

Australian Dream Snake

by Leigh Adams

Photography by Jerry Katz and Larr Cunningham

The Australian Dream Snake is an Aboriginal creation story of extremely ancient origin. It tells that before the earth was as it is now, there was only Dreamtime when nothing happened—only dreaming. The energy of the dreaming built until it could be contained no longer. The Rainbow Dream Snake became restless with the dreaming energy, flew up into the sky, and crashed back down into the earth, creating caves and underground rivers. It surged upward again, creating volcanoes, mountains, and valleys. As it flowed over the surface of the earth, the rivers, lakes, and waterways came to be.

Working Together

In Arcadia, California, is a 127-acre botanical garden, the Los Angeles County Arboretum, where I am artist in residence. In the Arboretum is a forty-acre Australian garden—the hotter, drier, wilder area of the park. Mark Wourms, former CEO, asked if I were willing to accept a commission to create a “Children’s Discovery Trail” based on the Dream Snake of Australia. I leapt at the idea!

I received a donation of tile from New Metro Tile, and we overglazed tiles for almost 1-1/2 years before the project began. Kids at the LA Garden Show; random children coming through the Arboretum; and school, scouting, and church groups all participated. Youth leadership programs contributed, and Tim Phillips, the acting CEO of the Arboretum, was superb in his support.

The county chose the contractors—“They’re from Tonga.” (I had to look up Tonga!) It’s in the South Seas—the Southern Hemisphere. It is a Polynesian culture and the contractors (Ark Contractor Co.) were passionate about creating homage to their heritage in the beautiful Australian garden. I learned to love working with this crew as we met challenge after challenge and vanquished them all! Each day brought new processes, amazing results, and profound satisfaction as we poured, colored, textured, created insets for the mosaics, and finally sculpted the head. Six days from beginning to end!!!! The snake is 1,000 feet long with more than 100 square feet of mosaic glass and tile.

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”

Albert Einstein



Overcoming Obstacles

The Tongan families offered to help. We began working with a traditional indirect method of mosaic (mesh, mastic, and tesserae). It was hard for beginners to learn so much at once and in a very uncontrolled environment. Remember, we weren’t working in a classroom or workshop. It was a bit of an organizational nightmare in terms of materials and clean surfaces!

Finally the discovery of Streuter’s No Days Mosaic at the Las Vegas Glass Expo made it possible for us to get superb results. Most of our mosaics were done with No Days, a few used mastic, and a few were direct mosaic done with mortar. All pieces were set in mortar and then grouted and sealed. The grouting was a challenge in itself with sprinkler schedules and *very hot* temperatures to deal with. Mortar wasn’t such fun either, as it seemed that people stepped on the mosaics before they were set up, much to their embarrassment and chagrin, but we still had to redo the installation. There were new volunteers to train continually, but everyone contributed on an extraordinary level. As the snake neared completion, a five-point-three earthquake hit and cracked it in numerous places . . . and then it continued to crack!

Surprise! Our Dream Snake sits smack atop *three* earthquake faults. The ground moves continually! So we retrofitted with twenty more expansion joints and mosaicked each of them as well. This was a brilliant idea from a county engineer, Steve Derry. His contribution was so delightful that we can’t wait to use it in our next installation! I *will* be working with Ark Contractor Co. again!

Everything is done, eyes created with dichroic glass, lamp-worked elements by Cathi Milligan, and vitrigraph by Larr Cunningham and Leigh Adams are installed and sealed. The aerial photographs are taken. The Dream Snake is sealed and the upgrades to the garden are being planted. We are receiving drawings from Aboriginal children in Australia who want us to know more about the Dream Snake. And we are learning every day!



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