge Big Egg Hunt charity exhibition and auction for which 209 giant eggs decorated by artists and celebrities were hidden across London.

To get a sense of the scale of the project, the world's biggest-ever Easter egg hunt, consider the names of some of the luminaries who created the other eggs – Mulberry, Sir Ridley Scott, Zandra Rhodes, Diane Von Furstenberg, Tommy Hilfger.

Each artist was given a large white fibreglass egg and most chose to paint or decorate it, keeping the ovoid shape. However, Shine's idea was to play on the idea of the iconic British post box, and *Egg Letter Box* was born.

The 200 eggs were put on display in cunning places around the city early one morning and Londoners

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### Original children's classic

Would Mem Fox's bestselling children's book *Possum Magic* have been quite as successful if it had been called *Hush the Invisible Mouse*? That's the title on the first draft. Its first page is now on display in the Treasures gallery at the National Library of Australia.

Exhibitions project manager Erin Stephens says *Possum Magic* was one of her favourite books when she was growing up. She first saw the manuscript last year while working on the gallery.

"It's amazing to have the manuscript, to handle it and to put it on display now." The story in that first draft is a little different to the published version. "We also hold a lovely oral history of Mem Fox talking about how *Possum Magic* came to be, how difficult she found getting it published, and how the publishers made her change the story," Stephens says. "She wrote it as an assignment at university in Adelaide while studying children's literature. She tried several publishers and one publisher called on a Friday and said the manuscript was great but they wanted changes to the story – a different animal, make it more interesting. She says in the oral history, 'They told me to rewrite my crap and come back on Monday.'"

She did, and when it was published in 1983 it became the biggest-selling Australian picture book ever – it's still in print in hardcover and has sold more than three million copies around the world. In *Possum Magic*, Hush is made invisible by Grandma Poss who wants to protect the little one from danger and must travel around Australia eating various Australian foods – including lamingtons and Vegemite – to find a way to reappear.

The manuscript is in Fox's papers from 1961 to 2002. 30 boxes of them, held in the National Library of Australia's Manuscripts Collection. "We have drafts of 17 books." But *Possum Magic* is her magnum opus and the library also has various editions of it, including one in Japanese in the Asian Reading Room. "It's a very Australian story," Stephens says.

Ron Cerabona



Shine at work, above, and the 60-centimetre egg (stolen, then returned days later), inset. Main photo: Melissa Adams

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were given maps and hints about where to find them on the charity's website.

Shine's piece became an instant smash hit, garnering comments of admiration on the event's website. But last week, in a rotten move, *Egg Letter Box* was ripped from its plinth and poached. Only one other egg was stolen and that was the bright yellow *Hatch* by Natasha Law, Jude Law's sister, which was returned within hours.

"Naturally I was pretty disappointed to hear my design had been stolen," Shine says. "But my initial disbelief soon turned to amazement as my email inbox began to fill with requests for media interviews to help build awareness and support for the egg's safe return."

Within days the story of the missing egg was being reported across news stations including the BBC and ITV. Shine's phone rang hot through the night in Canberra as he gave interviews, including to London's Crimestoppers who asked for a description so witnesses could keep their eyes peeled.

"I said he's two foot tall, he's bright red, and he's a bit portly. I said it would be great to get the CCTV of someone running off with an egg under their jacket," he said.

The lighthearted approach worked as social media and radio callers expressed outrage. "Someone realised they were holding on to seriously wanted stolen goods, too hot to handle, so decided to give it back and it was left outside Liberty's department store which is a stone's throw away from where its plinth was located," he said.

The egg was handed over to police and was reinstalled on its plinth yesterday after some minor repairs. It was driven to its site in a Royal Mail van, by postal workers who had adopted it as a mascot.

So how did an award-winning London designer end up living in Canberra? Love of course.

Shine had studied fashion design at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design and Central St Martins in London and in 2003 he set up his creative studio, where materials, techniques and construction ideas flowed in his diverse portfolio and multidisciplinary approach.

As his work began to attract clients – fashion labels, product and interior manufacturers, international institutions such as The Crafts Council, UK, and The New York Museum of Arts and Design – a young Australian fashion designer crossed his path.

She was Danielle Stone, a Camberran who was doing work experience fashion PR in London. "She got roped into coming to an art exhibition of

mine. That's where we met and we started going out for three years in London and we've now been living here in Canberra for five years."

He has worked with global brands including Barclays Wealth, Deutsche Bank, Coca-Cola and Google. There was also a suite of European design awards. Shine was invited to the Faberge project because he had been involved in a similar one in 2010 called Elephant Parade with the same organisers and charity. "It had 200 elephants that had to be decorated to raise money for the Asian elephant. The one I did got a lot of coverage for them and was one of the big sellers."

Shine created the *Taxi Elephant*, inspired by glossy black London cabs. Chrome detailed, the structure has headlamps as eyes and shows a yellow taxi sign on his head, which illuminates at various times, day and night, powered by a solar panel.

Earlier this year, he hatched the egg design while in London where he has a fabrication team. "So I started it there and when I got back to Canberra, we were just tweaking and finishing it off. There were lots of emails and photographs sent backwards and forwards, texting and Skypeing. The amazing thing is I do so much work for overseas, but I do a lot of it from here with it being made overseas; technology today is amazing."

"In terms of getting the proportions right, my team over there took photographs and sent them to me and I superimposed where I wanted things moved or changed and to the millimetre, we got it to how I needed it to be, and we did it quite quickly."

"I sent through the logo and got them to position it on the egg exactly where I wanted it, move up a bit and within 10 minutes they would have the information I'd sent them and I'd see a photograph of it in London. This is how it works in the industry anyway – if you are manufacturing something in China, they send you a photograph of a sample and you can look at it straightaway and tell them what you want changed."

So Shine certainly doesn't feel disadvantaged by living in Canberra. "Not at all. I've managed to get over some of the main hurdles and technology today just doesn't make it much of an issue. In the UK, you could be two hours away instead of 24 hours away and you are still doing the same thing."

*Egg Letter Box* and the other 200 eggs will be sold at Sotheby's auction on March 20 to raise two million pounds for the Elephant Family and Action for Children charities. To see the other egg-cellar artworks visit [www.thebigegg hunt.co.uk/](http://www.thebigegg hunt.co.uk/)