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Sticking it out

As both an artist and a collector, Max Dingle tells JEFF STEPHENSON about the virtues of persistence.

THE difference between perseverance and obstinacy is that one comes from a strong will and the other from a strong won't.

Sussex Inlet artist Max Dingle's character is definitely of the former kind.

It seems every time he tried to step on to the path of an artistic career something would jump out and block his way.

It happened when he left junior high school in rural Queensland when he was eyeing off an arts course at the senior school or even university.

It happened again when he finally won acceptance to the Applied National Arts School in Sydney and he learned soon after the completion of his course that "artists don't make a lot of money".

Each time he was forced into another career.

But the love of art was always with him and he never diverted from its path.

In other words, he persevered.

"When I was leaving school I had hoped to get a scholarship to continue my studies in Brisbane, but I missed out and my parents couldn't afford to send me there," he said.

"So I joined the Navy – I'd just turned 16 and I needed to get a job," he said.

Not for the first time his interest in art was put on hold. Yet, 50 years later, this thoughtful and articulate man has developed into an abstract expressionist painter and steel sculptor of great renown throughout Australia.

He has gathered an eminent collection of some of Australia's great abstract artists and sculptors and he has bequeathed all of them – 200 pieces plus many of his own – to the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre.

It's a marvellous legacy he will be leaving and if it were not for his perseverance it would never have eventuated.

It was as a young sailor that he first set foot on Shoalhaven soil.

While stationed at Albatross he enrolled in night courses at the Nowra Technical College and then the old TAFE College, which later transformed into the Arts Centre.

It was something he had to do to maintain and

satiating his interest in the world of art.

He left the Navy in the early 1970s and to his great surprise he was one of 18 aspiring artists from 2000 nominations to win a place in the Applied National Art School in Sydney.

"That was a real buzz," he said.

"I thought, here we go, I'm on my way.

"I couldn't do anything else but accept the position and as it was a full-time course I then reversed my positions by working odd jobs at night to make some money."

Mr Dingle was a cleaner at Woolworth's and Grace Brothers in Sydney – anything to keep him going while he studied during the day.

He graduated from Art School and thought he'd go out and take on the world.

"That's when I learned artists don't make much money."

So, he instead landed a job at a bookshop or two and then at the Australian Museum of Natural History and Anthropology and maintained a working relationship with museums for the next 25 years, finishing as assistant director of the Australian National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour.

All the while there was a strong fascination with and yearning to return to the Shoalhaven, which materialised when he purchased a property at Sussex Inlet in 1981.

He commuted for 30 years – spending weekends at his property and continuing his livelihood at the museum during the week.

"I had wanted to work as a full-time artist for most of that time, but again was forced to put my ambition on hold while I worked to pay the mortgage and all those other things we need to survive," he said.

Even so, he worked painstakingly hard at weekends and was able to hold solo exhibitions.

Mr Dingle's interest branched to another field soon after retiring permanently to his Sussex Inlet property in 1998 – he describes it more as an obsession.

"I'd been collecting sculptures by artists who worked with steel and it got hold of me.

"I wanted to learn more about the art and put my own stamp on it."

He persevered in that direction to the point he was



named Best New Steel Sculpture Artist at a Sydney exhibition in 2001 and he's still powering along in both forms of expressionism today.

Mr Dingle's decision to bequeath his entire collection – one that's taken him nigh on 40 years to compile – came as the result of him "wanting to give something back to the community".

He has already displayed many of the works at exhibitions at the Arts Centre held over the last decade and has one running at present "Making Do: Art from Found Objects", which includes works by local artists and an interactive section where visitors can make up their own artwork and have it displayed.

The thing is, the Shoalhaven might never have had a look-in, but for a development in 1996 when Mr Dingle first learned of the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre.

"I didn't know it existed," he said. "I'd been talking to other galleries about the possibility of a bequeathment and Shoalhaven was not on the list.

"When I learned of the Arts Centre's existence, I went to them straight away and spoke to them about it.

