

The First Australian Sculpture Triennial: An Historical Perspective – Brad Leonard

I had no awareness of Australian sculpture in growing up. Sculpture was something that happened in Europe not here. The only work I vaguely remember was Bertram MacKenna's *Circe* and that no doubt due to pubescent fantasies. (Although it was only recently that I discovered the swirling figures around the base.)

In fact the first time I became aware of sculpture as something that happened in Australia concerned Mildura. I was going down the coast and called around to see some friends. They were going to the Triennial at Mildura.

I remember the old Volkswagen piled high with sleeping bags taking off down the street leaving me behind. And I remember their return and the fierce discussions that raged around names and concepts of which I wasn't aware.

It was Mildura that introduced me to sculpture in this country and, as someone who doesn't keep up with things as much as I should, it was Mildura and the recent exhibitions at La Trobe which have continued to define my concept of Australian sculpture.

The current exhibition at La Trobe and Preston is part of a tradition of triennial exhibitions which go back to the 1961 Inaugural Prize for Sculpture at Mildura.

The seeds for a large sculptural exhibition were sown in 1956 when a regional gallery was established at Rio Vista, the original Chaffey home, in Mildura.

Eric Westbrook, then Director of the National Gallery of Victoria and Rex Bramleigh, the first curator of the Mildura Art Gallery, decided to concentrate on sculpture at the new gallery. It was through their discussions, and the ability of realisation of Bramleigh's successor, Ernst van Hattum that the 1961 Mildura Sculptural Prize was born.

The first exhibition attracted 122 works of which only 11 were cast in metal, 51 carvings in wood or stone and 30 in plaster or cement.

The sixties, as Graeme Sturgeon¹ pointed out were lean years in Australian sculpture. Few works went beyond the plaster stage due to the lack of competent crafts people in foundries and the subsequent limited opportunities for acquiring skills. But money was the major problem and part of the notion of the exhibition was to involve industry and the government in the promotion of sculpture.. In opening the exhibition the then Chief Secretary, Arthur Rylah said the Premier, Mr Bolte, 'had promised to double the grant for galleries next financial year' (if he was elected) . . . However Mr Bolte wanted the provincial galleries to work out some formula so that those doing something for themselves would receive a better allocation than those which were apathetic!

Women swept the prizes at the first show. Norma Redpath took the major prize with *Dawn Figure*. Other prizes went to Margaret Adams and Jean Lilac.

It is interesting that at the time women were sweeping the sculpture prizes at Mildura they were still being portrayed in the newspapers as women in overalls and safety goggles holding blow torches under captions expressing surprise at such a novelty.

The other major influence in 1961 was the influx of foreign sculptors whose ideas had an obvious effect on the improvement of sculpture in the sixties. Of the 51 sculptors who exhibited about half were born or trained outside Australia.

The exhibitions at Mildura in '64 and '67 continued to pursue the notion of sculpture as a permanent and sacred object, although by '67, Sturgeon² suggests, minimalist ideas began to creep into some of the minor pieces.

The major improvement was in technique. This was particularly evident in the work of Norma Redpath who also took out the '64 prize with an 8 ft bronze entitled *Dawn Sentinel*. In the interim she had visited Italy with the prize money she won at the first exhibition.

In retrospect the breakdown in traditional notions of sculpture can be traced to the '67 prize. It was also the year that heralded a coming furore.

A councillor, S C Mills, described that year's purchases for the permanent collection as "monstrous" and stated "I have never seen anything like them".³

This was backed up by an anonymous clergyman who added that Ron Upton's 'Push Me Pull Me' was "decadent, crude and definitely obscene", to which the local Catholic priest, Fr M J Higgins replied, "It takes a poor imagination to read obscenity into it".⁴

The 1970 exhibition was non-competitive. Selected sculptors were invited to exhibit works from which purchases would be made for the Mildura Gallery Collection. It was also the start of Tom McCullough's involvement.

If there was a period when sculpture can be said to have blossomed in Australia it is that period represented in the 1970 exhibition.

A growing emphasis on environmental and technical works was evident with a fine smattering of installation and inter-media. Tony Coleing's 40 ft high blue painted tube set the tone of the exhibition.

It was also the high point of overseas involvement represented by Richard Stankiewicz and Christo who displayed photographs of his Little Bay project.

