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Entertainment

The art of building in red, white and blue, one brick at a time

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Block party: Artists Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro piece together a Lego work of art in their Blackheath studio. *Photo: Rachel Murdolo*

Colourful. Ubiquitous. Painful underfoot. Lego is an established presence in most households with children. Now, as artists explore the possibilities of these toy building bricks, galleries and museums are taking on a distinctly playful look.

This week, Blue Mountains-based artists Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro are shipping a large-scale work made from Lego to New York gallery Garis and Hahn in time for May's Frieze Art Fair. The diptych is the latest in a series of works depicting the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster.

"We chose Lego as the medium because it creates a pixellated look similar to the pixellated images we saw on TV back then, and now on the internet," Healy says.



Thom Blake, 6, with his brother Bill, 8, at the Sherman Gallery in Paddington surrounded by 60,000 pieces of white Lego as they work on their creations. *Photo: Dallas Kilponen*

"It's also a symbol of childhood. It links in with the idea of Christa McAuliffe [the civilian school teacher aboard Challenger] working with her class of children."

In May, Healy and Cordeiro will begin a year-long residency making native animals out of Lego at Rimbun Dahan, near Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia.

Both say they suffer from sore fingers after hours of pressing bits of plastic together. "We get RSI," laughs Cordeiro, "but the main downside is the cost. Lego is very expensive as a medium."



The largest ever LEGO model of Rome's famous Colosseum is now on exhibition at the Nicholson Museum.

Working with Lego does not make Healy and Cordeiro "Lego artists", however. "For us, we come up with the concept first and then think about the medium," Healy says. "Lego has been great to work with. It's just so pleasurable. People love the colours. I love the blue. We ended up having to raid our son's collection because we ran out of blue bits."

Colour isn't an issue at Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation in Paddington, where 133,500 Lego bricks lie scattered across a long table waiting for visitors to come in and start building a cityscape.

"All the Lego is pure white," gallerist Gene Sherman says. "It sparkles, it is so white!"

Olafur Elisasson's *The cubic structural evolution project*, was first exhibited by the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in 2009 and later bought by Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art. Sherman has borrowed the concept from GOMA but bought the Lego bricks from Denmark to avoid "cleaning every single tiny piece".

"Adults seem to enjoy Lego as much as children," Sherman says.

When Michael Turner, curator of Sydney University's Nicholson Museum, commissioned the world's largest Lego Colosseum, he never imagined it would attract more than 70,000 visitors.

The concept of "modelling the ancient world" has been so successful the Nicholson Museum has commissioned a Lego Acropolis (to be revealed in July) and a Lego Pompeii for show in 2014.

"In the 18th century, cork was the modelling material of choice for ancient buildings in museums," Turner says. "In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was plaster of Paris. Today, whatever traditionalists might think, it's Lego."

The Cubic Structural Evolution Project, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Paddington, until April 27; Lego Colosseum, Nicholson Museum, Sydney University, until June.

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