

Mari Funaki works 1992 - 2009

Foreword

Dr Stefano Carboni DIRECTOR. ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Over the last two decades, Mari Funaki has produced some of Australia's (and, indeed, the world's) most uniquely compelling jewellery and small objects. Given this, it is important to emphasise that Funaki's exceptionally evocative and finely made steel and gold works are so much more than decorative items: they are a form of (sometimes) wearable art and sculpture that show what is possible when the imagination truly finds its perfect form. Funaki's precise achievement is the way her work expressively encapsulates an enigmatic response to modernity in concert with the darkest mysteries of nature. It is because of these qualities that we are proud to be offering the first major State Gallery exhibition of the work of Mari Funaki in this country.

I would like to warmly thank Mari for her commitment to this project which has enriched our understanding of her work at the Gallery. The uncompromising eye for detail that has made her work so successful has been applied to every component of this show, and has, in fact, been its foundation. Thanks are also due to Katie Scott at Gallery Funaki for assisting us in sourcing many of the works. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all those who have lent works to the exhibition, in particular the private individuals who are loaning cherished personal items, including, in one case, a wedding ring!

I am also pleased to have the opportunity to acknowledge and thank Dr Tim Jeffery for his continued commitment to design through the Peter Fogarty Design Fund. It was through this fund that we first acquired Funaki's work for our permanent collection. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the Gallery staff whose professionalism has ensured the success of this fine exhibition.





Object 2009 heat-coloured mild steel $9.5 \times 71.0 \times 5.0 \text{ cm}$ Collection: Mari Funaki



Keeping the secret's secret

In his Japanese traveloque-come-structuralist's 'big day out' Empire of signs, the late French literary theorist Roland Barthes explored his and the Japanese fascination with the artful play of form. Just one of the arenas he was particularly captivated by - in addition, famously, to pachinko - was the tradition of packaging. In relation to this, Barthes wrote that: 'by its very perfection, the envelope, often repeated - you can be unwrapping a package forever - postpones the discovery of the object it contains. The object itself is often less significant, for it is precisely a speciality of the Japanese package that the triviality of the thing is disproportionate to the luxury of the envelope ... it is as if then, the box were the object of the gift, not what it contains'[1]. As is now well known, the purpose of such boxing and wrapping is not to hide a surprise but to prolong the process of unfolding and the surprise itself. The very notion of the gift, therefore, must be understood as a theatrical interplay of outside and inside that comes into being through the act of unveiling and, importantly, its deferral.

It may seem clichéd to open an essay about the work of Japanese-born, Melbourne-based Mari Funaki in such a fashion, but it is apt nonetheless. Her work is small-scale (sometimes wearable) sculpture that circles and embodies the generative energy of the secret and the enigma. So, though her objects are immediately recognisable (iconic of themselves perhaps) they give nothing away easily or simply. Instead, Funaki makes objects to be found and not to be found. The

work, hinting at a secret it might contain, holds some indefinable yet palpable thing in reserve and this reserve is the location of an intense imaginative power.

These qualities, combined with a striking formal ability and eye, have seen Funaki establish herself as one of Australia's most significant iewellers and artists. Her oeuvre is one of incredible, possibly unmatched, vision and precision as she works in the form of rings, bracelets, containers, objects and, less often, brooches. While ostensibly crisp and rather formal in feel, there is also a profound darkness in her work as it appears both animal- and architecture-like in its continual organic/ inorganic formation and re-formation. In addition to these complicated dynamics, Funaki's work as a 'body of work' achieves its power thanks to its consistency. There have been no phases as such, no movements from this type of making to that. The work is perfectly defined from the start. It opens up, contracts from, a position of formal completion, and thereby maintains a boldly definite visual and material language. It speaks of the maturity of Funaki's work and outlook as well as the confidence in, and of, her art.