The Mildura Sculpture Triennial-Sculpturscape '73 was moved outside the gallery onto 20 acres by the river. This created the problem of viewing sculpture in relation to a vast unstructured space.

Sculpturscape '73 also saw Tun Burn's legendary *'Minefield'* which John Baily, then Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, and Patrick McCaughey, then Lecturer in Fine Arts at Melbourne University, decided to test. The stick thrown on the piece set off a charge. The sculpture was subsequently withdrawn.

The *Mirror* newspaper, in a lovely piece on the exhibition which began "Situated on a former rubbish tip, Sculpturscape will remain at Mildura's front door for three months', went on to quote a Miss Merle Parkin. Miss Parkin, who was described as an avid collector who has visited art displays around the world, said "Sculpturscape is a concentration camp filled with unspeakable junk. I'm disgusted with the collection, human and otherwise"⁵

In 1975 the Triennial was brought forward a year to coincide with Arts Victoria. Although a rather quiet exhibition the works were more extensive and varied than in previous years.

Maureen Gilchrist noted a drift away from the reductivist styles of the '60s and an almost extravagant indulgence in extending the boundaries of sculpture.⁶

An example was Kevin Mortensen's shops which more than any previous piece, brought the exhibition close to the public.

Sculpture has always been the black sheep of the arts in Australia and as such has attracted its fair share of controversy but the events that surrounded the seventh Mildura Sculptural Triennial in 1978 were nothing short of amazing.

They began with the return to Mildura of Tom McCullough who had helped organise the successful Sydney Biennale that brought Joseph Beuys to Australia.

McCullough was aware on his return from Sydney of a change in attitude by the council towards one of greater hostility. The confidence built up over 11 years was gone.

The Mildura Council Arts Advisory Committee, for the first time, set down standards for sculpture. "No nudity, pornography, or bloodletting" were stipulated.

Further, they issued a general warning that it was up to the artist not to cross the undefineable line of public acceptance in Mildura, otherwise they would earn the wrath of the community and an end to the Triennial. Less social comment sculpture was wanted; more works of art and substance.

This did not sit easily with McCullough who had continually stressed the need for diversity at the triennials and whose basic aim was to present "work that is not easily collected, sold, or understood".⁷

It is to McCullough's credit that all evidence suggests he refused to heed the council's directive, albeit diplomatically. Indeed in his report presented to the council McCullough wrote that most of the tensions felt at the triennial came from the instructions issued.

The triennial had hardly begun when a local councillor, Syd Mills, who knows when to call a spade a spade, said "A hole is a hole not sculpture".⁸

He warmed to his criticism of Ken Unsworth's 'Open Cut' and added, "I hope they fall down the holes they are digging. Mildura is fast becoming the graveyard of

Australian sculpture".⁹ This came to represent the council attitude towards the 1978 triennial.

But criticism wasn't limited to non-artists. Sculptor Ron Robertson-Swann, reflecting on the object/post-object debate that raged in the art world, boycotted Mildura.

"The kids coming out of art school think making statements about art is the same as making it. They think being more outrageous is to do with being more real. The sort of art I and Caro make they tag 'elitist'. But what happens at Mildura is more truly elitist than anything", he said.

The best art he maintained is about extending conventions or putting conventions together in new ways. He added, "Sculpture today is being lumbered with every deviation in the arts and attempts to do serious high art - the only ones that ever counted - are seriously under threat".¹⁰

However despite the criticism Mildura '78 was hailed as a success. John Davies wrote, "It is this pragmatic approach (that sculpture has no limits) that makes the triennial such an accurate survey of current trends, a faithful demonstration of the controversy that exists between sculptors over the very nature and purpose of sculpture".¹¹

He concluded that the greatest affirmation to emerge from the triennial was evidence of a continuing belief that truth can be distilled through representation of the real world or as sculpture reclaimed from the earth and drawing nearer to it.

The '78 Mildura Triennial ended on a high note with performance work by Klaus Rinke and other German artists in Australia at the time. But, as these things go, the end wasn't really the end.

In the months following, the council fought an ongoing battle over the triennial. In fact the council saw it in that light. A councillor praised his fellow members when they showed solidarity with the Arts Advisory Committee "in its battle with the art gallery".¹²

Consternation centred around the allocation of \$800 to enable Peter Tyndall to staff his 'Shooting Gallery' during the triennial. Cr Mills said "It's a joke, the taxpayers have put up with this too long. I'd hate to take the law into my own hands".¹³

Another councillor, Lloyd Beasy said, "the community should get a greater share of the taxpayer's dollar".¹⁴ Tyndall replied by handing out pamphlets in the main street affixed with a one cent duty stamp, his share of your cultural dollar.

