

The Interview Paul Selwood



Paul Selwood is a well-known Sydney sculptor who has been exhibiting at the Watters Gallery in Sydney on a regular basis since 1973. He has a wealth of overseas experience, teaching at various art colleges in England, exhibiting as well as travelling extensively. His work within the last decade or so has been informed to a great extent by the environment in which he lives, the countryside just outside the village of Wollombi, two hours north of Sydney.

He was interviewed for **Seriousart.org** in May 06 just before his exhibition at the Charles Nodrum Gallery in Melbourne. The body of work that he produced for this exhibition was a response to a recent trip to Italy.



The sculpture park at Paul Selwood's home at Wollombi NSW

HS: You studied under Lyndon Dadswell at the National Art School, East Sydney, for two years didn't you?

PS: For one year, altogether I was only at East Sydney for two years, 64 and 65. I did the foundation course year 1 and I didn't want to do a second year of foundation, it was a five-year course then, I just wanted to go straight into sculpture. I asked Dadswell if that would be all right, and he said yes but that I would forfeit my diploma. I told him that didn't worry me because I wasn't intending to be a teacher.

A lot of students intended to become teachers?

Most of the students there intended to become teachers but I wasn't thinking about that, I just wanted to get involved in doing sculpture. I

continued to go to other classes as well, but I specialised in sculpture in my second year with Dadswell as the main teacher.

What were his classes like, was he more theoretical or more hands on?

His classes were mostly around modelling the life figure but he encouraged you to move into various other ways of seeing the figure. We had Godfrey Miller for instance as a drawing teacher, and the kind of drawing he was doing at the time and the way we were learning to draw the figure in his class, I wanted to translate into the sculpture class, so that the figure became more of a gesture with the positioning of various elements, the simplification I suppose.

So much more abstract...

Refining down to essentials, heading towards abstraction. So that was the actual class with Dadswell, but in my free time there was more room for abstract work. In the year before that, the first year, I did more abstract work, compositional work, using plaster. Some of those works tended to be similar to what I'm doing now. I was casting geometric forms and assembling them in space, using wire pins to connect them.

So you really had an affinity for the spatial context of forms right from the beginning?

I always looked at space as well as form, whereas a lot of sculptors prior to that time were looking at the form, the whole notion of sculpture was around form. It was form in the sense that Rodin talked about form, the form generated from an interior force creating surfaces. That was the kind of notion of form that sculptors like Brancusi and Henry Moore held. Although they produced sculptures in space, space wasn't considered as an essential ingredient, or as a part of it. Theirs were forms in space rather than form and space.

From the very beginning with my geometric forms, pinning them together, I was considering the spaces between, seeing them as positive elements in the sculpture. The actual physical form of the sculpture was forming the edge if you like, forming the shape, so you then had a form of space juxtapositioned against a form of material. That was something very early in my work.



Rock Forms (Synthesis) 2002
Painted steel

That was probably very unusual to come that early to constructivism, which basically is what it is. Was Dadswell encouraging you at that point, did he see your development as something positive?

I had a good relationship with Dadswell, we talked quite a bit. I don't remember the detail of what we talked about all that much. If you were moving away from rendering the figure literally, he wanted you to explain what you were doing, and why. So that kind of thinking was brought into it...

...a sort of analytical approach. Did you find that helpful?

I did, yeah.

In a way your thinking has continued in that vein.

Yep.

One can see a continuity in your work; you have retained what is valuable. There is an editing process going on where you maintain things that are very positive and eliminate things that are less successful.

I try to eliminate other influences also for example and just focus on my way of working. We all start out with influences but the idea is to discover yourself, and find one's own expression and in doing so it becomes a process of elimination to some extent, not obliterating the influences but discovering your own voice.

You went to England, London, in the early 60s?

I went to London at the end of 1965, at the end of those two years at East Sydney Tech. On the way I went to Tahiti to find a little bit of the romance of Gauguin. Then I went to London and went down to Greece for a while and stayed on one of the great quarries that had been there for thousands of years. One of the marble mines there, was where they mined the pure white translucent marble for the ancient masterpieces. I used to crawl down into this mine to carry out some big chunks. It was fascinating going down there just by torch light with old bits of stuff carved into the walls. There was a working quarry there that had almost gone out of business and I was able to occupy the workshop. That was an interesting experience. It was there that I also begun to work in steel via having to go and have my marble carving points hammered out at the local blacksmith's.

So how did you arrive at that, for up to that point you hadn't really thought about steel as a material had you?

I still hadn't thought about steel. At art school in Sydney I had done a few things in wire and solder, that sort of thing, which was the nearest I got to it, sort of drawings in space.

This was real blacksmithing was it?