Born in 1950 in Matsue, Japan, Mari Funaki arrived in Melbourne in 1979 ^[2]. She began her first official art studies in painting, studying at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) from 1981 to 1983. Her style was impressionistic and colourful, but also graphic in nature. Instead of *plein air* scenes, though, she painted indoor scenes - chairs, windows, etc. This

Bracelet 2009 heat-coloured mild steel 4.7 x 9.0 x 7.2 cm Collection: Private Collection

is, she depicted scenes that dealt with the dialogue between closed and open spaces, those very dynamics that would, in different form, be the central focus of her jewellery practice. While she enjoyed painting, she lacked a real drive towards it. As a form for her imagination, it was almost, but not guite right. Following this. Funaki became increasingly aware of the unusual jewellery in Melbourne. It was work that she found as interesting as visual art, and work she felt a direct connection to, thinking that she could maybe make some too. To this end, in late 1987, she enrolled in classes with Viliama Grakalic. It was at this time that she encountered the material that would become her own – steel. The crisp blackness of the material was attractive because of its precise distinction to the more typical Japanese metal of iron that is usually expressive of rusticity as well as being common in weaponry

After her brief period of private study with Grakalic, Funaki enrolled in the Gold & Silversmithing course at RMIT in 1988. It was a very dynamic environment, with a strong awareness of the international significance of contemporary jewellery and object making. In particular, Funaki was tremendously inspired by the staff, most especially such figures as Marian Hosking, Carlier Makigawa and Robert Baines. Early in these studies she was aware of having found something she loved doing. Importantly, the key form her work would take, that of the container, was found in the period between her three year degree and her honours year. During this time, she had gone back to Japan. It was

spring and she was walking in a local park with her nephew who was interested in insects. He picked up a beetle. As Funaki recalls, 'it was so beautiful and I held it in my hand and studied it, moving it around in my fingers'. This was, she felt, 'the three dimensional world, and I suddenly saw it so differently. It was a secret little world. There was so much expression, intricacy and unusual form in the beetle'. This revelation would be the inspiration for some of her most important works from that point on, with even her rings and bracelets able to be traced back to that single, potent moment.

Funaki's epiphany was formally consolidated in her last year at RMIT. Her principal lecturer, Hosking, remembers Mari as the star of an already great year. Funaki was clearly committed - she had found her form and was already making very impressive, resolved works. After graduating, therefore, Funaki was interested in finding places to exhibit her work without compromise. She had always had a very particular idea of how contemporary jewellery should be presented and, at that time, could not find any venues that matched this concept. The only option was to open her own gallery. In 1995, she had settled upon the location in Crossley Street, Melbourne, for Gallery Funaki. The space was already in her mind as she had worked in a restaurant nearby. It was attractive because she liked the idea of someone wandering through a lane and then finding a small 'gem' of a space full of surprises. Its small scale was perfect for

exhibiting jewellery, tucked away like a secret so as to minimise security concerns and remove the necessity to make high sales to cover the rent each week. Gallery Funaki was a space she could afford to make no compromises within; she would only show makers she fully believed in, starting with Australians and slowly adding a select few international makers.

The decision to craft a space she would be happy to sell and show her own work within meant she had to balance gallery commitments and making. Her achievements after opening her space, though, were impressive and recognised when she won the Schmuck Prize (run by the Munich Academy) in 1996 and 1999. Each time she visited Munich she took time to visit the Munich Academy which produces many of the world's best jewellers. Through discussions with major figures such as Otto Künzli, Karl Fritsch and Manon van Kouswijk, she was able to find personal inspiration and gain access to a range of iewellers to exhibit at Gallery Funaki. Such encounters were intense learning experiences. Yet, so was running a gallery as she found herself surrounded by inspiring makers whom she was embedded in conversation with and from whom she learnt a lot from creatively. Being a 'gallerist' was a way, therefore, of extending her education and ensuring she remained as connected to her scene locally and internationally - as she could be.

In this context, Funaki went about her post-study making quietly and determinedly. What is significant,

though, is that she had found her formal niche at university, and the work she would then make would fit within this, evolving slowly and carefully with consideration and nuance. In regards to this, the process of making for Funaki is gradual: instead of working for a show with a theme or set of ideas or forms in mind, she simply continues to make most of the time. Her way of putting this is that she makes 'from object to object'. This occurs through a very loose system of modulation and balance. For instance, a work she considers to have a cold feeling will be followed by one with a warm feeling. Similarly, a sharp work will be followed by a soft one. For her, these are formal and emotional resonances that chart a series of ongoing highs and lows through flickering and subtle relationships that emerge over time. As the works accumulate, the pieces will speak both on their own and to other members of the 'group'. She says 'it all happens by instinct by what feels right at the time and in the making of each piece'.

