

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE BALNAVES FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE ARCHIVE PROJECT

Interview with Robert Owen

31 July 2004

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Robert Owen on 31 July 2004 in Melbourne, Victoria, by George Alexander, coordinator of contemporary art programs at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the second Balnaves Foundation Sculpture Project. It now forms part of the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

The archive project focuses on significant Australian sculptors and sculptural practice. It was developed with a grant from the Balnaves Foundation in 2010, which supported the recording and transcription of interviews with artists and other figures in Australian art.

A version of the interview was also published in the book *Robert Owen: different lights cast different shadows*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2004.

About Robert Owen

Robert Owen (born 1937) began his artistic career as a sculptor and a 3D conceptualisation of space is integral to his practice, which includes paintings and drawings as well as installations and public art commissions. His work is characterised by diverse materials and approaches, linked by an interest in light, colour and geometry.

This is an edited transcript of a recorded interview. Some adjustments, including deletions, have been made to the original as part of the editing process; however, the accuracy of all statements has not been verified and errors of fact may not have been corrected. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent those of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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George Alexander (GA): You said that as a child you began your career as an artist drawing on the sides of your maths and botany books.

Robert Owen (RO): Yes, that's where it started. What's more I was left handed – the intensity of holding on to my left hand while I was forced to write with my right gave me a sense of identity that was being taken away. So drawing and making continued with the left hand.

GA: A left-handed person trapped in a right-handed world. That was enough to make you want to turn the tables on the usual expectations of country New South Wales! What kind of social aspects to artmaking would there have been back in the 1940s in Wagga Wagga?

RO: There were Monday nights at the Wagga Art Society doing 'observation and analysis'. They took me under their wing when I won blue ribbons for my cartoons at the Wagga Show. But a big influence at about 13 or 14 in 1951 was doing watercolours by copying Albert Namatjira paintings from a book.

GA: Jumping ahead to a work you did in 1975 which revisited your early Wagga years – they were conceptual-looking photographs of the slaughterhouse and the mushroom patch. What was the significance of that place for you?

RO: It was a place of escape on the outskirts of Wagga where I'd while away my time between school and home. I felt at one with myself there in an elemental way, as Walt Whitman celebrated in 'Song of myself'. It had the old slaughterhouse up the hill and the gum trees and a mushroom patch – which gave me the excuse to be there. I'd watch the birds nesting, and you lost your sense of your own identity. You were just there at one with things. It always remained and kept coming back to me.

GA: Then you left Wagga?

RO: I was offered a job in Sydney after finishing national service at 18. A very caring Lebanese family from Wagga – the Koorys – were opening a shop in Manly and I did window dressing and learnt tailoring. That got me through art school at night and weekends, doing drawings and sculpture. But it was the influence of Irene and Frank Broadhurst, who lived around the corner, and as a kind of artistic bohemian family I'd visit on Sunday mornings. Frank illustrated Boccaccio's *Decameron* – in the Art Gallery of NSW research library – and Irene was an artist who taught at East Sydney Art School [East Sydney Technical College, now known as the National Art School] alongside Lyndon Dadswell the sculptor, Frank Lumb and Laurie Ware.

GA: Tell us about Lyndon Dadswell.

RO: He was head of sculpture. In 1957 I think he was on a Fulbright Fellowship to research art education in Chicago and met [László] Moholy-Nagy, and he came back excited to change the sculpture department and strengthen those Bauhaus principles of interrelatedness across the school. When I heard him talk I was keen to start up. Sculpture sounded like the future and I was keen at that point to get away from the past. I bought my first art book on Naum Gabo from Swains. Dadswell also opened my first public show of sculpture at Beard Watson gallery, 25 July 1962. Sherry was served!

GA: What kind of techniques and materials were around in those days?

RO: You learn all the workshop techniques: life drawing and modelling, plaster work. Welding came later. There was, as in the Bauhaus, colour theory and making sculpture out of paper in the foundation years. Problem-solving was encouraged throughout the years.

GA: And then?

RO: By 1963 I felt I had to get out of Australia. At the end of art school I travelled, like good colonials should, and headed for England. Along the way, I saw this amazing new world and colours of the East – Indonesia, Singapore, Bombay – then through the Suez, Alexandria and the Greek islands appeared. I set out from Athens for a weekend and stayed three years on the Greek island of Hydra. I met [Australian writers] George Johnston and Charmian Clift and so decided to stay with a whole community of expat writers and poets, including Leonard Cohen, the Canadian poet and songwriter, and American poet Jack Hirschman who was translating the works of Antonin Artaud at the time. They all taught me things back then.

GA: Much of your work shows the influence of spare Cycladic sculpture as well as the blue and gold of Byzantine icons.

