



# craft arts

INTERNATIONAL

SCULPTURE BY ANDREW ROGERS

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(incl. GST)

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Aerial view of the three geoglyphs created by Andrew Rogers in the Arava Desert, Israel

## BREACHING THE BOUNDARIES

When Australian sculptor Andrew Rogers put his figurative style behind him and accepted abstraction as his means of communication, the transformation resulted in a new vocabulary that embraced geoglyphic forms. Profile by Roger Taylor.

**I**N 1998, Australian sculptor Andrew Rogers, told the Second Annual State of the World Forum Awards in San Francisco that, 'To express oneself is a timeless need – sculpture is a manifestation of this need. This need is always relevant: and how better to express our dreams and aspirations and the spirit of humanity – sculpture does mirror our society.' In his address, titled *The Passion of Sculpting*, Rogers told the 800-strong forum that being a sculptor was for him a personal journey. 'The journey necessary to create sculpture is just as important and meaningful as the final form and, yes, hopefully people will see what we are trying to express.'

Andrew Rogers commenced on his artistic journey just over 30 years ago, as a painter. But in the late 1980s, after numerous visits to the Musée Rodin in Paris, he decided to switch from painting to sculpture. Yet, subconsciously, as he noted in his speech, the origins of his decision lay in a much earlier experience of Rodin's art: the 'Rodin and His Contemporaries' exhibition which he had seen at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1967. 'Sculpture is an expression of the heart, not just the application of a skill. With sculpture we learn to perceive, to recognise differences, to clarify, to make a decision, and eventually one can see what it is that matters to create a form. For me, the works in the 1967 exhibition captured the essence of mankind simply through the gesture of an individual.'

The earliest sculptures by Rogers were representations of the human hand, an image which Rodin himself had fashioned so perspicuously. So it was fitting that five of Rogers' edition of his bronze sculpture of a clenched fist, *Critical Power* (1993), were presented to the forum's award winners, including Richard Butler, then executive chairman of the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq and now Governor of Tasmania, and Vincente Fox, who was elected President of Mexico shortly afterwards. 'It is my hope that these wonderful and worthy recipients look at their sculpture and remember their magnificent achievements and the critical difference they have made to our world, which has become a better place in which to live,' Rogers stated at the time.

It is this solemn philosophy that seems to have informed the uniqueness of Rogers' oeuvre. By 1993, when *Critical Power* was first cast, he had crystallised a style that incorporated realism, symbolism, and surrealism. It was at this time, too, that he began to abstract the human figure, hollowing out a number of his male and female forms. He developed a technique of slashing the forms with a series of parallel incisions to reveal a figure's interior. Some of these forms were shown in his 1993 exhibition 'Mankind in the Gesture of an Individual' (after Rodin), at Melbourne's Meridian Gallery, which stood out as testament to his achievement in working in the figurative tradition.



Aerial view of 'Slice', 60 x 38 metres – one of the three geoglyphs created by Andrew Rogers in the Arava Desert, Israel

This exhibition earned Rogers his first critical acclaim as a sculptor and, just as importantly, brought him to the attention of the corporate world. As the renowned curator and critic, Ken Scarlett, states: 'Rogers is an interesting phenomenon, an artist who had painted for many years before turning to sculpture as his essential means of expression. He may have had a long gestation period, but the rate of growth has since been extremely rapid and, following his first solo exhibition in 1993, his career has progressed at an extraordinary rate. In 12 years he has reached a position that other Australian sculptors have striven to achieve over their lifetime.'<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after the 1993 exhibition, the Becton Corporation, on behalf of the Victorian State Government, commissioned one of the edition of *Reaching Away* (1993), an ethereal bronze depicting a kneeling, nude female figure gesturing to the heavens, for placement in the gardens of a new residential development in Wellington Terrace, East Melbourne. *Reaching Away* was also acquired by the Castlemaine Art Gallery in regional Victoria, and by Hall Vineyard Inc. in California, US which, incidentally, now has 10 of Rogers' sculptures in its collection. Worldwide, Rogers currently has more than 50 works placed in major museum and corporate collections, including nine of the edition of *Flora Exemplar* (1997) in collections as various as the Art Gallery of NSW; Grounds for Sculpture, New Jersey and Stonebriar Park, Dallas, US; Hokoku Construction, Kobe, Japan; and Nussendorfer Strasse in the City of Vienna.

