2. Summary of the Conceptual Basis of the Australian National Botanic Gardens Master Plan

The strength and longevity of any Public Art Master Plan for the Botanic Gardens inevitably lie in its close connections to and amplification of the core values of the Gardens, rather than being an inessential aesthetic addition to the Gardens' identity, functions, and mission.

As already noted, those core values or mission of the ANBG, stated in the simplest way, are:

> "...to grow, study, and promote Australian plants".

The Master Plan's strength as an essential part of the "vision" for the Gardens is also dependent upon staff, Friends, visitors, consultants, and participants having a clear understanding of the "reasons why" art is present in the Gardens, and how its site-specific presence can be shaped over time to increase the vitality and the richness of visitors' experiences, and the meaning, content, or understanding which they glean from their visits.

The overall value of the Gardens is perhaps stated in the most succinct manner in the "Statement of Significance" for the ANBG in the "Register of the National Estate Database" (Database Number: 015078):

> "Statement of Significance: The Gardens are important for containing rare and endangered native plant species in cultivation (Criterion B.1).
>
> "The Gardens are important for their value as a research and teaching site based on the extensive herbarium collections which are linked to the living plant collections; this is rare on such a scale in Australia (Criterion C.1).
>
> "The Gardens are important for aesthetic characteristics valued by the community, as they exhibit an attractive park landscape with a well balanced integration of spaces and form; interest from the vegetation details of the variety of native species; contrasts of small and large plants, waterform, rockform and colour; vistas of major Canberra features including Parliament House and many enframed attractive views across the lake (Criterion E.1).
>
> "The Gardens are important for demonstrating a high degree of technical achievement by establishing a living collection linked to the herbarium collections.
>
> "The Gardens also demonstrate design excellence in construction of certain garden features, in particular the Rain Forest Gully which represents a geographic transect up the east coast of Australia and the rockery area with its carefully contrived combination of rocks, pools and running water. The Gardens are innovative in being the first public garden composed essentially of Australian native plants with some related species. Public Gardens of this type are rare (Criteria F.1 and B.2)" (Ibid., p. 1).

To identify how the presence of works of art, contemporary craft, and design in the Gardens can amplify and increase public appreciation of this significance, the following pages briefly set out the conceptual basis and guiding principles underlying the planning, commissioning, acquisition, and ongoing structuring of the ANBG Public Art Master Plan.

A. Art as a Means of Interpretation of Ideas

The essential role which contemporary art, craft, design, and artisanship can take in the Gardens is not one of "making attractive", but rather of interpretation. This interpretation process is defined by Freeman Tilden in relation to the National Park Service in the USA in his classic Interpreting our Heritage (University of North Carolina Press 1957), as:

> "Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact", and
>
> "Interpretation should capitalize mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit" (Ibid, p. 8).

Artists and craftspeople are obviously entirely capable of participating in that role of interpretation and response through commissions for site-specific works. For millennia, whether in Western or Eastern cultures, art has continuously functioned to "reveal a larger truth which lies behind", and to draw upon the observer's "mere curiosity" in moving beyond to "the enrichment of the human mind and spirit".

Freedman Tilden amplified his concept of interpretation in relation to natural and man-made environments by describing what he saw as a "...new kind of group education based upon a systematic kind of preservation and use of national cultural resources", and by identifying six principles which he believed underlie any interpretive effort:

> "I. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
>
> "II. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
>
> "III. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
>
> "IV. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
>
> "V. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole [person] rather than any phase.
>
> "VI. Interpretation addressed to children, (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program" (Ibid, p. 9).

Tilden acknowledges that his fourth principle arose from a passage from writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who stated "truly speaking, it is not instruction but provocation that I can receive from another soul" (Ibid., p. 33).

The role of art in society as continuously providing intelligent "provocation" is also both timeless and extremely important to incorporate as a positive, confident part in the life of any institution having a cultural role in the community. As the former Adelaide Festival Director and performer Robyn Archer explains,

> "...the muscle of the alternative, the poor, the radical, is developed out of the conflict with the conservative, the opulent, and the static. Eventually the old gives way to the new which in turn becomes the conservative of the new day. It is this vast network of push and pull, high and low, which must be taken into account when we speak of the arts. And all of it is absolutely necessary (R. Archer, Arts Action Update (No. 1, 1991).

B. Art Which Explores the Definition of New Cultural Narratives and Myths Through Interpretation

For the past century or more, Western society has ceased to invite and encourage its contemporary artists and craftspeople to perform the critical role of the community's "imaging of itself to itself", of actively exploring and repeatedly stating in contemporary ways "who" and "what" the community is and what it shall become. Unlike Greek city states in the fifth century B.C. or Florence in the fourteenth century, governments and individuals in the twentieth century have not actively and widely commissioned artists and craftspeople to promulgate, explore, and make seductively attractive in their public works of art the principles of communal life which support the long-term preservation of the community's good.

