

**W**ATER'S so varied. You can go from a tiny gossamer droplet to a torrential flooding river; a molecule to a huge ocean or a wave breaking on the shore. What I'm doing is using water and playing with its properties."

It does seem an odd coincidence that it's raining, bucketing down, in fact, as I'm talking to Jennifer Turpin. Turpin is a water artist.

"Initially, I was involved a lot with giving form to water which is a particularly sculptural approach. Water doesn't take a shape till you define it and there are so many ways of doing that. You can give water shape by creating a big pool. It's also shaped by those fine nylon threads in the *Water Works* series, instead of just being amorphous like the rain, the form and fall is actually directed."

*Water Works III*, shown in Australian Perspecta 1991 at the Art Gallery of NSW, is probably the best-known of the series. Turpin's two sculptures were installed in the curved niches at either end of the entrance to the art gallery. In one, the invisible, angled threads directed shafts of water to a central pool; while in the other two fluid curtains wrapped around and across the niche, veiling the solid sandstone with water.

"The water fell very slowly and very silently in tiny droplets. Because the drops were going so slowly a lot of people actually thought the water was flowing up, it had a floating feeling.

"The works provided a space for the viewer to embark on their own imaginative experiences."

Turpin's first water piece, *Shifting Ground*, 1988, was inspired by the tide. It was part of a students' exhibition held at Pier 2/3, Walsh Bay, in her final

year at the Sydney College of the Arts. "Ladders, old chairs and a lift cage were attached via pulleys to a cable that eventually went through the floor of the building to a floating 44-gallon drum loosely secured in the harbour - tying the drum off from a little dinky under the wharf on a cold day was quite a hairy experience. The way the harbour moved was then reflected and amplified by the concertina-like movement of the objects in the sculpture. You were made doubly aware that you were standing on water.

"The fun part of working with water is the more you learn what water can do, the more you can play around with it. But if you're not in tune with water, it won't work - if you make it go too quickly down an aperture that's too small, it will

in both Fine and Visual Arts). I've learnt a huge amount along the way. I've been given lots of advice, especially from my father, who's an engineer.

"The *Water Works* series were built in a studio I used to have at Leichhardt. It was like a little hydraulics laboratory. My father helped with the copper work and plumbing fabrication. The more recent permanent installations, like the one at the new International Airport Brisbane [a 13-metre high installation of water jetting from cone-shaped vessels], which is all stainless steel, after a series of prototypes that I did with Sydney Fountains, was fabricated by a professional stainless steel workshop, Fulham Fabrications. There always has to be a prototype stage when you're working with water, because unless

commissioned by the hospital for a courtyard near Intensive Care, is more contemplative. A perforated brass screen divides an elliptical pool in which ridges cause standing waves to pattern the surface.

"It was seeing some little standing waves at Clovelly that inspired it. The *Water Works* series came about more through experimentation. If you've got the time and the focus to be able to pick up on chance events, it's fabulous because you're discovering as you go."

Turpin and artist Michaelie Crawford are working on *Restoring The Waters*, an Australian Conservation Foundation project to do with the restoration of a natural creek at Fairfield that was channelled through concrete 20 years ago. Turpin and Crawford have come up with a concept called the *Memory Line*, a "sculptural pathway" that will follow the exact course of the original creek rather than the, of necessity, restricted meander of the restored creek. It's the most "directly environmental" of Turpin's work to date.

"I'm interested now in how our culture can be enriched by a better understanding of a natural environment. Our cultural understanding of water has changed. Since the Industrial Revolution, water has been seen as a domestic necessity manifested in sewers and bathrooms. Water has lost its religious and spiritual force. Something that was much more poetic has been reduced to being utilitarian. Working with water, I'm reinterpreting a natural phenomenon so people can delight in it anew - as they might have done discovering it as a child."

**Jennifer Turpin . . . and water sculpture she designed for Westmead Children's Hospital.**

Photograph by SAHLAN HAYES

## CREATIVE SPIRIT

MEG STEWART

### JENNIFER TURPIN

Sculptor

overflow. You can give it movement, speed, texture. You can create a textured surface, allow water to flow over it and it will form itself in interesting eddies and ripples and formations depending on how you've directed it. Lots of cultures have experimented with this already. The Islamic culture is the best example. They've done incredibly beautiful things, sending water down over sloped surfaces.

"It's really important to understand about plumbing. I love all that. I wish that I'd done a hydraulics degree or a plumbing degree instead of Fine Arts (Turpin has degrees

you're repeating something specific, you don't quite know how it's going to behave."

Turpin's work is not without humour. In 1993/94, she was commissioned to design a floating walkway for Luna Park. Turpin's Footbridge began with a pair of pink legs waving in the air and ended with grasping hands. Sadly, it went no further than a model and a cabinet full of plans and correspondence. *Drawers of Water*, purchased by the new Children's Hospital, Westmead, displays a similar whimsy with water tumbling down an elongated Alice in Wonderland chest of drawers. *Well*, a work