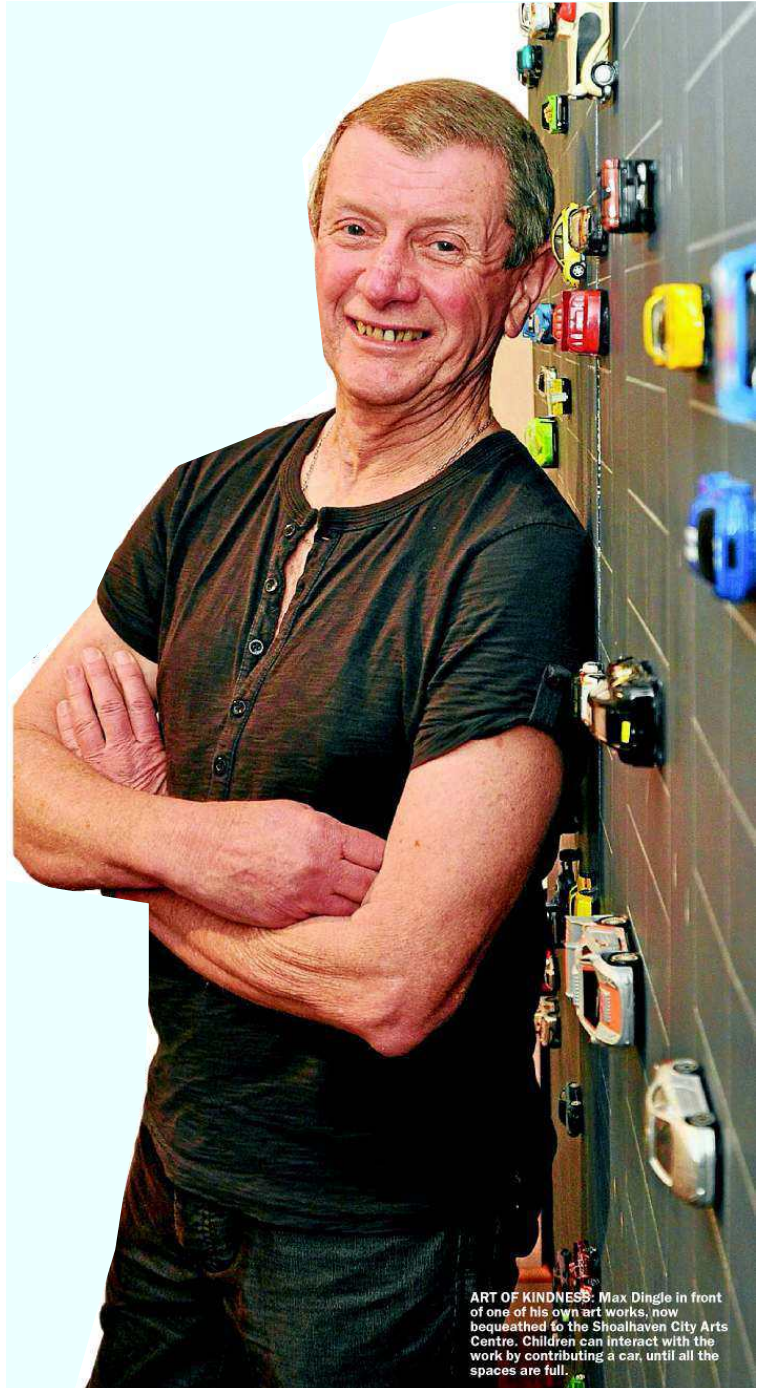
"It's the very building where I held my

first exhibition," he said.

It took two years, but an agreement to house the collection at the centre was finally reached in 1998.

Yes, just another case of perseverance.

Note: The author would like to take credit for the opening sentence of this report. It is, in fact, a quotation made famous by the American Congregationalist clergyman and social reformer, Henry Ward Beecher.



ART OF KINDNESS: Max Dingle in front of one of his own art works, now bequeathed to the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre. Children can interact with the work by contributing a car, until all the spaces are full.