On a practical level, the works come into being from drawings. She uses ink on paper and sometimes, though less often, ball-point pen. At this stage she will 'circle' the idea for a while, discovering what was/ is significant and coming back to it. If it survives this process it will be committed to three-dimensional actualisation. In the workshop Funaki now uses an assistant to blacken the steel, but other than this very recent development, there is no outsourcing of any of the activities; she prefers to control all aspects of the

making, saying that 'it has to be right, there has to be an appropriateness to the material'.

This material, thin steel, was originally sourced from local building supply shops or scrap metal outlets. Obtaining steel of the correct thinness, though, was very difficult and could not be relied upon. Luckily. she found a supply that suited when travelling back to Japan, and now sources all her steel from Tokyo. She travels there to buy it in A3 and A4 sheets which. back in the studio, she cuts to size with a jeweller's saw. Funaki then assembles the shape, soldering the elements in place. Once the form has been made, she cleans the steel by sandblasting to give it a softened, finely textured surface. She then blackens it with a torch. Under the flame, the steel goes through various colour stages from blue, purple, brown to black. This process requires many attempts in order to get the desired surface finish. Following this, she sprays the piece with machine oil to seal the surface and. finally, applies floor wax to seal further and prevent oxidisation.

The objects that emerge from this careful process capture a sense of dense, rich mystery. The darkness Funaki fashions in her rings, bracelets, containers and objects are physical night times that deepen the body, connecting it to the nocturnal and/or unconscious worlds. So while the works evolve from a prosaic entomological source, they equally seem to come from an inky, ill-defined space that wraps each piece

in an evocatively imaginative shadowy substance. Key to the formal success of each piece is the way it deals with and dissects space. They manipulate the dynamics of balance and repose in a way that is similar to the gestural articulation of a contemporary dancer's movements. Funaki's containers and objects move up from the floor on spindly legs, delicately bent, that do not simply support the torso form but are a sensitive extrusion from that shape. This lends each piece an animism that unsettles stasis. They seem as if they are in a process of movement, shifting from one pose to another. The touch is light as if it is moving across water, balanced on a meniscus that will be punctured by too rapid a movement.

While these qualities unite most pieces, each work has a very particular 'personality'. For instance, Container with lid 1995 (page 23), appears to be a thin sentinel, signalling and protecting itself with its two 'arms'. Object 2008 (page 16), is entirely different. Lethargic in nature, three thin tentacle/legs drag a lumpen body behind it. The weight is pitched down and back, whilst, paradoxically, the momentum lurches forward. Container 2006 (page 21), appears mid yoga pose, while Object 2006 (page 22), reaches out from itself, pushing to the horizon, like a stage-bound actor expressing the ache of wordless existential longing.

Others, of course, indeed the majority of the container and object pieces, deal more specifically with the delicacies of balance itself. In them, the torsos hover above the ground, miraculously supported by pin-like legs, sometimes tucked behind as in *Object* 2009 (page 15). In these, there is a very deliberate juxtaposition of forces. The legs are playful and teasing, maybe pressing how far they can stretch, bend, manoeuvre themselves, before the torso topples to the ground. The torso responds by not responding, by keeping as still as possible. Again, the dance metaphor is pertinent, as the nimble legs seek to express themselves against the burden of the torso they must carry. This is a dance of freedom and its restraint, one that traces the means of mobility specific to a form and then extends these movements as far as possible.

Following this logic, we also see the transformation of form in mid-flight. Container 2008 (page 16), is a good example. In it, two legs drag a torso that is then bent in two, cascading to the ground beyond which is a tail and two blockish forms. This piece is fascinating as the work seems to be half insect and half building structure. The animal is not exactly morphing out of the shape but caught mid-evolution. Here, we see a spirit of animism that is always tentative and never final. The relation of the built to the organic is not one thing or another: it is part of a shifting continuum.