RO: They were strong influences, yes. And George and Charmian gave me a copy of Robert Graves' *Greek myths* one Christmas and I followed the stories of Heracles around the Peloponnesus and Mary Renault's stories of Theseus as I travelled around Greece. I sent back figurative paintings of dancing over the bulls to Barry Stern Galleries in Sydney. I did a tour to Italy, and the Giotto chapel had a profound influence, as a kind of site-specific installation. How could I do that with contemporary materials? And then in Bursa, Turkey, the minareted Blue Mosque, with no lettering or decoration, just a beautiful lapis blue. That left a strong impression. That, along with reading [Fyodor] Dostoevsky, Octavio Paz, [Sigmund] Freud, [Carl] Jung and philosophy, made me realise I had to change my practice.

GA: So you absorbed the mythic imagination of the Greeks and I suppose the perception of light was important. Back in the 1960s they theorised perception as a psychophysical thing, not just a pipe that light passes through, but something that involves a cluster of senses.

RO: That was very strong. The full moon was like a fluorescent light on the island and you could see everywhere, to say nothing of the glow. The light in Greece reminded me of the light in Wagga. The transitions and shifts of light toward sunset before dark. It connected me to that place.

GA: So those blue Iznik tiles of the mosque, did that recall Yves Klein, who made statements with pure colour?

RO: Well I didn't know about Yves Klein until I got to London in 1966. And then I realised I couldn't use that blue then. But it was OK because what I came to England with was the 'eclipse of the sun' effects from Hydra. There were scientific expeditions to see the solar eclipse on the nearby islands that year and I observed the atmosphere act like a prism that caused the sun's rays to break into spectral bands. There was a great clarity and I could see shadows with different colours. It made me look at light and refraction and it reminded me of the physics of colour I had learnt in first-year art school and a whole series of works came from that. Then I researched diffraction grating, which had only been invented in 1963-64 [spaced parallel lines that separated light into different wavelengths] and I had noticed those colours flare out of soup cube wrappings when thrown in the fire, and in spectrum effects of engine oil on wet roads. I was first looking for the rainbow effects that were generated from the glue that was part of the Maggi soup cube wrapper. In London, I approached Yardley Testing Laboratory to research the possibilities of why the colours appeared the way they did. They broke it down to 24 possibilities. Yardley then put me onto Bausch and Lomb, who

were making diffraction gratings. But six inches of glass cost a fortune and was just used then as a high-science physicist's tool. I found a US company that ran out diffraction gratings on acetate. I used that material in my work and had it mirror-backed. That took two-and-a-half years of research. In the meantime I'd met these constructivists, who were friends of friends I'd met on Hydra – Anthony Hill, John Ernest, Gillian Wise – and so I set about bringing together the two sides of my interests: sculpture and painting, construction and those spectral bands.

GA: So with UK constructivism you were revisiting your enthusiasm for Gabo and Moholy-Nagy?

RO: Yes. The main core in the UK at the time was David Hockney and pop painting. On the fringes you had kinetic sculpture from France and South America and also Signals gallery and Bridget Riley. But I was more taken by the eccentric American Charles Biederman, who pursued a rigorous study of the structural properties of nature out of Leonardo [da Vinci] and [Paul] Cézanne. My constructivist works had titles with references to nature. I was seeing the diffraction gratings as miniature landscapes – they reminded me of Australia. So, they had symbolic content rather than a pure mathematical one, like that of Anthony Hill. So the historical connections that constructivism had in Europe and the UK were different for me as an Australian. Mine were linked to nature as a primary source of perceptual experience of the visual, as they were for Biederman.

GA: You were studying optics and luminescence, and were you selling work at this stage?

RO: Yes, I was picked up by Marlborough Gallery for a number of years and had a small show in New York until there was the split in management which blew up with the [Mark] Rothko affair. When I left, I had to find somewhere else, and it was Georges Mora who brought me to Melbourne for three exhibitions in the early 70s. It feels like going full circle now. The Whitlam years were encouraging, but there was no base in constructivism back in Australia. So I put sculpture into a drawing zone – as you see in *Memory and logic units* of 1976 – making miniature things using lead boxes, string, Perspex, earring clips. It came out of [Marcel] Duchamp and [Joseph] Beuys, looking for ways to unpack the imaginary, fractional spaces between the numbers one and two.

GA: Yes, I can see that there's a Hermetic side to this investigation into the language of materials, especially with all the accompanying diagrams and work notes, showing how carbon crystallises into diamond by multiplying its vectors.

RO: It has a lot to do with the healing of split states. Art can do that: patch together our fragmented selves and make connections again.

GA: Art – and your work especially – can reconcile what university departments think of as separate disciplines?

