



Clara Hali

Clara Hali is one of Australia's foremost female sculptors. She creates female forms inspired by Indian and Indonesian culture and her love of the Australian landscape, particularly the rock formations in the Blue Mountains. Her works reflect the strength and beauty of women whilst her most recent works also delve deeper into the human condition.

Clara grew up at Church Point in Sydney; her Dutch parents moved from Indonesia to Australia in 1956 when Clara was one year old. They lived on a large plot of land filled with cement sculptures of animals 'It was great for a kid growing up there', she said. She loved the animal statues as a child and said this was where she first developed an interest in sculpture.

Clara has received awards such as Distinguished Invited Artist Award from the National Australia Bank; a research grant from the University of Western Sydney; and a Staff Traveling Scholarship from the National Art School. She has been commissioned for works by PLC Sydney, Croydon; Compaq Computers and Brambles Australia Ltd, Sydney. Her works are in collections such as the Mitchell Art Collection, USA, Cottesloe City Council, Perth; Macquarie University, Sydney; Sir Herman Black Gallery, University of Sydney; Compaq Computers, Sydney; as well as private collections all over the world including, Switzerland, Holland, Italy, New Zealand and the USA,

Clara first studied at Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education completing a Diploma in Fine Art majoring in ceramics. It wasn't until after she finished studying and traveled that she decided to study sculpture. "I finished art school, and I traveled overseas and I spent a year in India, six months in Greece then a year in America, which at that time was the centre of modern art. When I came back to Sydney from that trip, I settled down, got a studio and clay; and nothing happened. The woman I shared a flat with had just studied bronze casting at the National Art

School (NAS). I applied to NAS and I was put into the post certificate program."

At the beginning of her studies, sculpture seemed a foreign concept. However, she found a connection to sculpture through the figure. "Unfortunately, at the time the figure was taboo and students were discouraged from sculpting the figure"... "One teacher told me, the figure is dead." Clara did not accept this and went on creating her figures. She learnt the importance of trusting her own intuition and taking risks.

"I think there is a lack of risk taking for the student in institutions. In my case, the risk was to turn to a more traditional mode of working. That was a risk but that was what I wanted in my heart to do. This was really important in terms of the progression of my work." Clara is a lecturer in sculpture at the NAS and she encourages her students to experiment and to find 'their own language.' "Taking risks is important for the student. Some art teachers want students to work in the same way they do. I try to find out what the student wants to do, what suits them. Experimenting means there is going to be failure but if you don't take a risk, then you won't find anything out."

Clara emphasizes the importance of a strong technical foundation. "If there is no technical foundation there is no loyalty to the materials; there is no communication, art is about communication, it has to be convincing. When you have to read the artist statement to understand a work, then I think that it has failed as a work. Why the National Art School is so good is because it concentrates on technique - this is unlike other art schools that concentrate on the conceptual."

An important subject of contention we discussed was art competitions. Some people see competition as turning art





One of the editions of *Tribanga III*, 2002 - 2006 Cottesloe City Council, Perth, bronze, aluminium, sandstone (200 x 35 x 35 cm)
Photo: courtesy of the artist



Walking Hips III, 2006 Bronze from different angles (41 x 48 x 42 cm)

into a sport. However for many it can be a way of getting their work out there. Clara has participated in many sculpture competitions including Sculpture by the Sea and the University of Western Sydney (UWS) acquisitive sculpture prize. She sees art competitions as being quite positive.

"When I graduated from art school in '85 there was nothing for sculpture, there were no competitions, no exhibitions and galleries were not interested because it (sculpture) didn't sell. I do enter competitions such as Sculpture by the Sea and UWS. Sculpture by the Sea is really about the exhibition and the opportunity to put your sculpture in a beautiful position; the wonderful thing about it is that it has really brought sculpture into the community. In the case of the UWS, the prize is acquisitive, to make a sculpture garden collection, which means permanence of the artists work." This permanence is a major incentive for the artist

to enter.

After art school Clara's work went from being relatively abstract to quite realistic, traversing yet another taboo at the time; she has since returned to an abstract form. There has been a return to a naturalistic form in the art world with artists such as Ron Mueck and others that have come from the theatre arts.