Each of Rogers' sculptures ferments firstly as a charcoal sketch on paper, completed by the artist well before the process of making commences. From the sketch, each piece is then realised as a bronze maquette, 60 cm high.

*'Flora Exemplar', bronze, ht 2.6 m. Installed in Vienna, Austria*







View of 'To Life', 38 x 33 m, one of three geoglyphs, Arava Desert, Israel, 1999



'Rhythms of Life', 1996, bronze (large version), 11 x 2.6 m, installed at the Victorian Arts Centre in Melbourne, 2001.

Below: The 'Rhythms of Life', sculpture constructed horizontally as a geoglyph in stone quarried at the site in the Arava Desert, Israel, 2002

Finally, the actual bronze sculpture is cast, limited to an edition of 12. 'Bronze is a very durable material that interacts with the environment over time,' says Rogers. 'It reacts to, and with, its surroundings. So, you can create a dialogue with the people who are viewing the sculpture in its specific environment. The advantage of bronze is that the message you're trying to incorporate doesn't get corrupted by the ravages of time, unlike a lot of other materials where form is lost.'

In 1996, a maquette of *Flora Exemplar* was presented to the visiting president of Technion, the University of Technology, Haifa, Israel, in the Queens Hall of Parliament House, Melbourne. This led to the commissioning of a 2.6 m version of the sculpture in Sapir Town, Arava, Israel. Speaking of this piece, one critic wrote, 'The mysterious body plant embodies nature's pure beauty perceived through the appreciation of the human eye.' Nonetheless, Rogers is emphatic that human touch also plays a vital role in a vigorous appreciation of his work. 'The changing of a sculpture that occurs through the effect of the environment, including human touch, helps enrich the form to become a "living" object in the real world,' he says. 'I particularly like people to touch my sculptures, to feel, in the case of bronze, the cool surface and strength of the metal. The effects of the environment and people's responses to a sculpture, create an intriguing dialogue.'

Rogers is honoured that almost the entire edition of *Flora Exemplar* is now situated in outdoor locations around the world, but is especially intrigued with the sculpture's placement in the Arava Desert, where the climatic conditions are so extreme. 'It's always interesting to see the same form set in different surroundings. But the intense



heat and cold of the Arava Desert will test the strength of this work, and the desert sands will tear into it, reshaping it over time. In fact, it's already happening. There are a lot of chemicals in the water that is drawn from under the ground in that area, so there has been oxidation on the sculpture. The bronze is now a totally different colour to when it was installed and a very different colour to the others in, say, the Art Gallery of NSW or Dallas.'

The inherent, abstracted beauty of *Flora Exemplar* is best summed up by Edmund Capon, Director of the Art Gallery of NSW, who considers it to be one of Rogers' most distinctive and characteristic works. Capon states: 'In its elegant and attenuated form, which reaches up and then twists and peers down, it does vaguely resemble a stem and a bud. But it is, I believe, much more than mere imitation of a natural feature, for its sheer expressiveness evokes in us emotions of human striving and introspection. Just as his forms, in particular a work such as *Flora Exemplar*, have a basis in naturalism, so do they convey natural and inherent human sensibilities. The abstraction of our strivings and imaginations are resolved into the quiet drama of Andrew Rogers' sculptural forms.'

Rogers asserts that, following the completion of works for his second solo exhibition at Meridian Gallery in 1995, 'Of Freedom & Will', he found the making of figurative sculpture constraining. 'There is only so much you can do with the human form,' he says. 'With abstraction you are able to create many different forms, flows and shapes, and manipulate the spaces around you with the object more freely than when sculpting figuratively.'

Ken Scarlett believes that this transition by Rogers from figuration to abstraction was an impressive achievement and is euphonious in his praise. 'In 1995 Andrew Rogers underwent a miraculous metamorphosis,' wrote Scarlett. 'Like a cicada that has spent part of its life underground, then crawled out from its confining tunnel to come forth into daylight, Rogers put his figurative style behind him and accepted abstraction as his means of communication. Just as a cicada bursts out of its old shell and almost immediately learns to fly, so too, Rogers emerged confident and assured, articulate and with a new vocabulary of forms.'

