

The story of the studios: A creative partnership across ten different workspaces
Meliesa Judge and Will Kuiper at Liquid Metal Studios



It was the mid 80's in small town Adelaide. Niche punk culture had become mainstream and evolved into the strange phenomenon of secretaries commuting to day jobs with dark rimmed eyes and hair that had gone through the spin drier. Art school was a human zoo of oddballs – sporting purple mohawks, metal studded faces and the incumbent tragic drug issues.

The Art School's foundry had already stopped operating. Figurative art and cast bronze was deeply unfashionable. 'Damage dialogues' and post-modern art as a confessional, underpinned the flight away from the object that became 80's and 90's sculpture in Australia. None-the-less the sculpture department workshops were still well equipped. A technician who was a ship builder, with a wry sense of humour, guided the art students through their hair-brained projects. The kiln rooms roared and radiated. Firing is a discipline that tethers the artist to reality. I learnt to understand the flow of burning gas as it curled through a padded box, around the heavy coil-built clay figures I was making, as early experiments in figurative form.

Will was in his final year, constructing huge fabricated forms and struggling to translate his ideas into obligatory artspeak. I gave him my thesaurus. We shared a group of friends, there was a band, there was a series of share-houses. Henley beach, when it was still shabby, allowed us to live for a while in a Deco flat with marble staircases leading up from the beachfront. The changing vista of the sea was ever present and crept into the art-work. In winter the ocean was exclusively ours.

Studio spaces: Brompton was an industrial wasteland before gentrification. The pub had a topless bar, advertised by a crudely painted, pinky fleshed torso, just boobs with no head or arms. A block up the road was the Bandidos club-house that was later blown up by a rival bkie gang. Our warehouse opposite the pub housed mobs of us aspiring artists; painters, sculptors, potters, jewellers and postmodernists who needed thinking space. Derelict buildings on short leases, marked for development, were our only choice. Another studio was just off Hindley St in a labyrinthine building, crumbling like the old underworld family that owned it.

Seeking to make beauty in grungy, dark and ugly buildings, while drunks piss up against the walls, takes a certain kind of tenacity. Will fixed the doors, replaced locks, screened windows in each place we moved to. Security was always an issue. I would only work nights if he was there also. The last and best of these shared spaces was an old smallgoods factory, back in Brompton. One of the cold rooms became my slow drying clay space. The ceilings silted black dust and everything smelt

slightly smoked, but it worked. There were twelve of us there and friendships that have survived to this day.

Full time work didn't stop us both from making art. While I was at Artlab I kept a studio space and pottered there in the evenings, coiling huge heads and fragile figures. Will fabricated massive organic planished copper forms and exhibited widely. Bronze casting was the natural progression. Some of the others were interested to explore the medium so the group secured a grant toward equipment & materials, and Will built the first bronze furnace and kiln. We found mentors who ran a small art foundry in the hills who guided us through our first few castings. The rest we learnt by trial and error.

Will and I loved bronze from the get-go. It was the perfect fusion of our knowledge. Bronze casting rapidly became central to our practice while at the same time shunting us out of group studios. The casting process is risky, time intensive, physically demanding, messy and requires precision – it needed dedicated space. We set up independently in 1994, rebuilt the equipment again. The next year our first show of bronze sculpture in the premises of Elaine Melhuish, president of the Womens Business Foundation, brought sales and reviews. It felt like we were going somewhere.

Our studio name, inspired by the iridescent fluidity of the bronze in its molten form, was registered in 97. We kept the word 'studios' plural in our name for good reason. The creative space we have at home today, with salvaged tall glass windows gazing down a quiet valley, is the tenth workspace we have shared.

There was a studio in the south of France where we spent the long summer of 2001, partially funded by a Churchill Fellowship. Our intensive journey through the great art collections of Europe was like adrenaline for our creative minds. In Montelieu both of us worked around the clock, challenged by new ideas, new materials and expert advice. The Pyrenees in the distance were drenched in soft summer light through evenings that stretched out forever. The five story building had been a tannery which once employed a whole village, it was now just big empty spaces circled by bats at night, and a handful of travelling sculptors from all over Europe.



The Old Tannery Foundry, Montelieu

The strength of contemporary figurative sculpture in Europe shifted the paradigm for us, strengthening our conviction that the figure can be part of a wider dialogue and sphere of references. As individuals all of us draw on personal knowledge to interpret the present, the inclusion of the figure in art engages everyone in the reflective discourse of an artist's work.

Our second visit to Europe together, just a few years ago, reinforced this understanding, especially in Amsterdam, which has consistently invested in intelligent and lyrical sculpture for its streets and squares over many decades.

Liquid Metal has been housed in another reclaimed warehouse since 2003. Tucked into the hills face zone in Lynton, it is a sturdy plain building with a history as a quarry site and a council depot. It was empty and trashed for a decade, used for remnant storage when we moved in. We cleaned it up and restored it to function. The kilns were rebuilt for the third time, earlier experience resulting in a design that is clean, economical, EPA approved and brilliant to use. Our entire sculpting process is now moving toward zero waste. We are thankful for Mitcham Council's support, enabling a safe workspace. We share the site with a hard working green recycle depot, and the unsung heroes of the SES. We often work with the assistance of Kenny Monger who is a specialist model maker and mould maker from Bristol, and highly skilled in a wide field of material technologies.

Those early harsh years were a struggle but we were sustained by a community of collectors and art lovers who encouraged the work, who brought us projects, suggested contacts and bought sculptures for their homes.

I like to think about the reasons why an individual buys a sculpture. Sometimes it is just decoration but usually it is something deeper, the sculpture stirs a personal response, reflects an element of identity. People tell me they have invested in something they can keep for life. Often it is to mark an occasion, an anniversary, a change in life or a significant birthday. One client bought the sculpture she had coveted, to celebrate the moment when her youngest child finished school. A father and daughter bought a pair of dancing cranes, each keeping one for now, one day to be together again. A theologian bought one of the maquettes to celebrate the completion of her PHD thesis. An architect ordered a significant sculpture to reflect on a book that had changed the direction of his life.

Our upcoming retrospective is all about the artisan sculptor. It is about the combination of our skills and insights, of individual analysis alongside structured collaboration, the mastery of materials linked to creative insight. It is an intensive studio bringing unique sculptures into existence. We are delighted to open our doors to you for the month of May – to share our journey – new work and old. We look forward to seeing you.

Liquid Metal Studios.

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