

## ***Public Powwow*** by Tiarney Miekus



Simon Perry, *The Public Purse*, 1994. Calca red granite, stainless steel. Commissioned through the City of Melbourne Percent for Art Program, 1994 City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection, Cnr Bourke St Mall and Elizabeth St, Melbourne. Photo: Patrick Rodriguez

Mistaking giant purses for clams are the kinds of absurd confusions that public art (perhaps any art, really) can lead us toward. It's reassuring however that I'm not the only one. After some online investigation I found that Clarissa Y, Kathy L, Alexa and Matty, among others, had each mixed up clams and purses. Yet this is only the mere surface; *The Public Purse's* online history and context, the anecdotes told and the claims insisted upon, is another world altogether. It has a Yelp page (rated 4.5 stars), is featured on 4-square, curated into Pinterest boards, consistently hash-tagged on Instagram, posted on Facebook and forms the basis for many blog posts.

The obvious enjoyment of *The Public Purse* seems to hinge on its ability to be both seating and sculpture. As Instagram user lmaheart4 comments, "Gotta [sic] love art that looks great & is practical (& that I take as a 'sign' that I should go back and buy that bag I was looking at ;))". Others just seem impressed by its realism, such as this Facebook commenter: "It really does just look like a giant purse!"

What's interesting is how, for some, *The Public Purse's* practicality and exactness actually makes it *greater than* aesthetic experience. See [this blog post](#): "*Public Purse* has transcended from being merely a piece of art to being a significant landmark; its smooth marble flanks serving as meeting point for friends or resting place for weary shoppers." Many social media posts agree that the purse functions as a well-known meeting point.

For Hels, who [commented on a blog post on public art](#), this type of popularity is the ultimate pursuit. She writes, “Melbournians almost always say ‘meet you under the clocks’, meaning at the entrance to Flinders St railway station. Imagine if a sculpture became well enough known to say ‘meet you at the purse’ and people nodded knowingly.” This indeed is what has happened. For blogger [Melbournian Girl](#), like so many others, it is a “meeting rendezvous”. There is fanciful merit in this: in Brisbane, where I’m from, we just say, “Let’s meet outside Hungry Jacks.”

Merely being practical however, would be boring: *The Public Purse* is a punch line. There are plenty of photos of people faux-stealing the purse or attempting to pry apart its clips to reap the rewards. Many sentiments are humorous in their combination of levity and personal desire, such as this anecdote from Mat O: “I used to work in a very busy restaurant near here. Many a day I wanted to open it up and climb inside to hide!” Other people take photos of the purse with captions like, “Scuse me ma’am, you dropped your purse” or “Can we go shopping with this?” or “Time to hit the shops in Melbourne!” or “Got money?”

While a sense of irony underlies all of this humour (we all know the purse is not really a purse, it can’t be opened, it’s empty, there’s no money), there is little comment on the irony of the work’s placement or how it functions as a visualisation of the very mechanism that paid for its existence (although we should remember we only say something is paid for by ‘the public purse’ when we *don’t* like it). Instead *Public Purse* appears to have a rather congenial – almost sympathetic – relationship with its surroundings. As one writer on Wordpress blog [Melbourne Public Art](#) puts it: “This public seating can be located anywhere in the retail district without ever looking out of place.” The photos and sentiments featuring the purse almost always show a relationship that is perfectly reflexive and never troubled. In fact, rather than being an ironic statement on things like commercialism or the nature of public art, *Public Purse* is often seen as a tribute to, and affirmation of, prosperity and abundance. The tone is money, but it’s familiar. It’s taken as promise without burden.

Surely the ability to interact with *Public Purse* in a variety of ways is part of its ongoing popularity. All manner of photos have been taken of *Public Purse*; people sitting on it, kissing on it, straddling it, faux-pushing it, skateboarding over it and, my favourite, a woman kneeling on the purse while dressed as a unicorn. There are pictures of young women sitting on the sculpture, with affirmative text superimposed on the steps behind them. This text reads things like, “Life is too short to wait.” There are pictures of people in suits surrounding the purse with hashtags such as #bankers #publicpurse #money #getrichdietrying.

*The Public Purse* is often called ‘popular’, ‘well-known’ and ‘much-loved’ and its sentimental attractiveness has accumulated over the last 23 years. I think of Sharadara and her vertically split before-and-now picture, where she’s perched on the purse in 1994 as a child, and then in 2013 as an adult. Others share this nostalgic connection: “It’s been there as long as I remember too! My Dad used to let me play on it when I was little also! Very special!”

Yet the purse was dealt a new context in 2016, captured by Instagram user jennifercljin who links the sculpture to Bourke St car attack that claimed six lives: “While the popular sculpture used to have tourists sitting on it for pictures and young locals using it as a gathering point, today I saw a man sadly sitting on it, looking at all the flowers for the victims, and sighing.” There are many affective posts on the *Public Purse*, most of which deal with the affirmation, and the betrayal, of human imagination and potential.

From all of the purse’s online profile, it’s one user on Yelp who particularly captures me. The review begins, “This purse helped me manifest my desire and fulfil one of my dreams from leaving Sydney and re-locating to Melbourne earlier this year.” She continues, “At 9:30pm on a Thursday night (so hungover from all the champagne) I sat on this purse with three pandora bags in tow (a goodies bag, a bag with a ring purchase from Pandora at Melbourne’s GPO and a bag with a piece of jewellery won as a lucky door prize I won at a party I was invited to for fashion month at Melbourne’s GPO) and yet this purse was too good to leave. The love of money is the root of all evil; yet the love of an image that symbolises prosperity is a great love...”

There’s no doubt that these thoughts and pleasures can easily be argued with. Often the difficult task is to engage with what we don’t always easily appreciate: the sentiments of everyone else. Yet it’s interesting that out of the hundreds of social media posts and blog entries that I came across, only one of them actually

questioned if what we were looking at could be called 'art'. The public powwow on *Public Purse* doesn't care for this debate. Instead the interests and attachments lie elsewhere: personal inspiration, hope, usefulness, nostalgia, desire, functionality, realism, social mobility, purposefulness, sincerity, candid humour and self-actualisation. Some would simply ride off these reactions as schmaltz and mawkishness, but that only makes sense to those who look towards art for the opposite of sentiment, who think it's all tied up in transgression and subversion. Instead *Public Purse* and its viewing public have different things to say; things that consist of practicality, popularity and pleasure.

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The Public Purse – [citycollection.melbourne.vic.gov.au/the-public-purse](http://citycollection.melbourne.vic.gov.au/the-public-purse)

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