

Sasha Grishin

Clara Hali: Selected works: 1992-2022. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until May 27. beavergalleries.com.au.

Clara Hali is a veteran sculptor whose Dutch parents moved from Indonesia, where she was born, to Sydney in 1956. Despite long periods of travel - where she spent a year in India, six months in Greece and then a year in the United States - Hali is largely associated with the Sydney art scene and particularly the National Art School where she has taught since 1988.

Over the past few decades, I have seen a great deal of Hali's work, as she is prolific and exhibits widely, and has been struck by its diversity and multifaceted nature.

She has drawn on landscape elements, particularly

of the Blue Mountains where she lives, with forms created resembling great boulders piled one on top of the other. She has also drawn on conventions of Indian sculpture as well as forms inspired by yoga that her mother practised professionally.

This exhibition is somewhat curious in that it is a survey of Hali's figurative small bronzes made over the past three decades. This is probably the most conservative aspect of her art practice and possibly made in defiance to the prevailing philosophies in her student days when figurative sculpture was proclaimed as dead. The scene was dominated by the Anthony Caro-inspired welded metal abstractions concerned with formalist values and cool minimalist sculptures that were distant from any figurative reference.

A decade ago, Hali

wrote: "The figure offers a wonderful means to explore sculptural concerns. It has within its make-up all the essential elements of sculpture, such as mass, shape, structure, direction, axes, planes, lines, contours, proportion, gravity, balance, geometry and space. It can be a magnificent means to give insight to who we are as humans and address issues of identity.

"Because we identify so easily with images of ourselves it is a wonderful subject to express aspects of consciousness. I am interested in expressing aspects of humanity that go beyond the physical. I want to explore the inner reality of humans. My interest lies with what makes us human and how that can be expressed through sculpture."

In many ways this longish quote by the artist sums up the main concerns



Clara Hali: Close quarters, 2019, bronze, edition of seven. Picture supplied

of this exhibition where predominantly the female nude is caught in an array of poses. *The dancer VIII*, 2000, an editioned bronze 80 centimetres high, is typical of the better pieces at the exhibition. The nude dancer with her arms clasped over her head exhibits poise and balance.

Although employing

a classical pose, Hali has resisted exploring a neo-classical style that has been the domain of other sculptors working in this mode, for example Guy Boyd, and resolves the work within a 20th-century modernist framework.

The face has been left a blank - open to be inhabited by any viewer - while

the anatomical features carry the traces of a planar dislocation of forms. In other pieces, including *The dancer*, 1992, another editioned bronze, but only half the size, the conceptual focus is on the heavily modelled surfaces designed to stress the human touch.

One of the more ambitious pieces is *Close quarters*, 2019, an editioned bronze 39 centimetres high, where anatomical forms are seemingly piled together to create a somewhat ambiguous heap of humanity.

The works in this exhibition are technically accomplished but they are a bit predictable and less challenging or adventurous than we have come to expect from this artist. Perhaps we are viewing more of the pedagogical side of Hali, where she sets out to defend some of the traditional values of figurative sculpture.