

# The Elements within Sculpture

4 June – 15 July 2011

A closer look at... Wood

In this *A closer look at...* we explore three different artist's approaches to wood in *The Elements within Sculpture* but there are many more examples that have been covered in previous weeks, such as the use of wood in indigenous art and wood as part of the developmental process of artists who cast in bronze. Michael (Mike) Nicholls and Manolo Ruiz Pipo use the traditional method of carved wood in their sculptural practice, contrasted to Robert Klippel's found wooden machine parts.

*The Elements within Sculpture* includes three very different works by Melbourne artist Michael (Mike) Nicholls. The artist was schooled in the 1980s by Melbourne sculptors Anthony Pryor, Geoffrey Bartlett and Augustine Dall'Ava. His two wooden sculptures are carved from native Australian timber and evoke the spiritual aspects of life through nature. *On the Shoulders of my Spirit*, 2009, is carved from eucalyptus citroda (lemon scented gum) and features a large bird standing on the shoulders of a person, with the shoulders of another person embracing the main figure visible at the base of the sculpture. The image of the lower person embracing and viewed from behind, is a motif evident in a number of Nicholls' wooden sculptures, such as *My Shadow*, 2007 and *Contemplation*, 2007.



*Walking With The Ancestors*, 2006, is carved from native eucalyptus melliodora (yellow box) and depicts a mother and child embracing, described as “a strangely moving homage to Michelangelo’s *The Madonna of Bruges*”<sup>1</sup>. Nicholls uses the rough texture of the wood’s surface to give the mother character and bring her to life. In the book, *A Work in Progress*, this work is named as a typical work by the artist, which is “impossible to look at without being seduced by the timber’s gnarled and sensuous grain, coursing through its enigmatic and palpably ancient presence”<sup>2</sup>.

The form and theme of *Walking With The Ancestors*, 2006 is characteristic of Nicholls' recent sculpture and similar works are currently on show at McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park in his solo exhibition, *Primitive Soul*.

MICHAEL (MIKE) NICHOLLS 1960-  
Walking with the ancestors, 2006  
yellow box  
103 x 64 x 25 cm

<sup>1</sup> Crawford, A., Smith D., *Mike Nicholls - A work in progress*, Melbourne: Hinkler Books, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Crawford, A., Smith D., *Mike Nicholls - A work in progress*, Melbourne: Hinkler Books, 2007

In contrast to Nicholl's rough wood carving of the wooden body in *Walking With The Ancestors*, 2006, Manolo Ruiz Pipo's (*Female Torso*) 1974, renders the female form smooth and sensual. Women were a favourite topic of the artist, according to the Newcastle Regional Art Gallery, who wrote that the artist "appreciated [women] for their sensuality and for their fertility. He considered women to be pleasure givers and lovers".<sup>3</sup>

Ruiz Ripo was born in Granada, Spain and at a very young age, experienced the trauma of his father being violently removed from their home during the Spanish Civil War, before relocating to Barcelona. He was known mostly for his whimsical paintings, however (*Female Torso*) 1974, is likely to have built using the wood carving skills he learnt at *San Jordi*, the Fine Arts Centre of Barcelona, where he studied, anatomy and dissection; painting in oil tempera, encaustic and fresco; wood and stone carving.<sup>4</sup>

In (*Female Torso*) 1974, the texture and natural lines of wood arc elegantly down the female body, accentuating the women's curves and craters. The pose is one of provocativeness and daring, the hips swung on an angle, daring the viewer to look at each deep line and curvature of the body.

In contrast to using wood to sculpt the contours of the human body, Australian sculptor Robert Klippel uses the material to create machinery in his piece, *Opus No.817*, 1989. The work is recognizably part of the artist's later artworks from the 1980s, a series of large sculptures of assembled discarded wooden sample machine parts, salvaged by Colin Lanceley from an industrial foundry in Ultimo in 1964.<sup>5</sup>

According to artist and biographer James Gleeson, Klippel was dissatisfied with the word junk, used by his contemporaries in the Annandale Group (see *A closer look at... found objects*), instead preferring the term 'found objects', like the salvaged wooden machine parts.<sup>6</sup>



MANOLO RUIZ PIPO 1929 - 1999  
(Female Torso)  
timber  
85 x 29 x 11

<sup>3</sup> *Manolo Ruiz Pipo: private dreams public collections*, Newcastle Regional Art Gallery, 21 February - 10 May 2009

<sup>4</sup> *Manolo Ruiz Pipo: private dreams public collections*, Newcastle Regional Art Gallery, 21 February - 10 May 2009

<sup>5</sup> Art Gallery of NSW, <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/work/57.1989/>

<sup>6</sup> Gleeson, James, *Robert Klippel*, Sydney: Bay Books, 1983, pg9

Although Klippel's early works were created using more traditional methods of sculpture such as carved stone and wood, he began to incorporate found materials into his works in the 1940s, moving to assembling machine parts in 1980s. Deborah Hart, Senior Curator, Australian Painting and Sculpture post 1920, at the National Gallery of Australia, described this practice as the artist exploring "correlations between mechanical and organic forms, what he described as 'machine-organic' inter-relationships"<sup>7</sup>.

In the catalogue for an exhibition of the artist's work hosted at Roslyn Oxley and Watters Gallery in Sydney, these later works from the 1980s are described as having "obviously been maturing in his mind for years since he had been collecting the patterns for 20 years"<sup>8</sup>. The colours Klippel has selected for *Opus No.817*, are a deliberate nod to the colours used by machine assemblers. Wooden samples of the machine parts were first made and colour coded before making the final machine.

Klippel's machine has no noticeable working parts, effectively de-mechanizing it and making it an aesthetic object, rather than an functional one. The colours are rubbed back so the machine pieces seem worn and used and the writing and markings on the pieces hint at a functionality the viewer cannot get a hold of.

In the artist's oeuvre, the sculptures created with found wooden machine parts are some of his most important works. The National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of NSW and the Tasmanian Art Gallery of Museum hold works from this series in their permanent collections.



ROBERT KLIPPEL 1920- 2001  
Opus No.817, 1989  
painted wood  
75 x 60 x 46 cm

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<sup>7</sup> Hart, Deborah, *Reinventions: sculpture + assemblage*, National Gallery of Australia, <http://nga.gov.au/Reinventions/Essay.cfm>

<sup>8</sup> *Robert Klippel: sculptures in wood*, Watters Gallery, 6 – 23 November 1985