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SCULPTING MARY WARD

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MELIESA JUDGE AND PETER WILLIS

Six years ago, Meliesa Judge, a young South Australian sculptor recently returned from a Churchill Fellowship in Europe, was commissioned by the Catholic Loreto Schools in Australia to create and cast life-sized bronze statues of their founder, Mary Ward, to be erected in the larger Loreto Colleges around Australia. Most of these have now been completed. Early this year, Meliesa and her husband, fellow sculptor Will Kuiper, invited me, Peter, to their studio foundry. I was struck by the almost sacramental depth and beauty of their work. Our conversation explored the variety of interlocking processes that had surrounded the creation of these statues.

PUBLIC SCULPTURE AND ITS DEMANDS

Meliesa and Will work mainly in bronze. They choose it for its strength, its timeless beauty, durability and suitability for outdoor conditions. They have worked together for 20 years, as independent artists, and have been commissioned to create a variety of public sculptures for diverse groups and communities. Much of their work is public sculpture for community enrichment. In the Waite Arboretum, a special botanical park around a large wetland in suburban Adelaide, Meliesa and Will were commissioned to create bronze sculptures of some of the birds native to this area. They are now installed in particularly lively and evocative poses and seem, to me, to act as a kind of consciousness distiller. One of Will's bronze wolves guards the Hindmarsh Municipal Library in Adelaide and is happily embraced by passing children. In the conversations in their studio, I became aware of the dimensions of sculpture as a powerfully physical, aesthetic form, which puts sustained demands on the artist in imagination and execution.

Meliesa referred to the 'visceral materiality' of sculpture that kept her and Will grounded in reality. When reflecting on the multiple processes in sculpting, she recalled:

> *...the grit and slip of clay, the slow emergence of form from shapeless mass, the slurry of plaster, the hot honey smell of wax melting, liquid rubber gelling into shape, mapping the path of burning gas as it spirals through a kiln, hot moulds that weigh a quarter of a tonne yet are as fragile as eggshells, the astonishing, wondrous, iridescent fluidity of molten bronze, the crucible glowing orange. I find myself looking into a 'volcano', looking back into the cauldron of creation. And then, when the firing is over, the black crust of the cast bronze contours in a mountain of plaster waste, like the first clues emerging from an archaeological dig, three dimensional jigsaws of jagged fragments. I live in my dust mask and gloves amongst shards and splinters of ground metal. I spend whole days in the silent chamber of earplugs and facemasks, every ounce of energy focused on the spinning of the tungsten-tipped grinders. The final serenity of a completed work never reveals the whirlwind of activity that has brought it into being.*

PUBLIC PORTRAIT SCULPTURE

For Meliesa and Will, portrait art in public sculpture has to be some kind of a living expression of the person being presented in bronze—their wider impact, ideas, aspirations, joys and sorrows. The creator of a public portrait statue has to attempt to coalesce the person's multiple identities into a unified, symbolic, embodied figure. In the case of the public portrait sculpture of Mary Ward, it was important for Meliesa to know not only who Mary was and what she looked like, but also what she had become in the minds and hearts of her Sisters and the children they taught.

Meliesa had already realised, when she took on the Mary Ward job, that she was entering this high risk, high reward public work. There was to be the massive time and technical commitment required of large-scale bronze work, as well as a demanding exposure to the expectations and responses of so many interested stake holders. For Meliesa the support and understanding of Will, the strength of his comfort and challenge was essential. She wrote that:

> *...we have learnt to allow each other the space for new work to evolve, for creative flashes of inspiration and then, by contrast, to work as a tightly choreographed team for mould making and bronze casting. His is the voice I trust most when I am in the creative stage of new work; he has the critical eye and the intuitive analysis essential to my creative dilemmas.*

INVOLVING THE STAKEHOLDERS

Meliesa and I reflected on the commissioning process. The practicalities of the formal commissioning involved senior members of the Loreto community from all over Australia who worked closely with Meliesa in the early stages. In addition, staff and students in Loreto schools throughout Australia contributed reflections and encouragement. Students from the Adelaide Loreto School visited the studios and worked as studio assistants over several years. Their fresh, unedited responses to the sculpture as it developed were yet another informal influence on the statue's evolution. Jacky Hamilton, Head of the school's Art Department, visited the studio regularly and documented the work in progress.

CLARIFYING THE TASK

Meliesa's job was thus to cast a life-sized image of this courageous woman that would somehow represent her multiple talents and character in an accessible way.