These moments of graceful, lumbering movement imbue the works with a resonant silence. This silence is not simply the absence of sound but an emanation from the objects that blocks out other sounds: it is

an active silence. This quality is due to the perfect matte finish that absorbs all light and accentuates the implied silence and the nuance of the gesture - the light, self-contained nature of it. It is as if the legs and the torso forms are marking a silent territory separate from other beings, a pure private space looked at but never understood or encroached upon. It is a form of personal space in public. This is a protective stance, whereby the hovering form protects something contained underneath it or nearby; it's a poetic and extensive movement dynamically and sensitively connecting the work to the space about it.

As the container is the central form of Funaki's oeuvre it is one that naturally shares qualities with the other modes of her work, as the rings and bracelets explore the terrain of the secret, the loaded coil of the animalcome-mini-monument in expansion and contraction. There are clear connections between the rings and the bracelets as both are based on circular motifs that are pushed and nudged out of the circle itself. Some bracelets are bands that drift around the wrist. while others are composed of modular structures. All. however, anticipate and encroach upon the activity of the wearer, the dangle and bounce of the arm, the lilt of a wrist, the bend of a finger. The tension here is between the monumental and the momentary. And, following the logic established in the containers, this tension forms the basis for, after Alice Munro, what might be called an 'open secret'.

Bracelet 6 2006 (page 28), is one of these open forms. The five segments are delicately balanced together, with an opening where the absent sixth would be. These slabs tilt like a Richard Serra sculpture and evoke a precarious pivot that makes us anticipate its continuation to full, ground-shaking flattening. Bracelet 2006 (page 32), is the end point of this implied movement with the seaments flowering out from the central void. In distinction, Bracelet 2006 (page 33), has double folds and seems like a maze seen from above. It is an enclosure, and feels wall-like, with the space between the layers on the outside becoming a maddeningly foreshortened path with no way out. Bracelet 2009 (page 29), with its more square formations and fold, seems exactly like a box being opened. Others are related not to the torso shape of the containers but to the flow and jitter of the legs. Bracelet 7 2006 (page 28) for instance, is a swirling conglomeration and tangle. It appears to be a frozen tornado, a locked flurry of shapes that holds tight a kind of fury. Bracelet 4 2006 (page 29) though, sees Funaki link the torso shapes and the leg forms together to reach around and form a bracelet shape. Bracelet 2001 (page 30) and *Bracelet* 2004 (page 32) are more reposed, the rhythm of their movement turning a curled circle, a relaxing of the tension held in the other shapes.

The rings extend these formal activities. A point of difference, however, is in their smaller shape and their necessarily less overtly modulated nature. Another

aspect unique to the rings is their material, with most being composed from gold. The use of gold lightens these works, and in a way Funaki's oeuvre in general. Funaki first made gold works for an RMIT project and found she loved the material for its softness and simple, elegant beauty. And for her, the rings open up visually by allowing some element of reflection to assist outward expression. This is important as the smaller scale is already tight and close. The gold (in its white form - made from nickel in combination with yellow gold - as well as its standard gold form) provides an opening, the possibility of space despite the curl and fold that dominate the formations.

Unsurprisingly, the rings are no less dramatic for their relative simplicity of design. Ring 2008 (page 24) and Ring 2008 (page 26), for example, are perfect curving forms, the roll of the gold resembling the symmetrical shavings of a pencil. One thick, the other thin, they arc out the different polarities of the medium. Ring 1997 (page 24) and Ring for one or two fingers 2002 (page 25) are on the more expressive end of the spectrum. The point coming off the square of Ring 1997, and its double side on the opposite end, keeps the process of unfolding alive, and the double ring is about multiplication and the uncanny doubling of itself. These modular units are delicate and sharp, as in motion of folding and unfolding, curling and uncurling; they are rhythmic forms in the continual process of unsettling.

What is also apparent in all of Funaki's objects rings, bracelets, containers - is an engagement with the monumentalism of modern material design as they evoke slabs of glass and concrete and layers of steel. In this, however, their reformations have a subtly vertiginous effect, imaginatively pushing your inner ear off kilter as Funaki's anthropomorphic abstraction transfers energy between segment and segment. As such, there is a slippage between the macro and the micro, a dynamic extenuated by the fact that they are most often presented on clean white surfaces that withhold any makers of comparative scale. It is because of this that the works are freed to function as object mise en scenes that activate 'off-screen' presences and meanings in a way that adds considerably to their imaginative load-bearing capacities.