*Flora Exemplar*, it would seem, is Rogers' most successful articulation of this new vocabulary and it's significant that most of the edition has now been placed in prominent national and international collections. But, perhaps the real consequence of *Flora Exemplar* was that its site in Sapir Town exposed Rogers to the ruggedness and pulchritude of the Arava Desert. Currently, the Arava Desert forms part of the border between Jordan and Israel and is of vast historical import. It also separates two vastly contrasting cultures. With these factors in mind, Rogers has recently completed his third geoglyph, *Slice* (2003), in the Arava. Constructed from rocks dynamited from its surrounds, the shell-like form of *Slice*, enlarged to gargantuan proportions, lays horizontal on the ground where it is intended to be viewed from the mountainous settings above.

Writer, Idit Porat, believes that *Slice* is an 'intensified metaphor for the fossil, a reminder of a far older presence in this place', and believes that by situating artworks in the Arava Desert, Rogers transforms the site 'from a place of artistic value to one that seems to expose form within the landscape's primordial archaeological discoveries and ancient values that reach far beyond time and place'. Porat also claims that the artist's decision to make landscape art which can only be fully grasped from a bird's-eye view aims 'at creating a concrete, participatory relationship with the surrounding culture. By inviting physical interaction between the geoglyphs and their visitors, the sculptor has established a new context which simultaneously com-

'Organic', 1999, silicon bronze (under construction), height 4 metres



Aerial view of 'To Life', 38 x 33 m, one of three geoglyphs, Arava Desert, Israel







'Weightless', 2002, cast bronze, 1,500 x 3,500 cm

ments upon the connection to history and land, while engaging its continued evolution.

Rogers completed the first of the three geoglyphs in the Arava Desert, *Chai* in 1999, aware that any sculpture positioned in such an environment would not only need to contain a powerful visual aura in order to match the competing surrounds, but should also be constructed from appropriate natural materials. 'For the first sculpture, *Chai*, two words taken from the Old Testament meaning Longevity or Life, the stones were taken from the dry water beds of the river,' Rogers explains. 'Stone has a natural association with its surroundings. It's just a natural material for me to handle in an environment



with which you have to be sympathetic – while at the same time you are making sure that the form stands out in it. These stones had been rolled along the ground for thousands of years in floods.

'Initially I started with the geoglyphs one at a time and the concept developed as I went on,' Rogers maintains. 'When halfway through the first, I knew that I would do a second, and a few minutes after starting the second I knew there would be a third. The concept was that the geoglyphs should be able to be seen and understood fully only from a height. Not necessarily from a helicopter (from where the photos you see were taken) or from a satellite from which the objects can be seen. The concept was to be near a mountain so that people could walk up the slope and then see the three objects together as they rotated around. You actually cannot see all the objects at the same time or even two together. You have to rotate your body, which is by design. When you're on the same level as the geoglyphs you cannot see any of the objects together. They are isolated parts of the rhythms of life until you reach the top and see it all together.'

'Rhythms of Life' is a catch-cry Rogers has employed unceasingly over the past six years. It is the title he has given to each of his solo exhibitions since 1997, including exhibitions at Lorraine Diggins Fine Art, Melbourne in 1997 and 1999, the Australian Embassy in Washington, DC and BGH Gallery in Santa Monica, California in 1998, as well as Soho Gallery, Sydney and his survey show at Deakin University, Melbourne in 2003. It is also the title of one of his most wistful and exotic bronzes installed outside the Victorian Arts Centre in Melbourne's Southbank complex in February, 2001.

After installing *Rhythms of Life*, Rogers returned to the Arava Desert to create the second geoglyph, a mammoth replica of the Southbank sculpture, this time in stone blasted from the desert surrounds. 'Deserts are pristine environments – they're like large blank canvases to work on,' says Rogers. 'No matter how large you make the form, it's really only a speck in space. But it needs to be a monumental speck against the dome of the sky and against the vastness of the landscape. It's really exploring what scale does, while at the same time looking at these types of different environments and how important they have been to mankind, both in traditional indigenous societies through to modern Western societies. It was an opportunity to explore the desert environment and take your symbols out of a modern urban setting and try to get the symbols understood in another context. *Rhythms of Life*, outside the Victorian Arts Centre, a 2.7-metre bronze, is now in the Arava Desert, made in stone at 28 metres in length. It's daunting to find an untouched tract of desert and realise what you have to cope with in terms of the technical skills as well as the impact you are going to have on it permanently.'

