

THE PASSIONATE MODERNIST

Australia has lost one of its classic Modernists, Modernism being the period of culture lasting from the Impressionists in the late 19th century to Warhol in the 1960s. Modernism being parted by two world wars was a great turning point in western culture. At the very centre of this in Australia was Tom Bass. Tom was your classic belligerent Modernist, disgruntled by the muffled conservatism of the past, and the consequential madness of two world wars, and dismayed at the postmodern abyss that was presented as the future, which, for Tom, was presenting an even emptier conservatism than the past.

In the middle was Tom, with a vision of art that twinkled like a star throughout the heart of the 20th century. He provided an insight into the great tradition of art, most particularly sculpture that resonated back through centuries of civilisation. When Tom Bass talked about the Greek Kourai, his blue eyes shimmered, like he was directly connected to the Oracle at Delphi. Tom loved to quote Camus' words, what the Kourai held to be the "universal gesture", which sums up all gestures; that the lover, robbed of love, could circle around a sculpture and win back the dignity taken away throughout the ages.

Tom began his artistic career in the art school of Datillo Rubbo. This was the hub of the Sydney Modernist movement, with such students as Roland Wakelin, Roi De Mestre and Grace Cossington Smith. Donald Friend gave Tom his swag strap just before he left the school.

Rubbo was an Italian who was part of a line of great teachers that led back to the Juliard School in Paris in the 19th century where artists such as Monet had studied. The lineage from there could reasonably trace back through the Baroque to the Renaissance and from there possibly to the great guilds of the Medieval era.

Tom was very aware of this lineage and felt a great sense of responsibility to play his part as a link in the chain that would carry on into the future. As a result, he leaves behind a legacy as not only a great sculptor but also a great teacher (the great art educators often go unnoticed in the passage of art history yet rare, if ever, does a great artist arise without one).

What made Rubbo's school significant as launching the Modernists was that, unlike other art schools at the time, Rubbo taught drawing essentially from the inside out. In other words, rather than breaking down the mass elements of a figure through outlines and planes, Rubbo began by looking within the figure, at the grand essential gestures that directed the pose. This idea would correlate with the cubist idea of trying to realise the "inner reality" of form. Like Cezanne, these artists weren't just interested in what an apple looks like but rather what an apple does. Tom would often say to his own students "don't make it look the way it looks; make it work the way it works".

These ideas were crystallised for Tom at the Mecca of modern sculpture in Sydney after the war, the National Art School, under the tutelage of Lyndon Dadswell. Dadswell was also linked to a great line of teachers going back to Rayner Hoff and Bertram MacKenna and from there back to the great Academies of 19th Century Britain. Dadswell introduced Tom to the great abstract Modernists of the 20th century, such as Jacob Epstein and Henry Moore (several of Dadswell's students, including Ron Robertson Swan, would go on to work with Henry Moore).

Abstraction was a logical progression from Rubbo's idea of the inner essence of form. For, as Tom would later explain to students, when one abstracts one goes beyond mere representation. Rather, something unique and independent is created, something abstract to preconceived ideas around it. This idea Tom often would trace back to Cezanne. When a painter paints an orange it is not the orange he paints on the canvas but his / her experience of looking at that orange. It is that experience, or more significantly, that change caused within, that gave creativity its flame. Arp would describe this creative experience as "the fruit that grows within a man". Without this there was literal copying, the regurgitation of ideas with the result like a 19th century death mask. Tom often told the story of Giacometti who spent an entire winter sitting at a table drawing a skull. After countless drawings he discovered the empty essence of death in his skull. This was an object with no life. It scared him so much he didn't sleep for two weeks and thereafter never slept with the light off.

Whilst these ideas represented a significant change in direction from the increasingly literal passage of Academie Art throughout the 19th century, for the Modernists it forged a greater connection to the "simplified", "primitive" abstract works of the past. Like Picasso, Giacometti, Moore, Hepworth and Brancusi, Tom Bass now identified with the creative experiences that lay at the centre of these works. Whether it be the monumental grandeur of Egyptian or Summerian work, the raw energy of African art or, perhaps most ultimately revered, the sublime silent unifying grace of the Greek Cycladic figure, these artworks were very alive and directly relevant to artists such as Tom.