Cr Burr attacked Tyndall again in council, "Artists need Mildura more than we need them", he said. Though not all councillors agreed. Diana Duck said that she thought Tyndall's pamphlet funny.¹⁵

Though in retrospect the events in '78 have a humorous tinge they effectively destroyed the notion of sculptural triennials at Mildura.

Although over 16 000 people visited the triennial, Cr Roy Burr persisted in his belief that the 1978 triennial was not accepted by Sunraysia.

As if to prove his point over 400 copies of a book on the triennial prepared by McCullough were destroyed by order of the council even though part of the cost was to be met by the Visual Arts Board. Only two copies are known to have survived.

"Council cannot be accused of acting irrationally", said Cr Burr, "we have been very patient in this matter and it is now time to show strength. Mildura has had enough of scruffy sculpture for a while".¹⁶

Tom McCullough resigned from his position as Director of the Mildura Art Gallery soon after the book burning; he was tired he announced.

With the departure of McCullough the triennial went too. When, two years later, it was announced that Melbourne would hold a triennial Cr Burr was quoted as saying, "In the past we made the decisions, applied for the grants and got them, but out of the blue we find there is another sculptural triennial to replace ours".¹⁷

The growth of Sculpturscape at Mildura had been effectively destroyed, the next triennial was to surface in Melbourne, on time, three years later.

However if the 1981 Triennial at La Trobe and Preston fits into the historic sweep of the Mildura exhibition it does not do so intentionally. It was purposely titled The First Australian Sculptural Triennial 1981, to suggest a break, a fresh start, away from the controversy and animosity that had virtually smothered Sculpturscape at Mildura.

The 1981 Triennial falls within the tradition of the La Trobe University Arts Festival, most notably the show in June and July 1978. Tom McCullough was invited to head the '81 Triennial by the La Trobe University Union.

McCullough and The Victorian Ministry of the Arts (which viewed the current exhibition as a chance to get art out of the museums and into the western suburbs) utilised the La Trobe offer and McCullough's position at Pitspace, Preston Institute of Technology, to organise a major show that would have the space and facilities to illustrate the scope and diversity of contemporary sculpture in Australia.

Since the opening of the '81 Triennial it has been announced that there will be a sculptural exhibition at Mildura in 1982. A local official has stated however that the exhibition will not concentrate on the state of contemporary sculpture or Australian sculptors but it will be solely what the people of Mildura want. While this may be a laudatory remark in terms of art serving the community, viewed within the context of Mildura Council's art policy and practice there is little hope of it following in the Mildura Sculpturscape tradition.

Press treatment and criticism of the 1981 Triennial has been interesting and if anything it says more about the press than the exhibition.

While general reaction in the dailies was good (lots of 'happy news' photographs of Tony Trembath's *Pavilion* and Ross Grounds *Canberra Bomber*) the standard of criticism in Melbourne was abysmal.

The Herald set the standard with Allan McCulloch¹⁸ who stated that "the event has become the art" which is fair enough but he went on to talk about "alternative art" at La Trobe without one mention of a sculptor or work.

Robert Rooney,¹⁹ The Age critic, described it as a "massive carnival of subsidised self indulgence" and The Sun's Jeff Makin²⁰ dismissed the exhibition as "raw, undergraduate and disappointing".

However if the event has become the art then art is fast become irrelevant to the review. Of the 300 exhibits by 206 artists, from Canada and New Zealand (as well as Australia) the three reviewers between them only managed to discuss ten artists.

What became important was criticising the organisation and the catalogue, not the works. This uniform criticism might be acceptable but reviewers in Sydney and to a degree Mary Eagle in Melbourne, (who admittedly trod the same line as other Melbourne reviewers), were able to widen their base and discuss some of the issues the works raised.

Perhaps an indication of the failure to come to terms with an exhibition of the triennial's scale is inherent in the conservatism of the reviewers summed up in Makin's comment that the '81 Triennial is not the place "to look for the heirs to a Henry Moore, Picasso or Rodin."²¹

Certainly there were problems with the exhibition but these relate mainly to running a large sculptural exhibition without properly trained curatorial staff.

