

The Sculpture Years – Rob Harle

Rob Harle (aka Robert Maddox-Harle) spent the years from the early 1970s to 2000. making sculpture. His physical health forced him to stop carving, mostly stone and wood, and concentrate on drawing, digital artwork images and writing.

Rob made his first “sculpture” when he was five years old, a wooden construction with hundreds of coloured wires stretched across inside it, *Communication Device* – uncannily similar to Naum Gabo’s work, which of course he had never seen. Around age fifteen he started consciously making geometric figurative sculpture maquettes from polyurethane 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 1973).. During this time, actually since he left school, he has always written - poetry, articles, short fiction and essays.

After completing his architecture studies there was a major downturn in the building industry so he and his wife left Sydney, moving to the 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 but mainly in stone.

Often he would seek out professional 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 Sculptor’s Guild of NSW, this was short lived but did result in workshops, public education days and some quality exhibitions between 1983 -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 examples are (Fig 2) *Sound of Silence* (1.5m h.) and (Fig 3) *Aquarius* (90cm h.) 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”.

He had not long finished *Moon Goddess*, a large 2.5m h. piece when his maquette of *Locking Piece 3* was selected as the successful entry for a large commission at Eucha/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 both sides. The finished work in situ is shown in Fig. 4. This 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 the sculpture.

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, ie. the curve of a wave, the curve of a well-set sail, the sculptural shape of surfboards and yachts, *set his sculptural destiny*. To expose “the secrets of the archetypal curve”, he said was his sculptural mission – this has 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 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 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 sculptural career to an end in the late nineties. Works from this period were in stone and wood, all found good homes, *Sound of Silence* (1993) and *Goanna Dreaming* (1991) were dearly loved by the children at The Daystar Rudolf Steiner School near Lillian Rock.

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. The following are some quotes from the artist's statement of 1994.

* My sculpture has always been for all people, not for the critics, museum vaults, nor 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 sculpture 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 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 through his highly productive sculpture years he always to continue to write prolifically, especially poetry. But he also wrote numerous articles concerning sculpture, art and alternative design. He is now again concentrating on his poetry writing together with literary and scholarly book reviews.



Fig1 **Harmonic Convergence**, 95cm h. Gosford sandstone. 1987.
Made to celebrate the great Harmonic Convergence event and planetary alignment which happened on 16th August.

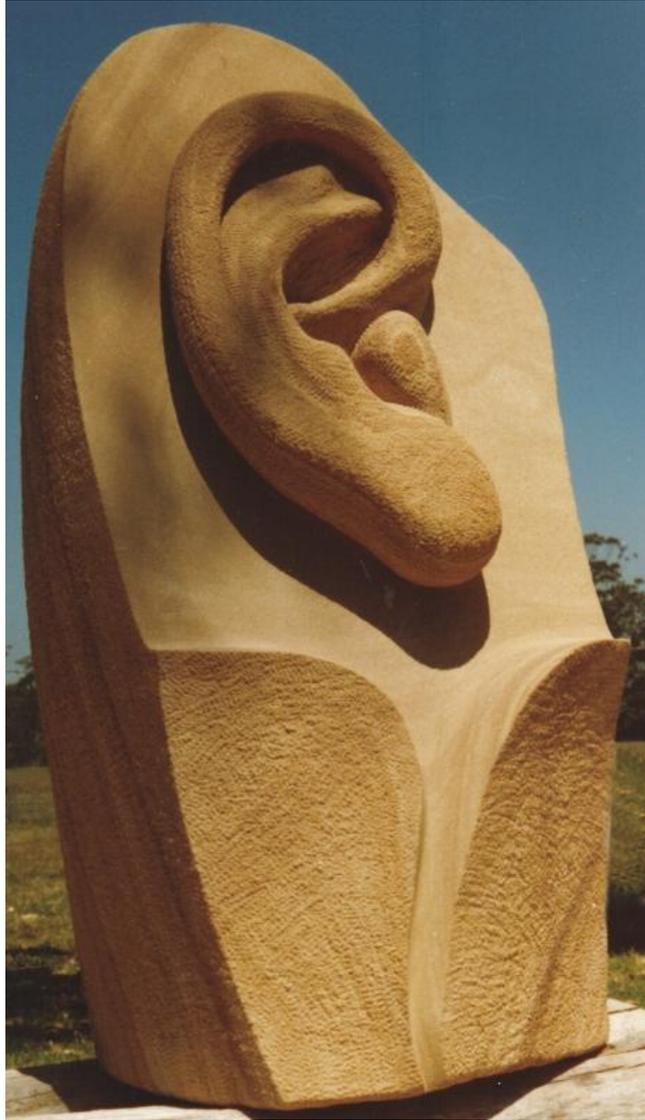


Fig 2 **Sound of Silence**, 1.5m h. Gosford sandstone 1987
The obverse side has a black sphere floating in deep niche.



