

Andy Plummer's glass eye



Andy Plummer in his custom-built Sydney glass studio. Photo: Nic Walker

You might think Andy Plummer had taken enough risks in his life. The mining engineer and financier, who helped steer Peabody Energy Corporation's \$2 billion takeover of Australian miner Excel Coal in 2006, has spent more than 35 years in the mining sector, including as a director of Whitehaven Coal.

But the biggest punt of his life is still ahead of him. American-born Plummer, who retired from corporate life in 2012 and is now a non-executive director with Malabar Coal, spends much of his working week in a glass studio he built on an industrial lot on Sydney's northern beaches. Specialising in cold work – cutting, grinding and polishing rather than blowing glass – he is working towards his first exhibition, to be held at Sydney's Sabbia Gallery in August 2015.

"The work I'm doing is all about boundaries, challenging yourself to get past them," says Plummer. "The whole process has no meaning unless I actually take the chance of exposing myself to criticism."

The self-professed creative thinker grew up wanting to be an artist but family tradition – his engineer grandfather led construction of America's interstate highway network – compelled him to enrol at the Colorado School of the Mines.

It was not until the 1980s that Plummer took himself off to weekend classes in glass at the College of Fine Arts in Sydney. The connection was instant. "I had forgotten about that kind of task which just makes you lose yourself completely. No matter how long I had been in there, it always felt like five minutes."

In 1994 he founded Australia's first acquisitive prize for contemporary glass art, the Ranamok Prize, which will close next year after a 20-year run. Back in the days when Plummer was working at the Resource Finance Corporation, he managed to convince his peers on the board to sponsor the prize. "It was a funny thing to do at the time, but it helped to brand the business in a very crowded field. It was a way to say that as a group, we thought about things differently."

The racing-series Porsche sitting in the driveway hints at the opportunities his career afforded him. "I have no regrets. I enjoyed my career immensely and the reality is none of this would have been possible without it."

The work that has most influenced him is by American "outsider" artist James Hampton. A janitor from Washington DC, Hampton created an elaborate throne from tin foil, broken lightbulbs and other household detritus. It is now in the Smithsonian. "This thing just stopped me in my tracks. It was the doggedness, and the infallibility that he knew he was right ... it resonated with me," says Plummer. Two words feature above the throne: Fear Not. They gave Plummer strength when moving into his purpose-built studio. What he made of his shiny new resource was up to him. "It was a frightening, really scary moment."

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