There is a relative absence of public processes in contemporary democracies whereby artists and other "creative makers" are actively given the traditional role of examination and perpetuation of society's venerable myths which reiterate long-term values and the good of the whole, rather than the interest of the individual. There are also few mechanisms where long-term interests are publicly and repeatedly placed in the consciousness of individual citizens. As described by US biologist, designer and inventor Stewart Brand:

> "Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span. The trend might be coming from the acceleration of technology, the short-[horizon] perspective of market-driven economics, the next-election perspective of democracies, or the distractions of personal multi-tasking. All are on the increase. Some sort of balancing corrective to the short-sightedness is needed—some mechanism or myth that encourages the long view and the taking of long-term responsibility, where 'the long term' is measured at least in centuries..." (S. Brand, The Clock of the Long Now. Time and Responsibility (New York 1999) p. 2).

The mechanisms or "correctives" which Brand seeks in order to reinsert an emphasis on the long-term in society's daily consciousness are being proposed in contemporary debate utilising a variety of starting-points and perspectives. For example, U.S.-based cultural historian Suzi Gablik describes an international contemporary movement among many cultural and social planners in government and private practice toward the conscious creation of new cultural models and new roles for contemporary artists:

> "Most artists still see art as an arena in which to pursue individual freedom and expression. Under modernism this often meant freedom from community, freedom from obligation to the world and freedom from relatedness.
>
> "The emerging new paradigm reflects a will to participate socially: a central aspect of new paradigm thinking involves a significant shift from objects to relationships... Whereas the aesthetic perspective oriented us to the making of objects, the ecological perspective connects art to its integrative role in the larger whole and the web of relationships in which art exists.
>
> "A new emphasis falls on community and the environment rather than on individual achievement and accomplishment. The ecological perspective does not replace the aesthetic, but gives a deeper account of what art is doing, reformulating its meaning and purpose beyond the gallery system, in order to redress the lack of concern, within the aesthetic model, for issues of context or social responsibility.

> "...David Feinstein writes, 'We need new myths; we need them urgently and desperately... Times are changing so fast that we cannot afford to stay set in our ways. We need to become exquisitely skilled engineers of change in our mythologies'. ...If modern aesthetics was inherently isolationist, aimed at disengagement and purity, my sense is that what we will be seeing over the next few decades is art that is essentially social and purposeful, art that rejects the myths of neutrality and autonomy" (S. Gablik, The Re-Enchantment of Art (New York 1991) pp. 7 – 8).

The art which Gablik sees as re-emerging in contemporary society falls clearly within Freeman Tilden's precept of "interpretation as provocation". It firmly embodies his principles of relating directly to the essential experience of the visitor, of including critical information, and of "aiming to present a whole rather than a part, and of [addressing] itself to the whole [person]".

C. Art Examining the Exploration and Re-statement of Landscape Tradition as "Shared Culture"

Professor Simon Schama, in his seminal cultural history, Landscape and Memory (London 1995), presents an alternative view of whether new myths are required, while nevertheless coming to a positive conclusion about how participants in contemporary culture can positively and actively engage in interpretation in relation to the environment. Writing about environmental history, Schama says:

> " Once the archaic cosmology in which the whole earth was held to be sacred, and man but a single link in the long chain of creation, was broken, it was all over, give or take a few millennia. Ancient Mesopotamia, all unknowing, begat global warming. What we need, says one...impassioned critic, Max Oelschlaeger, are new 'creation myths' to repair the damage done by our recklessly mechanical abuse of nature and to restore the balance between man and the rest of the organisms with which he shares the planet.
>
> "It is not to deny the seriousness of our ecological predicament, nor to dismiss the urgency with which it needs repair and redress, to wonder whether, in fact, a new set of myths are what the doctor should order as a cure for our ills. What about the old ones? For notwithstanding the assumption, commonly asserted in these texts, that Western culture has evolved by sloughing off its nature myths, they have, in fact, never gone away. For if, as we have seen, our entire landscape tradition is the product of shared culture, it is by the same token a tradition built from a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions. The cults which we are told to seek in other native cultures—of the primitive forest, of the river of life, of the sacred mountain—are in fact alive and well and all about us if only we know where to look for them. And that is what Landscape and Memory tries to be: a way of looking; of rediscovering what we already have, but which somehow eludes our recognition and our appreciation. Instead of being yet another explanation of what we have lost, it is an exploration of what we may yet find.
>
> "In offering this alternative way of looking, I am aware that more is at stake than an academic quibble. For if the entire history of landscape in the West is indeed just a mindless race toward a machine-driven universe, uncomplicated by myth, metaphor, and allegory, where measurement, not memory, is the absolute arbiter of value, where our ingenuity is our tragedy, then we are indeed trapped in the engine of our self-destruction.
>
> "At the heart of this book is the stubborn belief that this is not, in fact, the whole story. The conviction is not born from any wishful thinking about our past or our prospects. For what it is worth, I unequivocally share the dismay at the ongoing degradation of the planet, and much of the foreboding about the possibilities of its restoration to good health.

