

The Elements within Sculpture

4 June – 15 July 2011

A closer look at... Bronze

The Elements within Sculpture includes a diverse array of bronze sculpture, demonstrating both modern and classical examples of its use in Australian art. Bertram Mackennal's *Silence* (1894) is a classical bronze relief, which belongs to an important group of Mackennal's low relief sculptures of the early eighties. On the opposing wall to *Silence* sit Anthony Pryor's bronze relief panels *Doorway 1,2,3,4* (1989), a modern interpretation of the traditional bronze relief. In both sculptures, the texture of the image complements the natural hues of the bronze, highlighting the subtle curve of the woman's cheek in *Silence* and demarking the sharp edges in *Doorway*. The panels of *Doorway 1 & 2* depict imagery of mountains, clouds and rainbows in landscape or 'special place', as is often the case with the artist's earlier timber Boxes and Shrines.¹



BERTRAM (EDGAR) MACKENNAL 1863-1931
Silence c.1894
bronze relief
33.4 x 2.6 cm



ANTHONY PRYOR 1951-1991
Doorway 1,2,3,4, 1989
bronze relief edition 1/6 (two shown)
59 x 34 x 2.5 cm

In his introduction for *The Elements within Sculpture* catalogue, Ken Scarlett compares the fascination with the female nude in the works of Guy Boyd, Barbara Tribe, George Baldessin and Bertram Mackennal, all of which are cast in bronze. Despite the similar motif of the nude female form, Scarlett notes that the modern interpretation of the theme, such as Baldessin's *Performer* (1972), provocative in pose, would be too much for Edwardian tastes. Mackennal used classical references to make sexuality palatable, as seen with *Vesta* (1990), the virgin goddess of the hearth, home and family in Ancient Rome, conceived by Mackennal to adorn a dining table centrepiece. Barbara Tribe's *Malinee* (1973) has an almost erotic pose, echoing of the curves of Mackennal's *Vesta* in a modern form. By contrast, Godfrey Millar's *Female Torso* (modelled c.1938-40; cast 1990) is an abstracted version of a female torso, the indication of form only given upon discovery of the title.

Many sculptures in the exhibition demonstrate that the traditional practice has not varied too much over time. Ola Cohn's two sculptures (*Resting Youth*) and *Seated Figure* show the progression of bronze sculptures, often being modelled first in plaster or clay, before being cast in bronze. Likewise, Marea Gazzard's sculptural practice has developed from clay and ceramics

in her early 1960s works, to her more recent pieces in bronze, as exemplified in *Portara iii* (2005). *Portara iii* references Gazzard's Greek heritage and the Greek Island of the same name, the grey-white hues and texture appearing sea-washed. Christine France for *Art and Australia* writes, "the sensuality of the surface comes from Gazzard's dedication to clay as her a material"ⁱⁱⁱ, noting that all her bronzes are first modelled in clay.

Another work that demonstrates this practice is Arthur Boyd's *School Boy Riding A Goat* (1952-54) is a bronze edition of a terracotta work he produced in 1954. Boyd learnt ceramic art from his father, artist Merric Boyd and the early 1950s saw him turn his attention to ceramics and produce some of his finest sculpture. Biographer Franz Phillip characterizes these works as possessing a mood of "light-hearted metamorphosis", describing the molding as fluid.ⁱⁱⁱ There is no delineation of where the boy finishes and goat begins, giving the work a feeling of calm fluidity.

Guy Boyd's *African Dancer* (1966) and *Maquette for Swimmer Entering Water* (1984), reveal the variance in size between a final artwork and a maquette for a bigger sculpture. Both of Boyd's figures display a fluidity of movement, the swimmer ready to dive straight into the water and the dancer swaying to the music, the smaller maquette not losing any of the aura or movement so profoundly evident in the larger sculpture.



GUY BOYD 1923-1988
African Dancer (1966)
bronze edition 1/6
80 x 20 x 24 cm



GUY BOYD 1923-1988
Maquette for Swimmer Entering the Water (1984)
bronze edition 20/24
23 x 10 x 8 cm

Clifford Last's (*Maquette for Architectural Project*) is another example of a maquette for a larger sculpture. Last also completed wooden maquettes *Architectural Projects* (1975), which were exhibited in the National Gallery of Victoria's *Clifford Last Sculpture – A Retrospective Exhibition* in 1989. Like many sculptors, Last was known to carve timber sculptures from which the bronze casts were taken, often sandcast.^{iv}

Two works by Robert Jacks also demonstrate the very different treatment of the bronze to create texture. In the earlier work, *Goddess* (1958-60), Jack has used polished bronze to make the surface glow, highlighting the geometric edge of the nose. *Goddess* is a very early piece in Jacks' practice and the influence of Henry Moore's sculptural works is evident. At art school Jacks felt that Moore was over-taught, commenting, "I love his work greatly, but it took more than twenty years before I could look at it again"^v. By contrast, the texture of *Starfish* (1988) is rough, the starburst shapes reminiscent of Jacks' later paintings. Similarly, in (*Untitled*), Clifford Last uses the green of the patina to add to the texture of surface.

In his introduction, Scarlett also writes of the seriousness with which sculpture was considered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, stating that “they would have been bemused by the light-hearted humour”^{vi} of the many of contemporary works seen in *The Elements within Sculpture*. This is particularly apparent with the works of Del Kathryn Barton and Dean Bowen. In Barton’s work *I am loving you like this (version 2)* (2008), the Archibald winning painter has composed a pumpkin with tiny arms and hands growing out where the leaves should usually be. The light-hearted subject matter both bemuses and delights the viewer, with the classical medium giving the sculpture authority it might not have in another medium. Likewise, Bowen’s *Big Sister* (2009), *Little Sister* (2010) and *Small Farmer* (2007) use the texture in the bronze and colour to highlight the features of the characters, giving the works a childlike, playful feel in a normally serious traditional medium.



DEAN BOWEN 1957-
Little Sister (2009)
bronze edition 1/9
14.5 x 40 x 8 cm



DEAN BOWEN 1957-
Small Farmer (2007)
bronze edition 7/9
36 x 35 X 12 cm

The Elements within Sculpture also includes a number of fine pieces from artists whose works appear in public spaces around Melbourne, such as Anthony Pryor’s *Night Stalker* (1991). It echoes the form and powerful stance of *The Legend* (1991), Pryor’s imposing steel sculpture on the forecourt of Melbourne’s MCG. In both works, Pryor’s works exude suspended energy and extreme confidence, elements present in Pryor’s final works.^{vii} Created as a maquette for a possible larger scale commission, *Night Stalker*’s positive energy charges through the work.

ⁱ The artist’s estate

ⁱⁱ Christine France, Marea Gazzard, *Art and Australia*, vol. 43, issue 1., 2005 p123

ⁱⁱⁱ Phillip, Franz, *Arthur Boyd*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1967, pg. 77

^{iv} Noel Hutchinson, Forms of Inner Light: Clifford Last’s Sculpture and Beliefs, *Clifford Last Sculpture – A Retrospective Exhibition*, exh. cat. The National Gallery of Victoria, 1989 p. 30

^v Ken McGregor, *Robert Jacks – Past Unfolded*, Sydney: Fine Art Publishing, 2001 p17

^{vi} Ken Scarlett, *Such Diversity*, *The Elements within Sculpture*, exh. cat. Lauraine Diggins Fine Art, 2011

^{vii} The artist’s estate