Tom made the study of these works the centre of sculptural understanding at his school. However, he was quick to forbid copying. "One must recreate these works by translating them into sculpture through one's own sculptures". In fact, Tom believed you can only really understand a work of art by recreating it (much as a musician can only really understand Mozart by playing it). Tom would be quick to criticise the "experts" who prod at sculpture with words and magnifying glasses. How can you know about a place if you haven't been there? For Tom, the experience of making sculpture was paramount. In the true Modernist tradition, it was the process of the journey rather than the outcome or the destination that was significant.

Along the same line, the word "smooth" would make him shudder when uttered in the lesson. "We do not smooth the surface of an artwork but rather refine the inner essence of the forms emanating from within".

Tom's time with Dadswell also introduced Tom to the world of civic sculpture (creating sculpture for churches, universities and town squares rather than galleries). Civic sculpture had been synonymous with all sculptural work up until the time of Rodin. Notwithstanding Rodin's incredible monumental works such as *The Burgers of Calais* and *The Thinker*, Rodin turned sculpture away from the monument and toward the gallery. This seemed to be an indication of the general Modernist direction of sculpture (it was the artist's experience that was important, not what was being commemorated or monumentalised). The countless monuments erected to commemorate the two world wars severed the link with modern sculpture completely, with such civic work being identified with the old order that perpetuated the "glorious dead", the very idea the Modernists had reacted against.

However, not all Modernists abandoned the idea of civic work and perhaps the most significant of those in Australia was Tom Bass. As mentioned, Tom saw sculpture in the context of its longest traditions, going back to its archaic Greek and Egyptian origins. In

accordance with such a view, civic sculpture was at the very centre of these works - there are very few private commissions in the art history book. Tom saw it as his obligation as a sculptor to provide work directly and in consultation with the public. This led to a prodigious output of work in public places throughout the country. Most particularly, Tom completed many works for the Catholic Church. Tom found such a strong correlation with the liturgical process and his need to make public sculptural statements that he converted to Catholicism in the 1950s. Tom would often say that the holiest man in the Vatican in the 1500s was Michelangelo (the cult figure of the Modern era). He would later leave the Church saying, "like all romantic relationships, I fell in love, then out of love".

However, whilst his civic work was prodigious, the decision to move in such a direction did separate him from the rest of his Modernist flock. Whilst there are "public" works of Tom's in nearly all major cities around Australia, there is not one work represented in a state or national gallery. It was once suggested by one particular gallery director that he contact the Powerhouse Museum.

Alas, the belligerent clouds began to gather around Tom throughout his later years. As commissions began to dry up and acknowledgment from the art world was increasingly unforthcoming, Tom put more and more energy into teaching what he believed were the essential tenets of sculpture at his school.

Adding to these clouds the paralysing disarray of postmodernism, with its return to literalism, soaked in formaldehyde or even piss, led to increasing concern and despair. Tom liked to point out the postmodern edict, that an artwork should look not well done.

Critics such as Arthur Danto have claimed that the advent of postmodernism with its absolute relative subjectivism ("anything goes") has led to the death of "art" as an agreed upon concept. Tom Bass was "art", art was at the centre of his soul. Written on the wall of his art school were his words "Knowing is not being. To know is to become what you know. Put all of your energy into becoming what you know". Tom had put all his energy into becoming sculpture, and the thought that this idea had died would break his heart or send him into a passionate fury.

It was the belligerent one we loved. The great passionate Modernist. However, Tom was not a victim and to assume he had not made mistakes would be wrong. Perhaps in his fervent Modernist vision of what art "should be" he failed to pay due respect to the Academie structures that were abandoned in the past. Perhaps, as a Modernist, forever transfixed with the journey, he failed to take responsibility for the endlessly fractured outcome that was postmodernism. Time will tell.

But at the end of a life one asks what did he do, leave the "perhaps" for those still living. Tom Bass passed on a flame, burning brightly. With each week we lose another great member of the World War II generation. These are the people who have lived through the heart of the 20th century, the most tragic century ever witnessed by humanity. These people are the Modernists. If they were belligerent it is because they believed in something. For Tom Bass it was more than a belief, it was a conviction. His statement to humanity will be greatly remembered.

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