All I did there was to shape my marble carving tools. They consisted of a bag of points. You carved away all day working with points and as they got blunt and wrecked you chucked them into an empty bag, and when they were all there you took them to the blacksmiths and hammered them out and retempered them. That was my first experience of working with steel and experiencing a very traditional blacksmith's shop. It was dark, you had the forge, you had the bellows, the guy with the big hammer on the anvil, a jolly fellow, but neither of us could speak a word of each others language, but we worked out what we wanted to do, and he was happy to show me how to do it. Then I just took the points back and continued carving marble.

A little later I arrived back in London and got a job as a technical assistant at the Royal College of Art. I had only just turned twenty at that point. I worked there for the next three years and found myself in a position of being in control of the studios and equipment, but I also came in contact with all the staff there. I had my own studio; I was better set up than a student with my work going on and staff coming in to talk. There were quite a few of the 50s sculptors like Ralph Brown around. Professor Bernard Meadows was head of sculpture. He was Henry Moore's first assistant. In a way Meadows was more traditional, more old fashioned if you like than Dadswell, but he really liked my work. I arrived there from Greece and I had showed him photos of sculptures I'd done in Sydney and he really liked them, and after I had been working there for a while he asked me if I wanted to become a student. I didn't immediately say I would become a student because at that point I started connecting with St Martin's School. I had gone over there for some seminars and discussion groups.



Eye of the Sun 92
Painted steel
160 x 165 x 40 cm

Was Anthony Caro teaching there then?

Yes Caro and David Annesley and Phillip King and Bill Tucker and people like that were there and I found them quite stimulating. There was a difference between the schools in terms of their philosophy and the way they were going. Looking back on it obviously St Martin's was very dynamic and new but the Royal College was very interesting too in so much as it gave you a sense of what the routine of being a sculptor would be. Even now I look back on those days and I can remember Meadows working in his studio, very energetic, very focused and systematic. He turned up every morning on time, marched into the studio with the energy of a Sea Captain, I think he was ex navy; demonstrating a strong work ethic. Just watching him with all his assistants helping him to produce the work, seeing the bronze foundry in action and watching what was going on, taught me a lot. Then there was this whole school of fibreglass, some of the young sculptors who were coming in as visiting lecturers; many of them were working in fibreglass. It was a medium that was very popular. I started using that medium because in some ways I was like a student in that I was studying what was going on around me.

Did you find fibreglass sympathetic to your ideas?

I made some very nice pieces in fibreglass, and then I started combining steel elements with fibreglass. It was only when I left the Royal College and had a studio of my own that I started to make steel sculptures as such. The influence of Caro was becoming more serious in my work. Not only Caro but the whole philosophy surrounding St Martin's.

So you were just as interested in the theoretical discussion that was going on at the time?

Absolutely. At the same time as I left the Royal College I started working for the Kasmin Gallery in London where many of the famous international painters and sculptors were showing, especially the New York painters and many of the prominent British painters at the time. Not the Pop artists so much, except for Hockney.

Hockney was at the Royal College?

Hockney was at the Royal College, Howard Hodgkin was at the Royal Academy before that and he was a good friend of mine at the time and teaching at Chelsea School of Art.

You were really in London at a very important time, there were a lot of influences floating around, a new Modernism with the New York School and so on.

You call it new Modernism, of course Modernism was quite old at that stage with Matisse and so on, but this was a whole new direction, getting away from expressionism and into more refined classicism.

Did you find that aesthetic suited you?

I didn't think of it as refined classicism, I don't think I had the exact words, but I did think about it as being abstract and not referring to things outside of itself. Again the spatial dimension that I had discovered with my work with Dadswell I was able to rediscover in a way, well not exactly rediscover, although I had lost track of it carving



Song 2006
Patinated Steel
13 x 17 x 12 cm



Verse Cube 2006
Patinated Steel
24 x 31 x 18 cm

marble in Greece, I was able to find it again, which was very appropriate in light of the work that was being shown in London.

Obviously your sensibility was really suited to that form of abstraction.

I guess so.

If you'd been born a bit earlier maybe you wouldn't have been so attracted to sculpture?

One of the things that Dadswell talked about at East Sydney, which was very much there in the St Martin's aesthetic, was ideas of tension and gravity and so on. Ideas and qualities, which were not exactly visible but were concepts you could make visible through the form, through the juxtaposition of form and space.

A change came when I left the Royal College. At that point I had exhibited in various galleries and various group shows, and I was invited to teach sculpture at the Bath Academy of Art and I moved to a village near Bath and set up a studio in a barn. I could have had access to all the equipment I needed at the Bath Academy but I had my little welder and I preferred to work at home. Some of these works were very large sculptures made from very small elements by a process of addition. So quite small pieces of steel, about six inches long to a foot long were put together to envelop large volumes of space. The influence of David Smith came to me after the influence of Caro rather than the other way around. That was looking at an earlier kind of aesthetic, which was connected to expressionism but also connected to welded steel sculpture, which was related to spatial concepts. Some of that influence I started to draw on, not so much in a literal way but more in a metaphoric kind of way. The influence of David Smith lasted a long time and it could still be there although a lot of the other influences have faded away.

