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The man behind the water walls

STEPHEN BEVIS, The West Australian
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Danish artist Jeppe Hein at the opening of Water Labyrinth.

What Jeppe Hein can do with smoke, mirrors and water would put any fairground magician to shame. The Danish artist brings a sense of carnival playfulness into high-art institutions and the often austere open city squares to unlock people's potential to engage more comprehensively with both public realms and with each other.

Hein left Perth yesterday after a short visit to attend the opening of his first permanent public artwork in Australia, a \$1.3 million interactive water feature installed as the centrepiece of the City of Perth's \$36 million Forrest Place redevelopment.

Water Labyrinth is a 12m x 12m series of nine "rooms" created by jets of recycled water that shoot into the air and disappear as quickly as they emerge. It was an instant hit when turned on last Friday, drawing businessmen, bikers and mums with babies into its drenching vortex.

It seems a model example of a location, once considered hot, sterile and unwelcoming, blessed with the perfect match of a public artwork that enlivens the area, breaks down barriers between people and redefines perceptions of the cityscape in which it sits.

The 38-year-old Hein studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Art and the Stadschule in Frankfurt. His work has been displayed at the Venice Biennale, the Pompidou Centre, Tate Modern and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Based in Berlin for the past few years, Hein is one of the world's foremost artists but he insists that art with a capital A is far less important to him than communication. The spouting water "pavilion" outside the GPO is the latest in a long series of humorous Hein works which spring from the formal simplicity of 1970s conceptual art and minimalism, but really seem to come alive when people interact with them.

Seats that emit plumes of smoke or break into jitters as someone sits down; spiralling mirrored labyrinths; "dysfunctional" roller coaster-like park benches; light sculptures powered by cyclists; fountains crowned by fireballs. Hein's interactive works playfully remind viewers of their vital role in activating art's communicative power.

Two years ago, a smaller version of the Forrest Place aquatic pavilion was installed outside the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, which hosted an exhibition of Hein's gallery artworks during the Perth Festival.

"I see my artwork as a tool for communication and dialogue," he says. "In this situation, if the water is turned off, you have just a square - there is nothing else and not a lot of people. But suddenly if you turn it on, you are activating the area and making an energy point but only because people are using that energy. People are drawn to the water and begin to experience other people. It is really important."

This blend of fun and seriousness of purpose, as well as the blurring between architecture and sculpture, is typical of Hein's work.

His Modified Social Benches series of whimsical, seemingly impractical benches, for example, are a reaction to the removal of seating from big cities to discourage people from remaining too long in one place.

"Public spaces are becoming less and less public," he says. "My benches introduce happiness and fun but you can still use them as a functional bench in a way."

Like James Angus' neighbouring Forrest Place sculpture Grow Your Own ("The Cactus") and Geoffrey Drake-Brockman's new Perth Arena artwork Totem ("The Perth Pineapple"), Hein hopes Water Pavilion will soon earn its own nickname.

"I am almost trying not to say a name because it will come. People will find a name for it. It is theirs now. It is not mine. It is called the Water Labyrinth but I hope it will be known as something else, like the Cactus and the Pineapple. That is nice. It is the biggest dream for an artist to create that kind of energy."

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Jeppe Hein

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