

ONE ARTIST : TWO PERSPECTIVES

ARTIST ROB HARLE - THE SCULPTURE YEARS

by Sandra Joran

Rob made his first “sculpture” when he was five years old, a wooden construction with hundreds of coloured wires stretched across inside it,

uncannily similar to Naum Gabo’s work, which of course he had never seen.

Around the age of fifteen he started consciously making geometric figurative sculpture maquettes from polyurethane foam for possible later casting.

After leaving school he started an electrical fitter-mechanic trades course, which he disliked intensely. In his spare time he created abstract metal sculptures from discarded building site “junk”.

As soon as he finished his trade he moved into the drawing office and started studying architecture. During this time he experimented with models of alternative architectural structures and produced his first “official” small sculptures for exhibition (Avalon Arts Gallery 1974).

After completing his architecture studies there was a major downturn in the building construction industry so he and his wife left Sydney, moving to the NSW Central Coast where he commenced sculpture full time.

They lived a reclusive life on a remote farm in the country. This gave him the freedom to develop his sculptural vision and skills and produce some of his finest pieces. These varied in scale from small pedestal pieces to massive outdoor works in ceramic, timber and mainly stone.

Often he would seek out professionals and work with them for nothing to learn the “tricks of the trade”. As an example, he would build gas, stoneware kilns for his ceramic-clay sculpture mentor Kevin Flanagan,

in return for guidance in using oxides, clay bodies and firing techniques.

In this period he met two brilliant sculptors, Carl Merten and Joan Relke, they soon moved to another remote farm house not very far away, and so in the sculptural wilderness of Australia at least there were a few like minded artists exchanging ideas.

Rob's sculptor mentors were Constantin Brancusi and Henry Moore, after Rodin these two were highly influential in breaking the artifice of the French salon's insipid style of sculpture. Moore was far more of a surrealist, radical sculptor than many realise.

Together with a few others Rob helped establish the Sculptors' Guild of NSW, this was short lived but did result in workshops, public education days and some quality exhibitions between 1983 to 1988.

His preferred method of working was "direct carving" especially in wood and stone. The Central Coast is home to a number of quarries which supply top quality sandstone to the industry, the early public buildings of Sydney were constructed from this fine stone. This gave him access to many varieties of beautiful sandstone from which to carve his sculptures - two example pieces are Fig. 1 *Sound of Silence* (1.5m high) and Fig 2. *Moon God(dess)* 2.5m high). Rob believes sandstone is Australia's stone – "the colours, intensity and texture are uniquely Australian whereas marble is the stone of Europe, a softer smoother stone with gentle colour."



Fig. 1 *Sound of Silence* 1.5m sandstone

He had not long finished *Moon God(dess)* when his maquette of *Locking Piece 3* was selected as the successful entry for a large commission at Echuca/Moama. This sculpture is almost four metres high in blue-grey Wombeyan marble, it was designed to sit in a landscaped pond with water cascading down its two sides. The finished work in situ is shown in Fig. 3. The piece took a year's consistent, very hard work to complete and on top of that he had to make some special tools with his blacksmith's forge to create this sculpture.



Fig. 2 *Moon God(dessa)* 2.5 m sandstone

Rob considers the Hawkesbury River valley to be his spiritual home, he spent a great deal of time fishing, camping and hiking in this area when he was young – “here the sandstone, river and Australian bush exist in perfect harmony.” This influence, together with the “curves” he sees in nature and man-made objects, which were first consciously noticed in his surfing and sailing days, i.e. the curve of a wave, the curve of a well-set sail, the sculptural shape of