Of the meaning of his catch-cry, Rogers states: 'It's an interplay. There are only two things certain in life, being born and dying. I'm interested in our interaction with the environment and with other people around us. I like to look at the states we pass through and the changes that occur around us, the changes that happen to us as we go through life. Working figuratively made it easy to create works that were effortlessly recognisable in terms of expressions and moods. It's much more difficult to create the message in a form which is abstracted and to develop the appropriate symbolism and communication so people can understand what they're looking at.'

On completion of the first geoglyph in the Arava Desert, Rogers travelled to Peru, to the small Andean village of Machu Picchu, where he constructed his stunning sculp-

'Coil', 1999, silicon bronze, 330 x 240 cm. AP private collection

tural commission *Rhythm of the Andes* (2000), an obelisk-shaped bronze totem filled with stones. He had first visited Peru in 1996 and was overwhelmed by the dramatic scenery and archaeological ruins of Machu Picchu, which he described 'as one of the most spectacular sites that I've ever seen in the world'. Rogers made further visits to the village over the ensuing years, and was finally commissioned by the mayor of Machu Picchu, Dr Jose Soto Vera, to construct a sculpture that would consider both 'Anthropological and Historic Fundamentals'.

'The idea behind *Rhythm of the Andes* was to allow the indigenous people to become part of the project, to be integrated with it,' Rogers explains. 'We began with the concept of conveying the history of the people of the Andes which is represented by the bronze work. The idea of then filling it with local stone, the first stone being from the sanctuary of Machupicchu, was an opportunity for the people who are very dependent on the land to tie themselves back to the land and to tie themselves to their history, to be proud of their history through the sculpture. Like many indigenous groups in many parts of the world, they suffered at the hands of invaders, so it was great to be able to look at their history and reflect it back to them and allow them to participate in something they could be proud of. The sculpture can be read as three different things: as a shape, as a story, and it is also topped by an important symbol of the indigenous people, the condor bird, which circles around the area.' Over the past twelve months Rogers has begun to incorporate stone with bronze on a regular basis, with works from his *Mother Earth* series testifying to his abilities to efficaciously merge the organic and the abstract into a unifying whole. 'I began by incorporating the rocks into the bronze, then just using rocks,' he says. 'Now I'm attempting to imitate nature by making the rocks out of bronze. There's a practical reason for this. When you make very large sculptures, it means there is an imbalance with weight. But the deeper pursuit is that it's great to be able to try to imitate nature. That's the fascination, using bronze and pushing its use to create objects which aren't normally cast in this material.'

But it is with his most recent series of highly abstracted and poignant bronzes, the *Weightless* series, exhibited recently at Sydney's Soho Gallery, that Rogers has faced his most serious technical challenges. 'By its nature, bronze is heavy, yet I prefer to exploit its lightness and fluidity,' he says. 'I like to push the bronze to its limits. The challenge is always to try to make the material obey your will. Not only do you forge it in the furnace of your mind, but you must also get the molten bronze to flow in the right direction to create the required form. It is much easier to fabricate than it is to cast. These pieces are interesting because of their form, shape and ridge, and the nature of both their internal and external surfaces. What I've tried to do with the bronze in this series is to look at our states of being and explore the idea of weightlessness. They are meant to look light, folded and very accidental. It almost appears as if somebody has crushed a piece of metal.'

**Roger Taylor**

Roger Taylor is a freelance journalist based in Melbourne who writes on contemporary sculpture for Australian and international publications.

#### NOTES

1. Ken Scarlett, 'Andrew Rogers: a sense of optimism', in Andrew Rogers: *Rhythms of life II*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Foundation of Contemporary Art, Milan, 2002, unpaginated.
2. Edmond Capon, 'Andrew Rogers: Flora Exemplar', in Ken Scarlett's, *Rhythms of Life: The Art of Andrew Rogers*, Macmillan Art Publishing, Melbourne, 2003, p. 49.
3. Ken Scarlett, *Rhythms of Life: The Art of Andrew Rogers*, op. cit., p. 35.
4. Idi Porat, 'The Many Layered Desert Geoglyphs', in Ken Scarlett's *Rhythms of Life: The Art of Andrew Rogers*, op. cit., p. 25.



'Rhythm of the Andes', 2000, bronze and stone, ht 3.5 m. Machu Picchu, Peru. Indigenous people were encouraged to participate in the construction of the obelisk