While the quasi-surreal nature of the objects invite a structured (as opposed to the randomness of free) association, their defining logic is that, as noted above, of the secret. All of the works gesture towards mass and collapse, ravelling and unravelling in such a way as to delimit space and define an unknown interior (even if no interior is visible, or if this interior is the hole for a wrist or a finger). This is loaded, emotionally heightened, because the works are about a kind of union not yet actuated - the union of the secret and its revelation. It speaks of the subjective division itself - the divided self, unknown and unknowable.

What we see in Funaki's work, therefore, is a refusal to reveal all. To put it in the form of a paradox, the depth of Funaki's work has no depth: it is the depth of a black hole, a gap in space, not something to fall into necessarily but something to resist, to struggle against. Funaki offers us a series of physical presences that function as heightened absences, blanks in the shape of the world, three-dimensional negative spaces. In these spaces dwell strange things, things not human, not animal, not building, not jewellery, but all these things, moving between forms and shapes, the shifting mutations of a beetle found by a child, seen and held in spring time, evolved into the radically unknowable, and evolving still.

Robert Cook

Associate Curator of Contemporary Art

Notes

- [1] Barthes, Roland. (1976). *Empire of signs*. Basil Blackwell: Oxford. p.78.
- [2] All biographical details and in-text qoutations are from an interview in Perth at the Art Gallery of Western Australia with Mari Funaki, Marian Hosking and Robert Cook, February 20, 2009.

Containers / Objects

Measurements are in the order of height by width by depth. All object sizes are irregular.



5 containers (left-right: stealth, reverie, poised, arouse, menace) 1997 heat-coloured mild steel

stealth: 19.7 x 37.0 x 3.6 cm reverie: 9.3 x 7.6 x 6.3 cm poised: 41.5 5.0 x 3.5 cm arouse: 13.0 x 3.0 x 3.7 cm

arouse: 13.0 x 3.0 x 3.7 cm menace: 6.2 x 47.0 x 26.0 cm

Collection: Christine and John Collingwood



'Continuum' Container 2003 heat-coloured mild steel 29.2 x 5.0 x 46.0 cm Collection: Peter and Jennifer McMahon Container 2006
heat-coloured mild steel
26.0 x 8.5 x 6.0 cm
Collection: Peter and Jennifer McMahon





Object 2009
heat-coloured mild steel
28.7 x 44.0 x 28.7 cm
Collection: Geoffrey Smith and Gary Singer

Object 2009
heat-coloured mild steel
7.5 x 14.0 x 4.8 cm
Collection: Geoffrey Smith and Gary Singer



Object 2009
heat-coloured mild steel
14.0 x 5.0 x 4.5 cm
Collection: Geoffrey Smith and Gary Singer



Object 2008
heat-coloured mild steel
22.0 x 17.9 x 10.6 cm
Collection: Geoffrey Smith and Gary Singer



Container 2008
heat-coloured mild steel
21.3 x 40.5 x 8.5 cm
Collection: Private Collection

Object 2008 heat-coloured mild steel 20.0 x 28.0 x 5.0 cm Collection: Raphy Star



Container (Cat #4) 2006
heat-coloured mild steel
30.7 x 48.4 x 10.8 cm
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased with funds from the Victorian Foundation
for Living Australian Artists, 2006



Container 2006 heat-coloured mild steel 33.0 x 62.7 x 11.1 cm Collection: State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia Purchased with funds from the Peter Fogarty Design Fund 2006









Container 2008
heat-coloured mild steel
4.8 x 16.0 x 15.5 cm
Collection: Private Collection







Container 2002
heat-coloured mild steel
26.3 x 10.6 x 5.6 cm
Collection: City of Banyule Art Collection



Object 2006 heat-coloured mild steel 4.4 x 62.5 x 13.3 cm Collection: Private Collection Tall container 1992
heat-treated mild steel
17.5 x 8.5 x 3.0 cm
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery
Purchased 1997 with funds from the Australian
and New Zealand Banking Group Limited through
the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Container with lid 1995 chemically blackened mild steel 30.0 x 3.0 x 4.7 cm Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1995 Container I 1992 steel and anodized aluminium 10.9 x 34.0 x 5.7 cm Collection: City of Banyule Art Collection