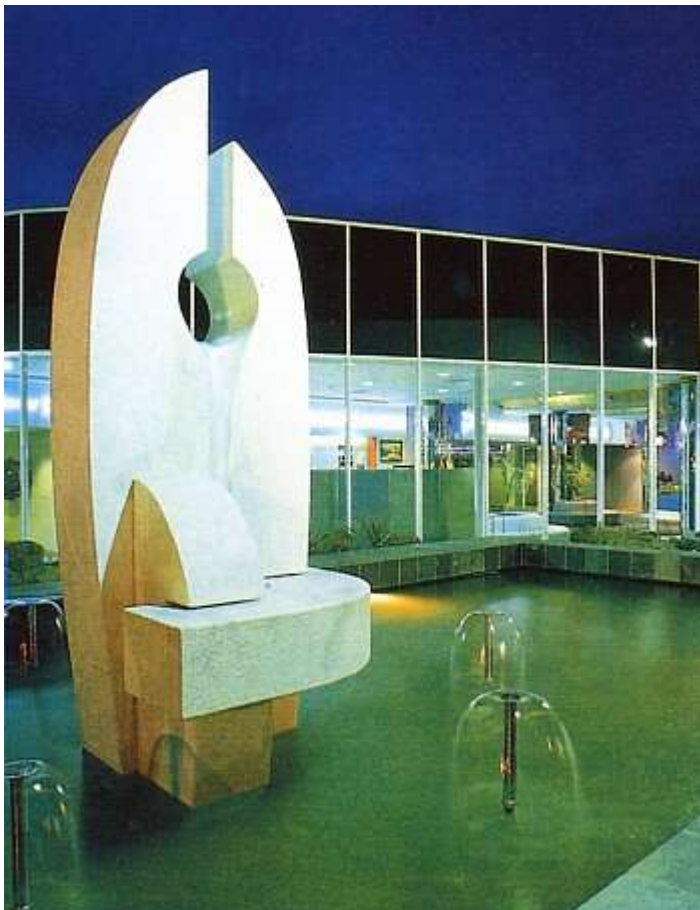


Fig. 3 *Locking Piece 3* 3.8m marble

surfboards and yachts set his sculptural destiny. To expose “the secrets of the archetypal curve”, he said was his sculptural mission - this had a deep and profound spiritual significance for him.

The period in the country at Wyee was really a time of Zen contemplation and the sculptures he produced there were intended to convey the feeling of contemplation,

harmony and deep connection with the natural world so others might experience this and regain some respect for the world of nature. As Rob reminds us, “this concept is not new, the indigenous Australians have had a deep spiritual connection with the earth for well over twenty thousand years.”

He and Sandra made a major move from the Central Coast to Nimbin in northern NSW in 1989. Again they lived in the country, built their own house and studios, all in direct view of the sacred Nimbin Rocks. He continued creating sculptures for a few years but a gradual decline in his health, a serious spinal defect, brought his sculpture career to an end in 1995. Works from this period were in stone and wood, all found good homes, *Sound of Silence* (1993) Fig.1 and *Goanna Dreaming* (1991) Fig.4 were dearly loved, especially by the children at The Daystar Rudolf Steiner School near Lillian Rock.



Fig. 4 *Goanna Dreaming* 1.8 m camphor wood

Early in the 1990s Rob and some artist friends organised the first serious art exhibitions in Nimbin, the first one was, The Barefoot Sculptor's Show which is now the site of the highly successful artist's co-op gallery, Nimbin Artist's Gallery – www.nimbinartistsgallery.org

The following are some quotes from his artist's statement in 1994:

- My sculpture has always been for all people, not for the critics, museum vaults or for the elite involved with the latest trends.

- Stone is the most earthy, solid material and mystical states are the most ethereal. I try to hint at these states through my manipulation of stone into sculpture.

- I feel a tangible connection between forms characterised by what I call “the archetypal curve” and heightened states of awareness. I cannot explain this in words, only through exposing the “secrets of the archetypal curve” in the unique language of three dimensional sculpture.

- My sculptures are objects for healing and contemplation, I see them as “four dimensional poetry existing in silence”.

After that he packed away his hand-forged, hand-made sculpture tools and returned to study at university. Towards the end of his Honours degree he had developed a unique body of work known as techno-surrealist digital art.

Some of these works incorporate scans of his original sculptures with and without manipulation.

Soon after Rob left school he started writing, and throughout his highly productive sculpture years Rob always continued to write prolifically,

especially poetry. But he also wrote many articles concerning sculpture, art and alternative design. He is now again concentrating on his poetry writing together with literary and scholarly book reviews.

Sandra Joran is an artist and occasional freelance writer, specialising in hand painted mandalas. Her work is held in collections around the world. She also lives in Nimbin, Australia.



Fig.5 *Matrix* 70cm black marble



Fig. 6 *Zen Mind* 70cm dia. plaster stone



Fig.7 *Ocellus* 80cm high sandstone

Bio:

Sandra Joran is an Australian artist and tapestry weaver, but has specialised in painting mandalas for the last fourteen years. She is an avid reader of poetry and books on all topics and the occasional writer. She has studied many art forms over the years, but always returns to the fascination of geometrical and mathematical based art forms. Her background is based in mechanical ~ electrical drafting. She works and paints with mixed media on canvas or watercolour paper using the old hand operated 'antique' drafting equipment from her early drafting days. Her art works are published in books and held in private collections around the world. www.mandalasaustralia.com

ROBERT HARLE: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

by Lister G. Clark

Some people pursue an activity with an intensity of purpose for some years, then leave this behind and move on to entirely different activities. Rob Harle had several major changes in his career. These changes reflected his changing interests and may be seen as a form of

personal development, underpinned by an effort to live a life in harmony with nature.