I have finally found my own voice and a lot of that has been discovered in living here in Wollombi and persevering in the studio on a regular basis and responding to a certain extent to imagery in the landscape. That has been a kind of synthesis of the landscape, an analysis of landscape in order to recreate a kind of mythical landscape if you like.

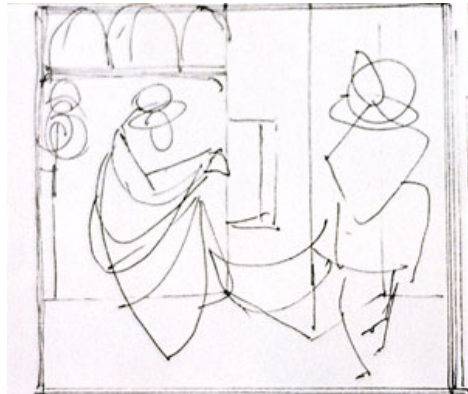
With the big pieces I've drawn profiles of rock forms and hills and I've translated those drawings into steel cut outs and then I've assembled them according to the principles of sculpture rather than the constraints of what the landscape is. It is a reassembling of the landscape, putting together the profiles in a different configuration to establish a kind of synthetic landscape.

Looking at the big yellow sculpture in the park there (Rock Forms Synthesis), it appears to be derived from the landscape and yet it is its own hybrid thing. It has all the sculptural elements implying the landscape without it being representational. Is this the abstraction you're trying to approach?

I'm always looking for a sculptural solution. I'm a sculptor and I believe in sculpture and I want sculpture to have an existence which is somehow relevant. The earlier ones, the positive/negatives ones, incorporate the same kind of idea. They are derived from what I was seeing in the landscape, the weathering of rocks and the caves. I was looking at how you can get sun on the surface of rocks and right next to it you can get a dark hole, a cave. It was this juxtapositioning of highlight and deep shadow that I wanted to play with.



Apian Way 2005
Patinated Steel
27 x 35 x 26 cm



Sketchbook entry



Watch Tower 2005
Patinated Steel
19 x 22 x 11 cm

The ones you will be showing at Charles Nodrum in Melbourne are also more or less playing with that interior/exterior thing, only more in an architectural form. Is this new body of work mainly based on that recent trip to Italy?

There are a few different things. At the moment quite a few of my small sculptures are following different paths, each following up some of the themes I've been developing. The ones like Music in the House have been a consistent theme for some time, then there are other ones which have this architectural influence enriched by my recent trip to Italy where I was able to look at archaic architecture again. I found there was a tonnage of stone piled high in the air and I found that inspiring and to some extent oppressive at the same time. It was interesting to translate the mass and energy of that into sculpture. Having found a certain source of scrap iron that was fairly heavy, thick pieces, and finding out how I could work with that, the way the steel could be bent and curved etc, suggested the shapes of things like Roman arches, piazzas and old buildings. So there was a bit of conscious representation going on there.



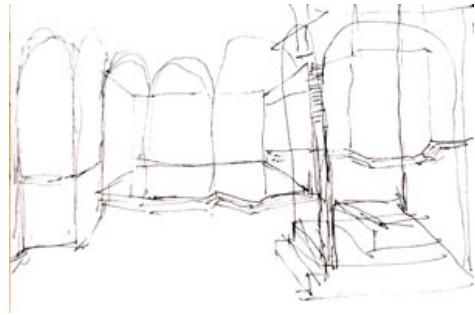
Venice 2005
Burnished Steel
68 cm high



Venice 2005

Did you do any drawing while you were in Italy?

Yes I did, particularly drawings of frescoes rather than actual buildings. I liked the way the perspectives worked in them. From the sketches I've allowed them to suggest ways of making sculpture without literally suggesting a sculpture.



Sketchbook entry

Quite a bit of this exhibition is the Italian journey ...Venice, Guidecca, Apian Way, Watch Tower and that little one there, which I call Town Square, which is actually based on the Sienna piazza.

I spent a lot of time in church in Italy, I was going to four churches a day looking at stuff and I was really into the perspective that is mainly achieved through architectural imagery in frescoes. These are paintings of buildings with corridors and rooms and staircases leading from one place to another, plus within the frescoes there are people doing various things in various places and so on.



Sketchbook entry

The fresco design is like a theatre isn't it, where the story is presented? Do you feel that happening in the sculpture where as players we could move through the pieces, the same way the artist has presented the figures moving through the architectural space in the frescoes?

In that piece Venice, there is a certain degree of theatre happening where you have the animated staircase, which is a kind of reverse perspective. The group on the staircases replaces the group of human figures, but it is still a cluster of forms.

