

## Paul Selwood

By Bridget Macleod

Paul Selwood is one of Australia’s foremost sculptors, creating beautifully fluid, complex works, often from a single sheet of steel, through his cut and fold technique. The Wollombi-based artist spoke to Artist Profile in Issue 41 about his mythical introduction to steel on the Greek island of Paros, what continues to draw him to this material, and some of the unique opportunities and complexities that it presents.



The Museum, 2013, painted steel, 205 x 218 x 120 cm, photograph Stephen Oxenbury



**You studied at East Sydney Tech under Lyndon Dadswell and Godfrey Miller but left after just 18 months – why was that?**

After seeing Ian Fairweather’s ‘Drunken Buddha’ show at Macquarie Galleries I was so moved that I hitch-hiked up to Bribie Island to visit him. After spending a day with Fairweather I made it all the way to Cooktown, North Queensland. On returning to Sydney I got a job as a labourer, saved some pounds and was soon on my way to Europe. Hitch-hiking was the mode of transport for art students those days and one of our important destinations was the Greek island of Paros. Parean marble was the whitest, most translucent and most desired by the Greco-Roman sculptors. My girlfriend Rhonda Smailes and I found ourselves living in an ancient quarry, where I carved an egg with a Sydney Opera House coming out of it.

**You first worked with steel at the quarry, where you learnt from a blacksmith how to shape and temper the carving tools. Did this initial experience with the material have an effect on how you continued to use it?**

It was the first stage of an initiation where I felt the hot metal become malleable in the forge. I think of steel as a soft, shapeable material. The Parean blacksmith has become a mythical character for me – Hephaestus, god of the forge. This was before tourism. In Paros things were as they had been for millennia. The bag of steel points was carried on a donkey. It was as if one was living the Odyssey.

**You lived in London between 1965 and 1971 and worked with many leading sculptors, such as Anthony Caro. What did you learn during this time and has it had a continued impact on your work?**

I arrived in London with only 10 pounds left and needed a job. I showed my slides to Professor Bernard Meadows, head of sculpture at the Royal College of Art (RCA). He must have been impressed, as he gave me a job as a technical assistant and later offered to take me on as a student.

I learnt from Meadows the professionalism and application to the routine work of sculpture. I had my own studio space there and got to know many of the leading sculptors who came in as visiting lecturers. Bill (William) Tucker took a particular interest in my steel and fibreglass constructions and he introduced me to Saint Martin’s School of Art, where Anthony Caro had established an avant-garde sculpture department. Compared with the RCA, Saint Martin’s was the new generation and I



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and subtract quickly, and it holds your thought in real time. With steel, you are thinking creatively and making simultaneously.

**You manage to get an incredible fluidity from a seemingly unwieldy material. Tell me about your physical practice and the tools you use to create this effect.**

Over the years I have done a lot of drawing directly into steel plate with the oxy torch. Drawing is a conduit from the brain, a bodying forth and embodying of thought. I think this has characterised my sculpture since I evolved the cut and fold technique and moved away from the Caro-influenced assembly and construction of found elements. I have a well-equipped studio for metalworking but on some larger works I access industrial workshops to make certain parts for the sculpture.

**Some of your complex works are created from a single piece of steel. Why put what seems like a limitation onto yourself?**

It was a natural evolution of the process of drawing in steel. Leading on from my interest in the physicality of the material, I found the cut and fold technique produced more from less. It was a new idea that instantly produced what seemed to me to be unique works. Rather than a limitation, a single plane of steel when cut and folded in various ways develops new meaning while maintaining the unity of the whole.

**Before you work in steel you will sketch out your ideas and often create a maquette in paper. Why is this level of planning important?**

It's mainly about sketching. Drawing. I can create a lot of variations on a theme in quick time in paper before going into the heavy work of steel. I can do it at night in the drawing studio or anywhere.

At a recent residency in Alice Springs I would drive out along the MacDonnell ranges drawing the landscape and rock forms and then applying the cut and fold technique, working towards an articulation of form and space. I wanted to see how I would 'feel the country' and model that feeling into sculpture using cut and folded paper as an initial sketch medium, then translating the sketches into sculpture back in the studio. I do not limit myself to this process but it has produced some important works.

**Your works are generally made to be viewed from all angles, 'in the round'. Why do you think this is important? Does this add a level of difficulty to your planning?**

It is important because it is one of the possibilities of sculpture. It's unique to sculpture. It is more complicated to balance the relationships of parts and 'shape the spaces' in a complex work but the very crux of the matter is to find continuous clear correspondence of form from all views.

**What impact do you think the environment the sculpture is placed in has on the work?**

I am interested in the psychology of perception. How we focus on an object in a white box in a gallery compared to the same object on the ground when we are standing in the street. Take a screwed-up piece of paper and put it on a white plinth in an art gallery. You are inviting the public to examine all the shapes, folds and nuances of light that there might be. You might be saying is this sculpture? But on the ground, it is only a piece of screwed-up paper.

**Often your works are placed directly on the ground, or on a very minimal plinth. Why is this?**

Historically the plinth was a remnant of architecture or the built environment on which the sculpture served as a decorative element. Caro saw the plinth as a convention that had a limiting effect on the expressive possibilities of sculpture. Putting his large works directly on the ground allowed him to extend horizontally. This was one of his important innovations. Sydney's Sculpture by the Sea challenges sculptors to compete with nature on a grand scale in the open air, like the sculpture park at Storm King Art Center in America.

**I'm interested in your perspective cut-outs.**

There are two main theoretical strands to my practice. One is involved with illusory space, re-presenting perspective drawing in the cut-outs. The other deals with real and constructed sculptural space. The two have an historic convergence in the Cubist collage.

I have been doing the perspective cut-outs since the early 1980s. They began on paper as a speculative drawing process towards the possibility of future three-dimensional sculpture. At one point, having arrived at what looked like a good proposition, I decided to cut away the background in order to better visualise what the sculpture would be. I was impressed by the heightened illusion of form resulting from this and decided to do a big one on rusted steel sheet. On the paper, I differentiated the planes with washes and shading of paint. On the steel, I wanted to keep the rust, so I used flat and gloss varnish on opposite planes which considerably enhanced the illusion of the third dimension. Steel is associated with mass and weight, so the works were further enhanced by an illusion of impossible gravity. Heavy architectural forms appear to be floating. The illusion is continued to the wall which becomes space. By extension, the ground the viewer is standing on is called into question.

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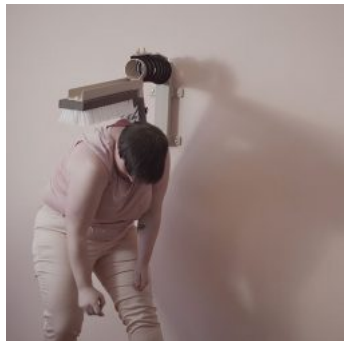
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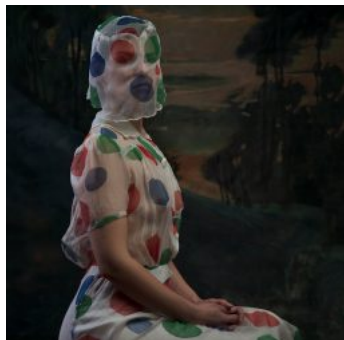
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