I asked her why people have had this sudden renewed interest in the realistic representation of the human body. "There is a fascination with being able to duplicate yourself. What it (naturalism) brings to the surface to me is the question of what is important in art. Is art about replicating ourselves or reality? Is art about duplicating life or interpreting it? For me the interest is in the transformation of the original form into an aesthetic experience for the viewer. I think the role of the artist is to help the audience open their eyes to

something they haven't yet experienced or thought about before, but which they can relate to."

Many artists struggle to create a successful sculpture of the human figure. I asked Clara her opinion on this. "I think it makes sense that the figure is more difficult than the animal because of the spirit, the being. There is so much to express in the human being; it is not just a shape or object. If you are going to do a life sized sculpture of a person, then it has to be bigger than life size or it looks too small. Otherwise it looks so diminished. We just see ourselves as bigger than we are".

Clara's abstract female forms are strong and angular which has given rise to her being categorized as a cubist. "The cubist thing - it's a shallow interpretation or understanding of my work. I am certainly inspired by cubism and I love the movement but I do not describe myself as a cubist. I don't call myself anything".

Of the Modern and Contemporary artists which inspire her she cited Matisse, Degas, Lipchitz, and Antony Gormley in more recent years. She respects what Gormley has done for art - "he has taken sculpture into the community and out of the white cube - out of the Gallery." She further commented: "Antony Gormley tries to bring community together. He is about insight. It is about the inner self. He went to India in the 80s and became involved in meditation". She also talked about 'the 'space within' as being a characteristic of both her and Gormley's work. When talking about the 'space within' Clara is not just referring to the artist: it is not a self portrait.

"It is about the universal self and about us as people on the planet. My work describes the human condition. My ideas are personal but then people have similar experiences. Part of the reason for doing the work that I do, is to communicate my experience as a common experience. A lot of my female forms don't have obvious female features, this is because I am trying to give an androgynous form, I am trying to express the 'everyman', that the spirit of the person transcends their gender."

Clara's sculptures are of the female form, though not overtly. The assembled pieces in each work have a softness which denotes the female form; and the manner in which each piece is positioned indicates the natural sway and grace that is distinctly female.

"When I started on the female form it was really about a woman's role in society. I do this form to express the changing position of the female in society. In the 80s when I started to do my own work, women were becoming

more independent, and the forms I made were much more muscular and strong. Saying the woman can be beautiful, independent and strong. That the woman can be sensual, but not a sexual object."

The materials of Clara's sculptures are part of this symbolism of strength in her work. She uses traditional sculpture materials, predominantly bronze, but also wood and ceramics. These materials are hard and durable and her choice of dark colours further express this idea of strength. Clara's career long interest in Indian and Indonesian sculptures of goddesses who embody both strength and sensuality, has been an important influence in her sculpture. The title of her sculpture, 'Tribanga' (which is derived from Sanskrit, 'Tribhanga') was exhibited in the 2007 Sculpture by the Sea; it means three bends in Sanskrit and is a pose of many sculptures in Hindu art and dance. "My original attraction to Hinduism and Hindu art was the joyous sensuality, whereas Christian art reflects a repressive approach to sexuality. I just loved the sculptures because they were so sensuous. The religion is so positive, anything can happen, you just have to believe."

Clara has also studied Buddhism. Her interest is in the philosophies that both these religions teach; she doesn't conform to any particular doctrine. When speaking of the Dalai Lama she said, "What I like about the Dalai Lama is the selflessness and modesty. I think he is just a good guide on how to live your life. I find meditation very helpful. I am interested in the principals because they are very positive"... "I don't talk about my own spirituality a lot, but I find solace in nature. It is a connection with the land, with the bush."

The Australian landscape has been a clear inspiration as her works resemble the rock formations. She sees the rock formations, some held in a delicate balance, as a metaphor for a person's life, "They can stand strong, unwavering until something happens to disturb the balance and everything comes falling down. This duality of fragility and strength in a person's life is expressed in her work through this positioning of the pieces.

I returned to that ludicrous assertion 'the figure is dead' and asked her whether she thinks that this could ever be possible. She smiled and said,

"I think that inherently humans are going to replicate images of themselves. That is why in the 80s it was just astonishing to me that my teachers were telling me that the figure was dead. It didn't make any sense. There are sculptures of people that are 3 million years old, You've got to say, its been a theme".