Money was also a major problem and though assisted by the Visual Arts Board and The Victorian Ministry of the Arts it is believed that the financial situation reached dire straights about a month before the exhibition.

At one stage, it was rumoured, due to problems with under valuations in tenders, it was touch and go that the exhibition would eventuate.

McCullough acknowledges problems and expressed disappointment that some of the works, particularly those of the students, were poorly exhibited.

However he was unrepentant over the size and presentation of the catalogue claiming he was in a no win situation; no catalogue and he would be criticised, and likewise if he produces a book that does justice to the sculptor's work.

Most works were labelled for the opening and a detailed and numbered layout of works on the La Trobe campus was available with the catalogue.

He defended the catalogue's \$7 price pointing out that it was subsidised by \$3 and its use could easily be pooled by students.

Vandalism McCullough stressed was the main problem with the exhibition. By the second week an unusually large number of works had to be withdrawn, which will raise insurance problems in the future.

Though the vandalism has been put down to pranks during orientation week it has been pointed out that La Trobe seems to suffer more than other institutions from vandalism and car thefts. Its isolation and virtual desertion at night and proximity to a number of institutions leaves property open to wanton destruction.

But for all its faults the First Australian Sculpture Triennial should be measured by its positive contribution. Among the 300 works by 206 artists from Australia and New Zealand there were some remarkable pieces. That such a large number of artists saw fit to participate is in itself a statement that sculpture is alive in this country and insists on being taken seriously.

Though I admit there is a certain cerebral quality missing from most of the works this year their sheer technical size was quite humbling and evoked the most direct response from the public. The public might not be able to come to terms with a piece straight away but they can at least admire a job well done that in turn demands further responses.

It has been suggested that this emphasis on the technical quality of a work is by default a peculiarly Australian characteristic. The theory runs along the lines that Australian sculptors still look to Europe where the finish on a work is not considered particularly important. However when photographed and reproduced in art magazines it develops a certain gloss that we imitate here. It's an interesting theory as far as theories go but could equally be a manifestation of the pioneer ethic; if a job's worth doing it's worth doing properly.

The history of sculptural triennials in Australia, for all their controversy is a healthy one. Sculptors have benefited through the knowledge that their work will be shown honestly away from the commercial circus, the fob to architecture, that too often it has become.

The triennials have provided regular events where artists, critics and the public can come together and compare, argue, and take part in contemporary sculpture. Its sheer diversity has, in the past, guaranteed that it represents the state of sculpture in Australia at the time.

Further, in its presentation it develops a dialogue between sculptors and non-artists involved in installation of the works that provides the framework for a more professional attitude towards sculpture amongst sculptors and workers alike.²²

"The result is the creation of a unique ambiance in which everyone meets everybody and to which the art of sculpture is central".²³

The immediate future of large scale sculpture exhibitions within the tradition of the triennials is not exactly clear. Their value in the past is indisputable, but whether they are any longer necessary, whether the function of sculpture has outgrown such mass

exhibitions, and whether the organisation and finance of such a massive undertaking will be feasible in the future is open to question.

Footnotes

1. Graeme Sturgeon, 'The Development of Australian Sculpture 1788-1975, pp.150-151.
2. Sturgeon, p 179.
3. The Herald, 28/4/67.
4. Ibid, 8/5/57.
5. The Mirror, 15/4/73.
6. The Age , 2/4/75.
7. John Davies, Art & Australia, vol. 16, no 1, Sept '78, Mildura's Seventh Sculptural Triennial', p 4 2.
8. The Herald , 1/3/78.
9. ibid, 2/3/78.
10. The National Times, 10/4/78.
11. Davies p 42.
12. Mildura Council meeting, 25/5/78.
13. Ibid. Note Goebbels "When I hear the word culture I reach for a gun".
14. Ibid, 4/5/78.
15. Sunraysia Daily, 27/5/78.
16. The Herald, 27/1/79.
17. The Sun, 29/3/80.
18. The Herald, 10/3/81.
19. The Age, 4/3/81.
20. The Sun, 4/3/81.
21. Ibid.
22. In 1981 large amounts of steel were donated from steelworks in North Melbourne for the duration of the exhibition creating interest from workers and management alike, (also further breaking the barriers between temporary and permanent works).

23. Sturgeon, p 224.

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