Fig 3 Aquarius 90cm h. Gosford sandstone 1986

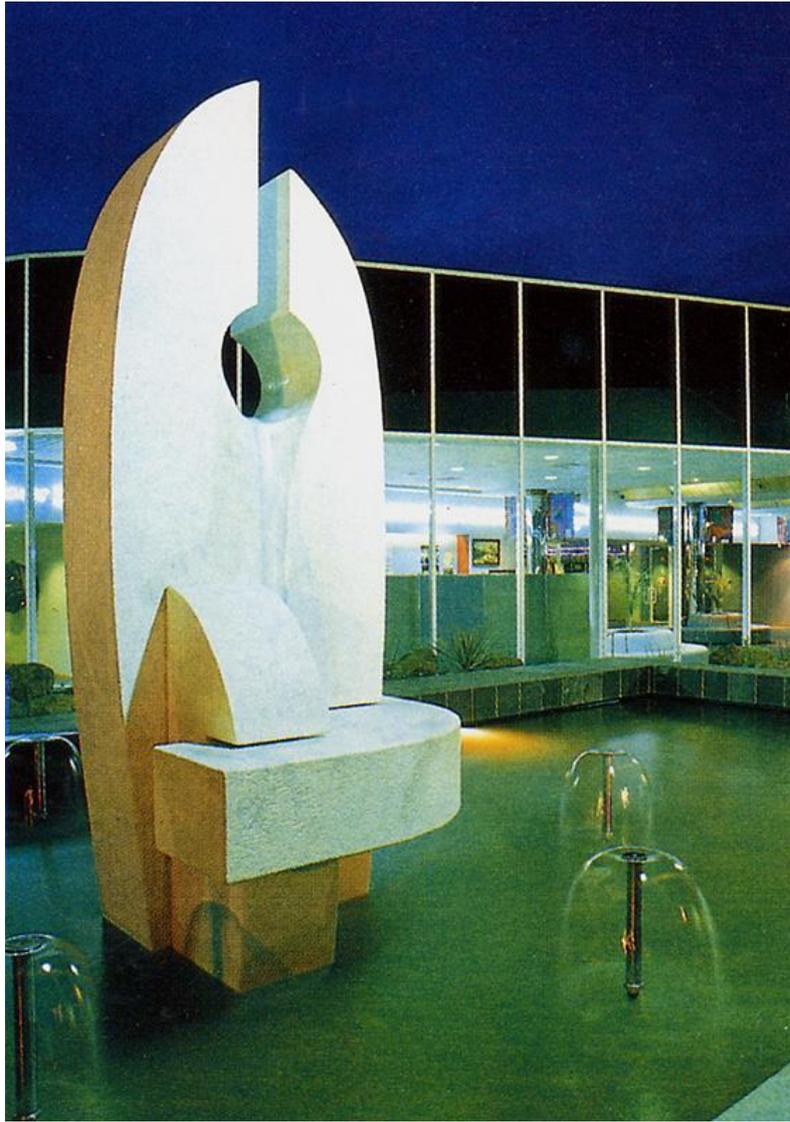


Fig 4 Locking Piece Three 3.9m h. Wombeyan marble 1988



Fig 5 Homage to Henry Moore 95cm h. Camphor laurel 1985



Fig 6 **Ice Cave** 95cm h. Camphor laurel & aluminium 1985
Inspired by the source of the Ganges high in an ice cave in the Himalayas

A poem by Rob which encapsulates the Sculpture Years, from his first volume of poetry, *Scratches & Deeper Wounds* 1996

Sandstone To Ink

Of sandstone dust my spirit formed
a love of stone and water in
the dreaming of the Hawkesbury rift;
I dared to shape this nature's art
to carve and grind and penetrate
and share the vision of our primal source
to fire the soul's of others.

Inspired by sculptors past
Noguchi, Michelangelo and Moore
driven by a sacred muse
whose face remains illusive,
This spirit of the stone in silence
demands an awful price.

To dance on high with spirits fierce
is fraught with danger's sword,
Though double is the razor's edge
when dancing with the naked ape
whose tongue is sharply forked
and heart is hardened with desire
for more and more and more.

Art circus schooled in sabotage
adorned with superficial smiles
you couldn't violate my dream
nor change one mallet's thrust,
But coupled with these fragile bones
disintegrating far too soon
a transmutation of the means
has traded chisel in for sharper pen.
Now once more the ink will flow
or is it boiling blood
to trace its tracks across a page
instead of through the sandstone dust.