

EULOGY FOR MY FATHER

TOM BASS

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My father loved analogies. In essence, his art was one long series of analogies for his understanding of the world. Those analogies worked through symbol, form, gesture, the full alphabet of sculptural language. And I think the old boy has even provided an analogy for his death, or whatever happens at death. Anyway, in trying to sift out what I wanted to say here, I remembered how in my childhood at the end of a commission or project, after the plaster moulds were made, one of my jobs was to take the clay off the armature while it was still soft and moist, pinch it into small pieces, and put it back into the clay-bin ready for the next job. The original positive clay model would often be quite damaged after the removal of the mould, and it was always a strange, solemn and almost frightening thing to be disassembling that ‘living sculpture’ into the bin. My father loved the clay. With each job we would remove remnants of gravel and grit that might interrupt a surface, and with each working the clay would get finer, more supple and plastic. In his words:

I keep on recycling it and the more it's used the better it gets. I'm told that in Europe when a well-known sculptor dies there's great competition to get his clay. You can imagine getting Rodin's clay, for instance. I have a great feeling for clay. It's not just mud, it's wonderful stuff... Clay is not just something you stick on to something else to get some ultimate result. It's a beautiful material in its own right and the process of using it is a beautiful process—in a way, almost like a dance.¹

¹ Tom Bass & Harris Smart, *Tom Bass: Totem Maker*, Australian Scholarly Publishing 1996, p. 43

Here we are again returning the clay to the bin, so it will be ready for the next job, finer, more plastic. And yes, it is a kind of dance. Strangely, for a monumental public sculptor, my father believed that art should be ephemeral, a coming and a going. He loved the idea in Aboriginal ritual art, of the sand painting erased by the movement of the dancers. On Sunday I received this message from a Melbourne friend:

[Tom] will clearly be missed [as an artist] as well as by those who loved him for more personal reasons. Co-incidentally, presently I am reading Richard Holmes' wonderful book *The Age of Wonder*, which, as you might know, is a very entertaining history of scientific discoveries in England. One of the scientists discussed is the chemist Davey (he of the miners' lamp), and I have this afternoon read of Davey's contemplation of the idea inherent in the First Law of Thermodynamics ("that nothing is ever destroyed in the physical universe, only transformed"), and of his reflection that this suggests a kind of human immortality. Without any thought as to the theological implications, I found that to be a rather comforting concept!

But we are entitled to a little comfort at this moment of loss. Comfort for Margo, and Peter, and for Keith his younger brother who is here today, for his niece Patty, and Peter Harrington, Dad's cousin, who has helped to organise this service. Comfort for my brothers and sisters and for the youngest members of his family, grandchildren and great grandchildren, Will, Lucy and Oscar, who are perhaps coming to terms with final loss for the first time. His energy may have been transformed somehow, but its immediate absence is palpable. As Obi Ben Konobi would say: 'There has been a disturbance in the Force.'

Thank you all for being here to honour Tom on this special day. In no tokenistic way, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Wangal People of the Eora Nation, who occupied this land and made

their own sculpture here long before western culture arrived. This is also an important reminder of the special connection my father always felt with Aboriginal people, their relationship to land, and their eloquent, subtle and symbolic art.

It is a privileged and exacting task to speak of my father. The fact that he was 93, nearly 94, makes it no easier because his life force was as strong at the end as in his youth — in my brother Marco's words, he had the heart of an ox. Only two weeks ago in a telephone conversation I asked how he was. 'In rude health', was his reply. Like the Irishman, he vowed to die healthy — and he did. But his long-protesting body, finally forced him to acknowledge mortality. When he went to hospital for the last time he said to me 'I am looking forward...' He did not need to complete the sentence.

For such a dramatic figure as Tom, you don't need a licence for hyperbole, and I'm sure we all have that larger-than-life sense of him. All I can hope is that I point to a few qualities and memories that activate your own, and which today will send him off with a sense of joy that his life's work meant something beyond a mere career, and was in fact an intersection of many lives, traditions and values, a catalyst for something good in our Australian ethos.

Place as an artist

His final place as an artist is better left to more objective judges than me, though we all know that he literally changed the landscape of Australian

cities — one only has to think of Ethos in Canberra, the National Library sculpture, his major works in universities, the Children’s Tree in Melbourne, and Circular Quay. On this occasion how can we ignore his great passion for making, for objectifying ideas, for responding to place and occasion in sculptural form? That was what he was.

He was a Promethean figure. Prometheus, originally the son of a Titan, made mankind out of clay, and when Zeus oppressed them and deprived them of fire, Prometheus stole fire for them from heaven. The British theorist Adam Phillips uses this metaphor in a brilliant essay entitled ‘On Not Making it Up’.² It focuses on what we mean by the ‘creative process’ and he adopts Adrian Stokes’s distinction between carvers and modellers, the **carver** being the artist who assumes the stone contains within itself the form given by nature, a form the artist merely liberates, disclosing its hidden face; while the **modeller**, on the other hand, does not acknowledge the truth of the stone, but insists on his own truth in modelling a form. Phillips goes on to qualify that distinction and indeed to recognise that there are carvers and modellers co-present in all of us.

But for me, Dad was that Promethean modeller par excellence. He was the maker. For him, and for artists like him, adversity is the very material of their work rather than a barrier. As Phillips puts it: ‘For the Promethean, circumstances are there to be used; contingent events are the point not the problem. They are, indeed an opportunity — the only opportunity available— to make the self.’ Such was my father. Ringing in our ears as children, as we ran to him with some childish problem or

² Adam Phillips, ‘On Not Making It Up’ in *Side Effects*, Penguin Books 2006, pp. 75-100.

tragedy, was the intonement: *'The Worst things that happen to you are the Best things that happen to you!'*

In this context I want briefly to address his position in the art world, and the sense of grievance he had at being excluded, from the gallery system and mainstream acknowledgement. My feeling for some time has been that, at some level, he chose that position, and further, that he could not have produced his work without the contingency of exclusion. It freed him, it gave him licence, and it allowed him to construct a public self as advocate for public art, for totemic sculpture, for sculpture as *the* relational vehicle of a society.

