

# Ricky Swallow

b.1974

Bachelor of Fine Arts (Drawing): Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Australia

Ricky Swallow is an artist, who has become internationally recognised for his painstakingly crafted works, particularly those carved from wood. He was the Australian representative at the 2005 Venice Biennale, which was pretty extraordinary given that he was only 30 years old.

Swallow's art has elements of 'geek chic' and 'street smarts' to it. He constructs elaborate miniatures and models that relate to popular and contemporary urban culture. Turntables, scuffed sneakers, Darth Vader's helmet and BMX bikes are sculpted with obsessive precision. Much of his work riffs on 17th century art, *memento mori* (Latin for remember you will die) paintings of skulls, hour glasses and dying flowers. This is reflected in his *iMan Prototypes* (imitation Apple Macs in the shape of human skulls); *Come Together* (a skull in a hoodie carved from wood); and the crustaceans and crabs of *This Time Another Year* that evoke the golden age of Dutch still life painting.

Made in 1996, *Blanket Shark* is a smooth fusion of personal and art historical references. We look at this sculpture and can think of 'Young British Artist', Damien Hirst, (a near contemporary of Swallow, born in 1965, and the über-cool of edgy emerging art in the 1990s) and his infamous artwork *The Physical Impossibility Of Death In The Mind of Someone Living* (1991) – a tiger shark pickled in a big glass display box full of formaldehyde. Hirst is trying to suggest a metaphor for the way life and memory interact.

So is Swallow. His shark, made from a cuddly and comforting blanket, is a reference to going fishing with his father (a shark fisherman in Victoria), and the spotted Wobbegong carpet sharks which his dad used to catch. Swallow has said that he is interested in making objects that represent desires – in this case, nostalgia for the past – and this personal knowledge about Swallow adds to our understanding of the sculpture.

There is a funny contradiction in making a model of 'Jaws' (the killing machine lurking hidden in the deep, all sharp teeth like knives, and sandpaper skin) out of something as soft and

cuddly as a blanket, which most people associate with comfort and reassurance rather than terror. Swallow doesn't associate sharks with terror, but with his father. We all have our own personal symbols and associations unique to us that would not be obvious to someone on the outside, and artists often make use of this private language in their work. Sometimes it means the viewer has to work a bit harder to fish for the meaning in a work.

Swallow's shark is an accurately observed and formed model of a hammerhead shark – instantly recognisable even in plaid. As curator, David Jaffe said of Swallow's Venice Biennale installation: "The magic of Ricky is how he can track a fish fin or the seam of a beanbag to animate the forms, to communicate with us. He changes our relationship with the everyday and so enriches us".

## Andrew Paul Wood

### Artist website:

[www.rickyswallow.com](http://www.rickyswallow.com)

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)

[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)

[www.darrenknightgallery.com](http://www.darrenknightgallery.com)

[www.govettbrewster.com](http://www.govettbrewster.com)

### Web search:

Damien Hirst