Four major elements seemed to be integral to Mary's identity for Meliesa to represent in the statue. In the first place, Mary as founder and spiritual leader was obviously archetypal and symbolic. She was woman, visionary, founder, powerful protagonist, sisterly companion. Besides these heroic dimensions there was also her real historical self. She was an historical figure shaped by the events and circumstances of her times. Her statue would need to look more or less as she would have looked in her lifetime. Then there was her 'Loreto' identity. She must somehow be presented as belonging to and representative of the Order and its Sisters and relevant to the contemporary young women who studied at their schools. Finally as a statue, a thing of beauty, the representation of Mary Ward would have to embody something of her Sisters' aesthetic: refined, cerebral, even regal—but no sentimentality and certainly no kitsch.

These requirements needed considerable research to discover who Mary Ward was, what she looked like, what she did and how she was regarded by her Sisters, her superiors and the people she served.

GETTING TO KNOW MARY WARD

Mary Ward's life, 1585 to 1645, coincided with much of the reign of Elizabeth I. During this era, Shakespeare was writing his works and Europeans had just begun settling in America. The telescope was invented. Most of the population still thought the earth was flat. The printing press was invented and came into common use just over 100 years before Mary's birth. This brought about an information revolution more powerful than the internet has been in our generation. For the first time the power of text, of the written word, was in the hands of ordinary people. Once they learned how to read, they had a powerful tool for freedom. Mary dedicated her life to this learning and specifically to the education of women.

She was born to landowning gentry in Yorkshire, one of the rebel families that upheld a strong Catholic resistance to the separatist regime in England. As a young woman she joined the English refugee nuns in St Omer, in France and then moved back to England where she founded the Institute which later become the Loreto Sisters, in 1609. Mary wanted her Sisters to live outside the enclosure of the traditional convent and to wear ordinary street clothes, rather than a habit, so that they could go where they were needed, crossing between Catholic and Protestant provinces of Europe without attracting undue attention. She herself walked across Europe, from Munich to Rome and back, several times, as she endeavoured to establish the Institute's separate houses. Her Sisters became well respected and the Order flourished. However, Mary's Institute became caught up in church politics and was eventually suppressed by the Inquisition. Mary was subsequently arrested and imprisoned for allegedly disobeying the Papal Bull which ordered that her Institute must be closed. On her release she returned to Yorkshire where she died fifteen years later.

Meliesa and clay Mary Ward figure
Photograph by Jacky Hamilton

The Institute survived and grew in size in Europe and America for several hundred years. In the late nineteenth century, the Irish branch was invited to Australia's goldfields in Ballarat and from there, convent schools were founded and flourished throughout Australia. Mary, their indomitable but discredited foundress long since deceased, was not officially removed from church censure by the

Vatican until 1907. There were of course no photographs of Mary but there were some formalised sketches, showing an Elizabethan gentlewoman with a strong and level gaze.

When we came to discuss the sculpture's physical requirements and specifications which Meliesa had distilled from her historical research and community consultations, we drew mainly from Meliesa's notes.

Meliesa modelling clay head
Photograph by Jacky Hamilton

FINAL SPECIFICATIONS

The statue had to look like Mary Ward. Meliesa and Will, who always use life models for large works like this, found a perfect model. She bore a strong resemblance to the Mary in the historical etchings of the Loreto community and was interested in the project. It was a great discovery. As Meliesa wrote:

> *The facial structure was there, the shape of cheekbones, of mouth, the strong jaw and deep set eyes and she was a willing and disciplined professional who put her heart into the lengthy work.*

Besides the recognisable structure, the statue was designed with a dynamic feel, what Meliesa called 'a strongly walking position, so the model had to hold the unbalanced pose of mid-stride'. Meliesa and Will built a rig for her, 'to hold her knee, the back foot, the chest bone to take the weight as the torso leans forward, the hands'. She posed on one giant turntable while the clay sculpture grew on another beside her. Meliesa could line them up by eye, or through a grid, and follow the outlines and profiles against the white walls of the studio. The walking pose has to be enhanced with a sense of energy.