> "The point of [my work] is not to contest the reality of this crisis. It is, rather, by revealing the richness, antiquity, and complexity of our landscape tradition, to show just how much we stand to lose. Instead of assuming the mutually exclusive character of Western culture and nature, I want to suggest the strength of the links that have bound them together. That strength is often hidden beneath layers of the commonplace. So [my work] is constructed as an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface..." (Ibid., pp. 13 – 14).

Schama obviously differs markedly from Gablik in his assessment of whether the contemporary community needs new myths which emphasise environmental and social sustainability or rather merely needs to fully understand the multiplicity of the old. Nevertheless, Schama's words reinforce the positive role which artists and craftspeople can actively be invited to play in the interpretation of sites and environments. To use Tilden's words again, that role lies in revealing the "larger truths behind" and expanding the mere curiosity of visitors to encompass "the enrichment of the human mind and spirit". Schama also endorses another of Tilden's key principles of interpretation in emphasising the exploration of and connection with what each viewer or visitor brings to a landscape environment, saying:

> "For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock (Ibid).

In defining the role of contemporary art and craft in the ANBG in support of the Gardens' mission and role, the Master Plan's intention is that artists should be offered commissions which invite both the exploration of new myths or resonant metaphors relating to sustainability and biodiversity appropriate to our time, as well as the investigation and "remembering" of the richness of the 'landscape of the mind' of our pluralist cultures which visitors bring to the Gardens in its studying, growing, and promoting of Australian plants.

D. Art as Exploring Public Understanding of Co-Adaptation, Environmental Sustainability, and Custodianship in Australia

In view of the mission of the Gardens described in the ANBG Draft Plan of Management quoted above, what are some of the new "myths" or cultural truths which the Art Program of the Gardens should ask artists to explore, address, and present to visitors and staff alike? Dr. Timothy Flannery's The Future Eaters (Melbourne 1994) proposes multiple essential issues closely related to the views of Tilden, Gablik, and Schama:

> "[A] most vital change is occurring in Australia. It is a growing realisation of the way in which nature works there. For biologists are finally understanding that evolution in Australia is not driven solely by nature 'red in tooth and claw'. Here, a more gentle force—that of coadaptation—is important. This is because harsh conditions force individuals to cooperate to minimise the loss of nutrients, and to keep them cycling through the ecosystem as rapidly as possible. Thus, entire ecosystems have evolved in Australia that, when untampered with, recycle energy and nutrients in the most extraordinarily efficient ways. Aboriginal people have long understood this and have shaped their culture accordingly

> "I...argue that these changes to our world view are an early, yet crucial step in the process of adaptation of an essentially European people to life in Australasia... Through...personal experience I have learned how important histories are to people, including myself. They define our place in the world and validate our claims to inheritance, both individual and national. The radically changed world view that many Australians possess today means that Australians can now define themselves through things that are uniquely Australian.

> "...Australians are caretakers of a disproportionately large share of the world's biological riches and Australia is a land which tolerates few mistakes. If Australians do not possess a culture which values these things, they will be lost to the world" (Ibid., pp. 15-16).

Flannery's last two sentences quoted above and the following quotation can virtually serve as the substance and focus of the entire ANBG Art Program, describing in detail what the task of commissioned artists and craftspeople centres upon:

> "It is ignorance of the past that dooms each new wave of immigrants to the 'new' lands to be future eaters. So certain are they of their superiority; so sure of their ability, that they do not think to learn from those who have gone before them, nor do they take the time to read the signs of the land until disaster has overtaken them. We, perhaps, are the first generation of future eaters who have looked over our shoulder at the past, but we have done so quite late in the process of environmental destruction. If we can change our ways before we have consumed all of the future that we are capable of, then we will have achieved something very precious.
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> "It is true that the most recent immigrants are slowly being shaped by their new homes, but like Aborigine and Maori before them, the process is costing dearly in terms of biodiversity and sustainability. This, in turn, is severely limiting the future for their children. More than 60 years ago, Sir Keith Hancock wrote in his great work Australia:
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> > 'When it suits them, men may take control and play fine tricks and hustle Nature. Yet we may believe that Australia, quietly and imperceptibly..., is experimenting on the men... She will be satisfied at long last, and when she is satisfied an Australian nation will in truth exist'.
>
> "If Australasians are happy to progress towards adaptation at the imperceptible pace of change at which evolution proceeds, it will be a long time indeed before an Australian or a New Zealand nation will in truth exist. But humans are different from all other creatures. We can think, understand, and act to make our lives better. Yet despite all of our advantages—our technology and our intellect—we seem to have made as disastrous a series of mistakes as any other species. Even now, we seem to be seeing only the very first glimmer of the change that Sir Keith foretold. For the moment, I hope that Australasians one and all will begin to ask the right questions. For this is the first, necessarily wobbly step on the road to discovering what it means to be custodians of the wonderful and enigmatic 'new' lands..." (Ibid., 405-406).

These seminal ideas expressed by Tilden, Brand, Gablik, Schama, and Flannery are intended to form the conceptual basis of the "typologies" for commissions under the Gardens' Master Plan, and are described in detail in the next section of this document.