Rings













Ring 1997 22k gold 4.4 x 2.0 x 1.5 cm Collection: Jackie Cooper

Ring 2008 22k gold 1.9 x 2.0 x 1.7 cm Collection: Mari Funaki Ring 2000 22k gold 2.4 x 1.4 x 2.1 cm Collection: Private Collection Ring for one or two fingers 2002 Ring for two fingers 2002 22k gold 22k gold 22k gold 3.7 x 1.5 x 1.5 cm Collection: Mari Funaki

2.2 x 4.7 x 1.7 cm Collection: Mari Funaki Ring 2006 18k white gold 2.5 x 2.0 x 1.4 cm Collection: Mari Funaki Ring 2005
20k gold
2.1 x 1.8 x 1.1 cm
Collectiion: Jane Millard
and Clint Brittain



Ring 2006 18k white gold 4.1 x 2.5 x 1.4 cm Collection: Mari Funaki













Ring 1999 22k gold 2.2 x 3.3 x 1.7 cm Collection: Teresa Fels

Ring 2006 18k white gold 2.9 x 2.4 x 1.8 cm Collection: Mari Funaki Gold ring 2000
22k gold
2.6 x 2.6 x 1.5 cm
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery
Purchased 2000. Queensland Art Gallery
Foundation Grant

Ring 2006 18k white gold 2.1 x 2.2 x 1.6 cm Collection: State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia Purchased with funds from the Peter Fogarty Design Fund 2006

Bracelets







Bracelet 4 2006 heat-coloured mild steel 5.5 x 11.1 x 11.1 cm Collection: Private Collection



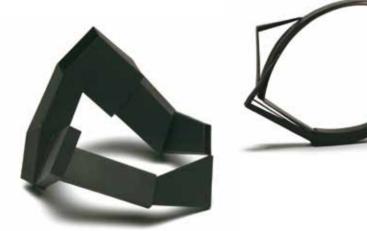




Bracelet 2006
heat-coloured mild steel
4.1 x 7.6 x 6.6 cm
Collection: State Art Collection,
Art Gallery of Western Australia
Purchased with funds from the
Peter Fogarty Design Fund 2006













Bracelet 2005 heat-coloured mild steel 2.0 x 11.1 x 9.9 cm Collection: Sandy Geyer Bracelet 2006
heat-coloured mild steel
8.8 x 11.0 x 10.7 cm
Collection: City of Hobart Art Prize
Collection, A cultural iniative of the
Hobart City Council

Bracelet 2001 heat-coloured mild steel 1.7 x 10.2 x 7.5 cm Collection: Sandy Geyer Bracelet 2008 heat-coloured mild steel 5.2 x 7.6 x 7.2 cm Collection: Mari Funaki Bracelet 2006
heat-coloured mild steel
4.9 x 7.1 x 8.0 cm
Collection: City of Hobart Art Prize
Collection, A cultural initiative of the
Hobart City Council

Bracelet 2009 heat-coloured mild steel 10.5 x 11.5 x 4.5 cm Collection: Mari Funaki











Bracelet 2008 heat-coloured mild steel 3.4 x 8.0 x 8.2 cm Collection: Private Collection Bracelet 2004 heat-coloured mild steel 1.5 x 9.8 x 8.5 cm Collection: Jane Millard and Clint Brittain Bracelet 2006 heat-coloured mild steel 1.3 x 12.3 x 11.2 cm Collection: Mari Funaki Bracelet 2006
heat-coloured mild steel
5.0 x 10.7 x 8.9 cm
Collection: City of Hobart Art Prize
Collection, A cultural initiative of the
Hobart City Council

Bracelet 2006 heat-coloured mild steel 4.0 x 7.3 x 7.2 cm Collection: Private Collection

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Robert Cook



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Front cover:

Bracelet 7 2006
heat coloured mild steel
6.8 x 11.1 x 13.0 cm
Collection: Sandy Geyer

Back cover: Ring 2008 20k gold 2.5 x 2.4 x 1.1 cm Collection: Mari Funaki Annual Gallery Sponsors