As Meliesa wrote:

> *Mary Ward had to be depicted with energy. The walking pose is that of someone who has travelled far and has a distance to go. Spirituality in action is the primary metaphor of this work. To complete it, she carries a small cross, a double decade of the rosary in her hand, around her wrist. Something intimate that in a long walk becomes a meditation. A woman's faith held close. The initial message should be read in that single first glance, from a distance.*

The clothing of the statue had its own challenges. Meliesa wanted her statue's clothes to have:

> *the rough texture of homespun, the hurried hand of light shifting in dappled shade, the sense of immanence, the next step about to*

happen, something glimpsed but not quite seen, movement and shadows. I researched every item of clothing precisely, jacket, coat, length of skirt, and then I just let the modelling ripple around the figure, the wind pushes her skirt back and throws her coat open in structured geometry.

Finally, a statue like this, to be located in the grounds of an educational institution, needed to be designed to carry clues and additions for the audience. Meliesa wrote that around the statue's feet on the base were:

Clay sculpture and the model, Georgia
Photograhp by Will Kuiper

small clues and indicators, to engage the children in aspects of her [Mary's] story. There are quotes; one quote from her letters was chosen by each school and these are carefully scribed. The real message is in the movement.

At this point in our conversation, complete with a cup of green tea, we moved to the actual work that went into making and casting the figure.

CREATING THE SCULPTURE

Meliesa described the actual work of creating the sculpture itself. As she sat with Will there was a sense of fullness and completion. She had written these notes which beautifully moved our conversation from talking and writing *about* the process to being brought *into* the process itself:

The sculpture of Mary Ward took two years to emerge from the raw clay, four months just for the head. Standing eye to eye, face to face, working inches from the form, it was like having a long whispered conversation. Every flick of the tool changed her expression, from angry, to sad, to intense, to laughing, to wistful and distant.

I deliberately work in the tradition of the old masters when sculpting the figure, no shortcuts. I work from life models for any larger sculptures. The body is hand-sculpted precisely, as a completely unclad form, before any details of clothes are modelled into place. It may seem a strange thing to do, to spend a year sculpting a figure, when all that shows after robing is the ankles, the hands and the face,

but it is the only way to achieve a sense of veracity in a sculpture. Any small movement will change all sorts of details in a figure. For instance; stretch out your hand with palm upwards, then twist your upturned palm inwards, note how every muscle down your arm rolls with it. The elbow, even the shoulder will change. To get the gesture right, the movement true, is the real work of the sculptor.

For several months over winter, with the body details all correct and present, I could not shake the impression that she seemed angry, tense. I worked the portrait, hoping the facial expression would change the reading, but it was still there. One spring morning, with my life model at the studio, my husband and I analysed every aspect of the figure until we could locate the anomaly. The centre of the back moving to the shoulders, the tension held across the back of the shoulders. The final verdict was a shift of about one inch in the upper shoulders—not much seemingly but that inch would transfer up through the neck—where it counts for a lot. For the face, locked onto its armature, it meant a complete remodelling, and the loss of several months of work. We all fell silent when the realisation was reached. I took a deep breath and reached for my sponges and modelling knives, and sliced the face right off the figure, to start again.

These powerful memories underpin the depth and reach of the final sculptures. It is clear, now that they stand dynamically installed in the various schools, that their creators Meliesa and Will have achieved a good and satisfying outcome. Meliesa describes it thus:

I have been so well received by this community of wise women (and men), the people who make up the Loreto communities. I have never before experienced such depth of understanding and vision, of keen involvement in all the symbols, the structures and the ideas within a work. And like walking with friends, often the role has changed, from leading to being led as surprising insights from visitors have changed the way I understand the very work of my own hands.

I believe that any sculpture must be integral to the community it serves. I love the challenge of incorporating a multiplicity of ideas while still maintaining artistic integrity. In so many ways this sculpture is the result of the vision, values and passionate involvement of a whole community of people. They brought me their ideas and I became their hands.

For my part, as I sat in the studio in the company of bronze dancing human bodies, owls and animals caught at a moment in their activity when they are most alive, I became a devotee of sculpture and an honorary member of Meliesa and Will's fan club. I hope that more institutions will commission such quasi-sacramental reminders evocative of special life moments, so that our cityscapes will have more such beautiful working jewels to enrich them.

Peter Willis was educated as a theologian, anthropologist and adult educator. He has spent many years teaching and researching at the University of South Australia.

The completed sculpture of Mary Ward is depicted on the front cover of this issue.

EREMOS

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COVER *Mary Ward*, sculpture in bronze by Meliesa Judge (see article page 4). Photograph by Richard Lyons

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