So you feel a sort of animation?

Yeah, but the aim is not necessarily to recreate the frescoes or what the fresco is about, but just to use some of the aesthetic notions within them, the purely structural notions within them, and just play with it to see what one can do with it. In some ways they look a bit like some of those architectural forms but in other ways they aren't much to do with it at all, they are simply progressions of my own sculptural development.

In a lot of them you are working with the profile almost as if you are continuing the illusion of space through from the frescoes and retaining



Doge's Palace 2005
Patinated Steel
50 x 40 x 44 cm



Hill Town 2006
Patinated Steel
22 x 68 x 36 cm

it in the three dimensional object.

That's why in some of those staircases the stairs are completely distorted and impossible because that's how they look in a perspective drawing of a staircase but if you translate that into reality the tapering perspective becomes a triangle instead of a rectangle and so on, so you get that interesting play.

In other works like that one there, which I call the Doge's Palace, which is the Doge's Palace in Venice which is an incredibly Baroque building, I have played with that idea. I wanted to keep that turn and twist and plane going so that it becomes a continuous form.

Yes, but it is still within the limitation of the four walls. You keep returning to the façade from the interior.

I think there is actually a fairly even balance and distribution between the twisted and bent forms, which create the speed and movement in the work, with the staid architectural forms.

Well that is what gives the pieces their consistency, as you have retained this 'remnant' of a wall. They are not ruins but just remnant memories of architecture.

Architectural remnants and memory are certainly a good way of looking at those although some of the works I do think of them more in terms of ruins. Some of these like Hill Town, reference Celtic ruins. I like the idea that these reference stone architecture and mimic stone while being made in steel. There is a connection in my mind with an Iron Age notion.

Well the dimension of the steel does mimic a certain dimension in architecture with the size of the cut stone etc.

It has that visual weight and gravity I feel.

You are not particularly aware of it as steel for you are much more interested in the configuration and really the material is not evident. I don't even notice the flame cutting; it is just there as part of the construction.

In some way they seem to mimic stone architecture but also some of those forms look like clay in that I have disguised the steel by giving them an even patina.

I don't see your sculptures as very Caro-esque for instance where everything is constructed and placed one after the other. Your work is more thought out as modelling and seen as a whole.

Yes, quite different to Caro in terms of the way I treat scale and I think they do have various kind of representation, albeit fairly abstract, with references to architecture, which is presented more as modelling. There is an implied monumentality in the work.

Yes, with this piece (the Apian Way) you can see it in terms of its actual scale but at the same time you can see it in another scale, a monumental scale, like rows of columns.

The name Apian Way was applied to the sculpture once I had made it, but once I realised that it reminded me of the Apian Way, which I had just been to, I allowed that memory to help me to complete the sculpture. It didn't set out to be that but it looked like that, for example I used this top element as the lintel and so on. There is something very sculptural about those big blocks of stone and the ruins and the rubble of the archaic architecture.

But you've brought your modelling through from the other pieces, your bending and twisting. You haven't just butted things together; you've got your angles and transitions happening.

Yes, and there is a whole fluidity in that kind of modelling which is something that goes right through this group of work. Steel, when you heat it, is a very flexible material, and when you treat it the way I've treated it here it becomes a lot more fluid. The softness of it reminds me of doing it in clay.

The twisted arches in this one (Doge's Palace) look very intentional. I know there is happenstance and accidents and so on, but these look really intentional.

There is not that much happenstance in it. It is mostly all intent by the time I've done that because it must be about the twentieth that I have made like that so I am now using that technique fairly precisely. I know pretty much what it is going to look like and of course I can adjust the planes to one another.

So you just heat it up again and adjust it if you need to?

Yep. In this work Music in the House, it's ultimately a form in which you're looking through a layered set of drawings, which allow you to progress through, and if you step back you begin to see those passages that allow the eye to progress through.

Yes, what I like about this piece is that it is like sheets of paper and as you keep going back these edges appear and disappear. Some sculptors would be tempted to carve into those edges but you've kept the edges as is and allowed all the animation to happen through the centre.

Yes the original rectangle is still intact. If you look over the top you can see the edge of the original rectangle.

I have shown this bodywork of work to different groups of people now and each group of people have focused on different elements, different sculptures entirely have fired their imaginations.

That's a good sign isn't it?

It is, it's not a bad sign at all, it is interesting for me.



Apian Way 2005
Patinated Steel
27 x 35 x 26 cm



Music in the House 2004
Patinated Steel
80 x 84 x 60 cm

[TOP](#)

HOME	GALLERY	ARCHIVE	NEWS/EXHIBITIONS	CONTACT
----------------------	-------------------------	-------------------------	----------------------------------	-------------------------

copyright © 2006 Serious Art