RO: Wonder is the ground and generator of it all: the beginnings of philosophy, science and the investigations following this trail. What I like to do is to materialise ideas and feelings. Not like ideas in textbooks. Philosophy generates beautiful propositions and I think how exciting to make that visible. How can I use the subjects outside art and bring them into art? It's different from representation, from observation and analysis of the landscape.

GA: You've been pushing the boundaries of the beaux arts tradition, of paintings in frames and sculptures on plinths, which still dominates the general public's idea of what art should look like. And looking at *Altar* – your contribution to the 1979 *European dialogue* Biennale [of Sydney] – there's a table made of lead with one leg growing out of some granite rock, and

sitting on 24 steel plates and two silver goblets, one polished and one tarnished. Can you talk about this sculpture?

RO: The title of the Biennale 'European dialogue' seemed relevant to me in this exchange that I was experiencing between here and there. And remembering the powerful holistic effect of the Giotto chapel, I wondered what our sense of the sacred was here. It wasn't so much in church; it's the table you eat at, that's where communion takes place. The polished and tarnished goblets referred to the breakup of a previous marriage, with a corner of the table cut off. So I was trying to bring together the personal and social, Europe and Australia, tangible and intangible. The 24 steel plates refer to Carl Andre but I was adding content to that minimalist art history.

GA: In 1981 you made *Hiatus*, a lovely piece. When you first see it, you see a window pouring sunlight onto a granite rock. But then you notice the window is a photograph and the sunlight is talcum and the shadow is lead. A total trompe l'oeil work.

RO: That was a memory of [Johannes] Vermeer I had from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. You can't tell where the light begins in the room and finishes in the painting. I was materialising the light with talcum and dematerialising the rock. The photograph of the window was done in these mid-grey tones and was meant to look like a drawing.

GA: And the *Apposition* installation piece (1979) with 15 black-and-white wall photos and 15 real stools, that the Art Gallery here owns. Tell us about that.

RO: I received a card from Leonard Hessing one morning and it was the Duchamp bicycle wheel on a stool. There was my own stool in the studio so I picked up the Polaroid camera I had and 'wheeled' around the stool following the sunlight and shadows around. And again, it goes back to the holistic nature of the Giotto chapel. I wanted to get that whole experience in the studio and convey it in an artwork.

GA: In your grid paintings there's this Rubik's Cube of colours, how do those get generated?

RO: It comes out of sacred renaissance geometry. In the 1960s in London I had all these drawings I had done by hand, filling all these combinations of the grid and seeing how far you could go without repeating yourself. By the tenth page you'd be exhausted; entropy sets in and you can't remember what you've done. In the 1990s I showed them to a PhD maths student and asked if he had a way of making a graph to see how many there are. So a grid of 16 units, divided into one of four units, one of three units, three of two units and three of one unit were shifted around with an amazing over a million-and-a-half variations. It took the computer about two-and-a-half weeks to go through them. Each one is unique. Extraordinary. We got very excited by it.

GA: And the colours?

RO: They began with coloured origami papers I bought in Singapore for my young daughter at the time in the early 1970s. The colours entered drawings from the 1960s. So began a new *Sunrise* cycle in 1990. You go through life with its dark moments and its black holes – and I have these night-time pieces, *Traditions of the night*, *Turn of the moon* and *Notes to myself* – and geometry was this good way to find your way through a crisis, like following Ariadne's thread out of the labyrinth.

GA: Do you resist certain colour combinations?

RO: Yes. Once we got the system generating, I wanted it to stop to make selections. It kept going, so I'd ad lib. It was like throwing a dart into a board. A kind of intuitive logic. And I was

curious about entropy. How many variations do you go through before you got sick of them? So you'd choose 30 or 40 out of the two-and-a-half million.

GA: The cube appears and reappears in your work, and early on you often refer to [Albrecht] Dürer's allegorical engraving of *Melencolia*, which has this truncated cube shape alongside the other things, but later you made it into a public sculpture in Japan [*Vessef*].

RO: What was interesting was, is it a cube? It's not a 45-degree angle in the etching, so it's not a cube, but drawn in perspective it is a cube. So I thought I'd see if I could make it. It has a different angle on two sides, so I scaled this tetrahedron up, and the sculpture went to Japan. It's like this corrective thing in perception, depending on your point of vantage. Like Michelangelo's *David*, the head and hands are bigger to correct for the angle the viewer looks at it. Then I played with stereoscopic effects in the 1987 work, *Re-vision (Melancholia)*, by floating two cubes above each other and seeing them snap into 3D, with the implication of solid and transparent 4D hypercubes. So in the current show I play with the vertices, lines, and polygons for the hypercubes that are calculated from rules that have been generalised to 'n' dimensions.

GA: There are so many tributaries in your practice, Robert ...

RO: It could be a worry. If I keep repeating myself I get bored, but if I'm learning something ...

[End]