Naïve realist

My father was a great raconteur. He enjoyed public speaking and had that natural talent and sense of humour and occasion that entertained audiences and allowed him not to miss an opportunity to instruct or persuade. Many, many times I have listened to him in awe as he thought on his feet. This gene I did not inherit. But it certainly played a part in his appeal — here was an artist who was presentable, articulate and informative. It won him many admirers, and opened pathways to his work.

His book, *Totem Maker*, gives a good idea of this story-telling, almost theatrical ability, transforming simple incidents into little dramas, or comedies that have a shape of their own. One of my favourites is about his Hire Purchase sculpture for AGC:

When I introduced the maquette to the board of AGC, the chairman was a classic really, with one of those retired colonel's moustaches, the lot. When I showed him what I'd created, he looked at it quite baffled. Then it was passed around the board in

stunned silence. When it got back he said, 'Well now, Mr Bass, perhaps you might like to explain what this is all about?'

So I said, 'I asked myself what is it that the AGC group of companies do...'

And here he broke in and said, 'Usury, Mr Bass, usury.'

Of course I'd done the sculpture precisely to combat this attitude. I am quite convinced that hire purchase is such an important thing in our society that if Canberra passed a law overnight banning it, the whole economy would just grind to a halt. It's not the use of hire purchase that is evil, but rather the misuse of it. I was taking the principle and trying to make something significant of it.³

This anecdote, told against himself, illustrates my father's position as a 'Naïve realist', as the satirist John Clarke's would put it. He had a crazy sort of innocence that got him into trouble, but also got things done.

Legacies

This brings me to the human dimension and legacy of Tom's life. He did not work as a lone figure. He was both prescient and lucky in finding two remarkable women as partners: my mother and his first wife, Lenore Rays, and his present wife, Margo Hoekstra. Both acted as nurturers, critics, and co-architects in his major projects and his domestic life alike. Both of these women have been major contributors to his public success; both have provided domestic stability and harmony in the raising of children; and both have produced significant art work in their own right. I see these relationships, in addition to their richly human dimensions, as

³ *Tom Bass: Totem Maker*, p. 107

genuine creative collaborations, ahead of their time, and I think my father would be the first to acknowledge this.

He is the father of 6 children, Virginia, Anna, Belinda, Marco, Peter and me, all of whom, in our different ways, have pursued creative and imaginative paths. I hope I can speak for my brothers and sisters in saying how deeply Tom's values shaped our lives and aspirations, if only at times in the form of rebellion against them. But in the end he is always a reference point and, more than that, a challenge to reach one's own kind of authenticity. And I know that whatever our failures and limitations, there is his warmth and pride in us which will remind us always of his love.

Tom was deeply proud of his 11 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren, and I think he secretly hoped that his genius would re-emerge in them.

Hands and the Haptic

As my father lay in his hospital bed, there but not there, Virginia spoke of his hands, how large they were, even though he was not such a large man. But his hands always expressed a largeness and warmth — and I'm not being sentimental.

The family uses the term 'sandpaper hands' to describe his hands, always dry from plaster dust or clay, from modeling, filing, building armatures, polishing, waxing and colouring surfaces.

As his many students could no doubt confirm, Tom automatically *reads* a sculptural form with his hands. He also used his caged 'trouble lamp' to

cast its critical light along forms, with the same probing deliberation as the surface of the turning moon is lit by the sun. He made his children's sculptures to be felt, handled, touched. He was indeed a *haptic* artist, from the Greek *haptikos*, 'able to grasp, touch or perceive.' For artists, haptic perception is vital form of thinking, though it is rarely attended to in our theorised, cerebral age. But for my father, his work arose as much out of its *handling*, as out of his thinking, if the two can be separated. He was often damned with faint praise as a 'good craftsman', but I wonder if we neglect that whole dimension of touch to our cost.⁴

So there are the hands of the sculptor, but there are also the hands of the father. Last Friday, on the day he died, my friend Tomoko Kearns told me a wonderful new story of about Dad. Many years ago she was going in to the city and at Town Hall station she noticed ahead of her through the crowds a man in a strange white suit with a little boy. The man was holding the boy by the hand and striding purposefully ahead and she felt something intense about the quality of that grasp, and the link between them. It was only then that she recognized my father, and of course the little boy was Peter, aged about 5 or 6. She hurried to catch them, but lost them in the busy crowd.

This story resonates for me, as I'm sure it would for my siblings. I can remember exactly that grasp and its warmth, and the safety it gave, as a child. It's true that my father was usually too committed to his work to have much time for the usual leisure games with us children. But he had other ways of including us, and the studio was always a wonderland of materials and processes. As Virginia puts it: 'Our childhood was an extraordinary mix of freedom and discipline. We were children who only

⁴ His version of this was 'being praised with faint damns!'

knew an unusual family life. We lived with creative tension, fame and very little fortune. Learning and beauty were the benchmarks of our lives.’

Farewell

For this formal farewell, I invite you all to think now of Tom as you remember him in essence — in a sculpture, a tone of voice, a story or a gesture, or as the bearded figure in the beret which he earned so thoroughly and wore with distinction. In the terms of D.H. Lawrence’s poem, *The Ship of Death*, a central poem in his life, he is well prepared for his journey, with his modeling tools, his bottle of red, and his transistor radio.

Tim Bass

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