



Urban Jungle

BY DIONE VAN-HEER

Occupying a space on ActewAGL House's ground floor is a forest of lights. Or perhaps it's the colossal ribcage of some long-forgotten monster. They could be giant new shoots springing from cavities in the tiles.

The truth is, like most good abstract sculptures, the art installation that ActewAGL commissioned artist Robert Foster to create, will take on a different form according to the viewers' perceptions.

On the importance of art in urban sprawl, Foster said this "universality" is key to creating a public work of art that will stand the test of time.

"Something that appeals or challenges the general audience and something that people feel like, as a public work, it's a valuable contribution to the landscape," he said.

"Something that maybe they haven't seen before or maybe, something that evokes some sort of emotion or response in them, that adds value to their lives."

Each of the 37 'ossolites', as Foster calls them, are objects of similar shape, individually cast in carefully considered angles, heights and spacing

and constructed in a German-made plexiglass with special light-diffusing properties. From a soft glow of warm and cold whites, to the undulating show of colours, they're programmed to glow with sequences premeditated to suit the light and mood of the time of day. Each light sequence lasts an hour and there are motion-sensors to set off sequences that are more short and intense.

"I've programmed it to invoke lots of different emotions and connotations – like rain, clouds with lightning, forest fires," Foster said.

"There's a morning and evening sequence. The morning sequence starts in the east and it's blue and then there's a little bit of dull red that starts at the bottom. Then the red sort of pushes the blue out as it progresses through the sculpture. Then in the evening it's basically the opposite – like a sunset."

According to Foster, there's absolutely nothing like it in the world – not just because of the original intellectual property that went into its design or the innovative light technology, but also because of its energy-efficiency. Each ossolite contains twelve different channels of light colour – six for the tip and

six for the base. If every colour were turned on, each one would pull 300w – a total of 11,100w or the equivalent of a couple of bar heaters.

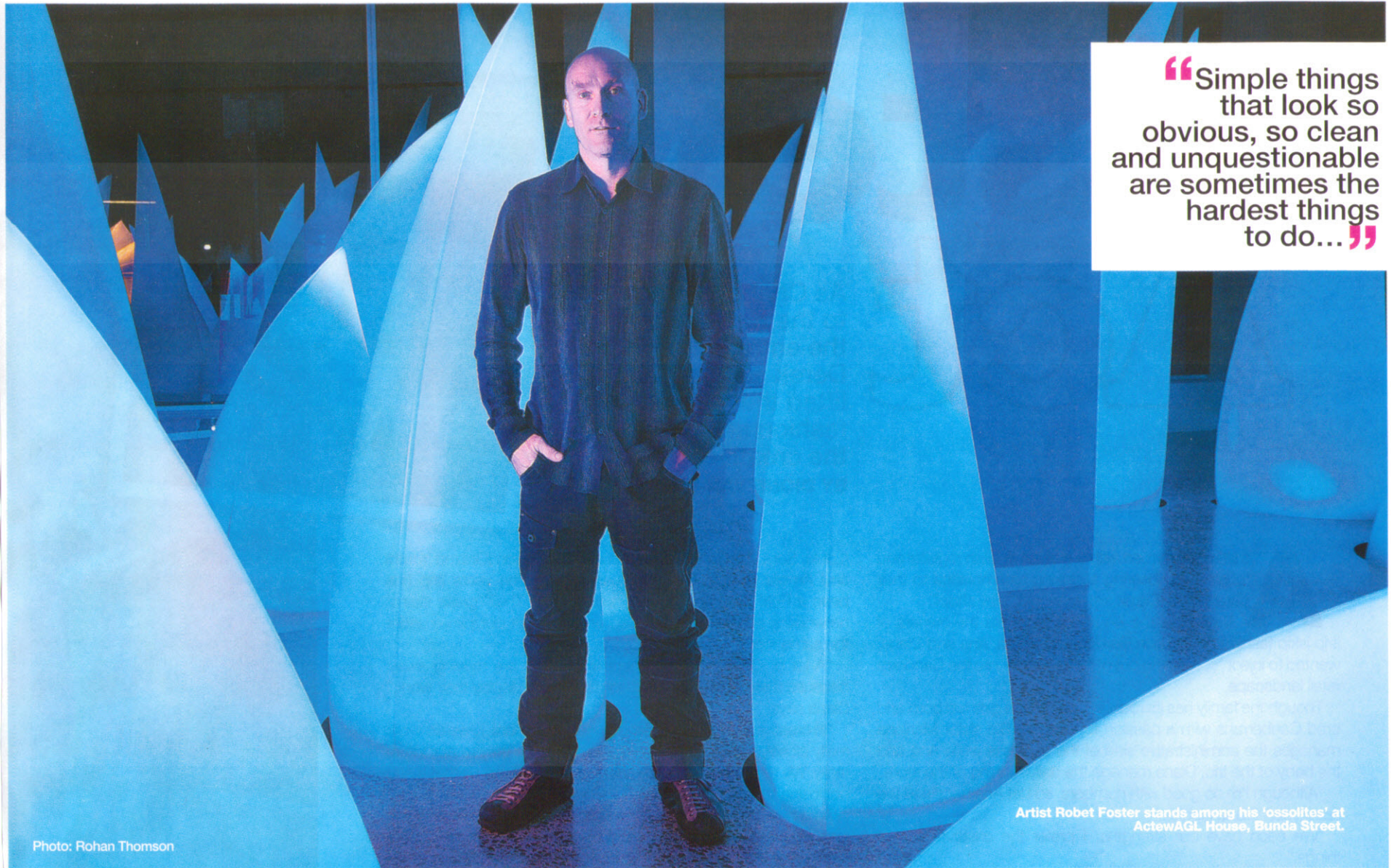
"But it's really only running on probably about a sixth of that, so it uses virtually no energy and the lights in them will last 15 years," Foster said.

If you were to slice one of Foster's ossolites in half, there's no telling what its insides would reveal. Nor would Foster divulge the secret, though he did add; "It's very tricky to get such a beautiful and soft transition of colour between the top and the bottom... Simple things that look so obvious, so clean and unquestionable are sometimes the hardest things to do... but there's got to be no question about how it looks because it's all resolved behind the scenes."

The intention is that this sculpture will be a new attraction to Canberra's public art landscape.

"The concept is that if you're going to the national gallery or the national museum, don't forget to go down and have a coffee in Civic and see the ossolites at Actew," Foster said.

"There's nothing else like this in the world."



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Photo: Rohan Thomson

Artist Robert Foster stands among his 'ossolites' at ActewAGL House, Bunda Street.