Robert Francis Harle was born in 1948. He completed his education to Leaving Certificate level. Acting on the suggestion of his parents that he should be trained as an electrician, he completed a trades course and became a licensed electrician. He then did a Drawing Course at TAFE and later gained a Diploma in Architecture. He worked for 12 years in Sydney with various firms of consultants, manufacturing engineers and architects. He became frustrated with architecture and unrealistic building regulations. This led to an exploration of alternative architecture and he contributed many articles to magazines such as Grass Roots and Simply Living.

He had been making sculptural constructions since he was a child. About the age of fifteen he consciously started making geometrical sculptural figures from polyurethane foam. Later, when he was an apprentice, he made metal sculptures in his spare time using oxy welding equipment. Reading "The Agony and the Ecstasy" about the life of Michelangelo had a profound effect on him. Another significant influence was his reaction to curves in

nature and in man-made objects. This was triggered during his surfing days - the curve of waves, the curve of a well set sail and the sculptural shapes of surfboards - these set his sculptural destiny. To expose the secrets of the "archetypal curve" had a deep spiritual significance for him. This preoccupation with curves was reflected in his sculpture.

He had no formal training in sculpture - when he needed information, he sought out the appropriate professional and worked with them - some were art teachers and others were trades people.

He became fully involved with sculpture when he moved to the Central Coast in 1978 with his wife Sandra. They lived an isolated life on a farm at Wyee. He acted as caretaker for this property which gave him plenty of time to work on sculpture. About this time the Sculptors Guild of NSW was formed. This brought together a group of sculptors from the Central Coast who might not otherwise have met. Initially, enthusiasm was

high but its aims were too ambitious and there were problems of leadership. As a result, the group ceased to function after a couple of years. Rob Harle served on the committee of the Guild and produced an excellent Newsletter which contained informative articles. It was at this time that I made his acquaintance.

He preferred to directly carve in wood and sculpt in stone. Occasionally, he made works in other media including concrete, plaster stone (artificial stone) and terra cotta. His work ranged from abstract to semi-figurative and was characterised by a simplicity of style. Most of his works were of medium scale but some were conceived as maquettes which were capable of being translated into large scale sculptures.

He produced a number of delightful small pieces which were displayed at exhibitions of the Sculptors Guild, at the Wyong Arts Festival (between 1983 and 1989) and at various other exhibitions. In 1988 he obtained a major commission to make a water sculpture for the Rich River Golf Club at Echuca in Victoria. This work was made up from pieces of grey

Wombeyan marble which interlocked to form a work 3.7 metres high. This major commission involved a long period of physical hard work and complete dedication for more than a year.

In 1990 he and Sandra purchased a 15 acre property at Stoney Chute, a few kilometres outside Nimbin in northern NSW. This was an idyllic location with a view of tree covered hills, the remnants of an age old volcano and a rain forest nearby. On this land they built a small house and a few years later, a studio for Sandra. She was now having considerable

success with her large wall hangings. One work titled "Chaos" was an abstract work consisting of wool woven on to canvas, 1.2 x 1.5 metres in size. This was displayed at the Nimbin Rocks Gallery, along with many of her drawings and tapestries. Her work

has been featured in the Textile Fibre Forum magazine and on the Canberra School of Art internet site.

Rob Harle had become totally disenchanted with the gallery system and this means of selling his work. Instead, he gained great personal satisfaction from giving sculpture to certain organisations and to his friends. For instance in 1991 and 1993 he donated some sculpture to the local Daystar Rudolf Steiner school.

He has always had a philosophical approach to his art. He stated that the underlying theme was concerned with re-discovering the spirit through transmutation and tranquillity His Personal Statement further explains some of his philosophies. He saw his sculpture as being influenced by the way of Japanese Zen, its simplicity of style being reflective of his

attitude to life generally. This simplicity was intended to "get to the heart of the matter. Frills and surface decoration on sculpture were abhorrent to him.

The physical demands of working with sculpture led to a deterioration of his health – his spine and knees were damaged to the extent that he could no longer work for long periods on sculpture. But his interests had now expanded beyond the realm of sculpture. Many years ago he completed a Diploma in Psychotherapy and he had a long time interest in Chinese Taoism and Zen (derived from Buddhism). He decided to study Philosophy and

Comparative Religion at Deakin University as an external student. This meant working on his assignments at home and communicating with the University by means of his computer and tele-tutorials. Life for Robert Harle had expanded beyond the realm of sculpture and the aesthetic ideals and philosophies that he was able to express through it. (Biography approved by the sculptor)

Bio:

Jack L.G. Clark was a scientist (Head of NSW Forensic Labs), and avid collector of sculpture, and writer and photographer of sculpture. He passed away not long after writing this piece.