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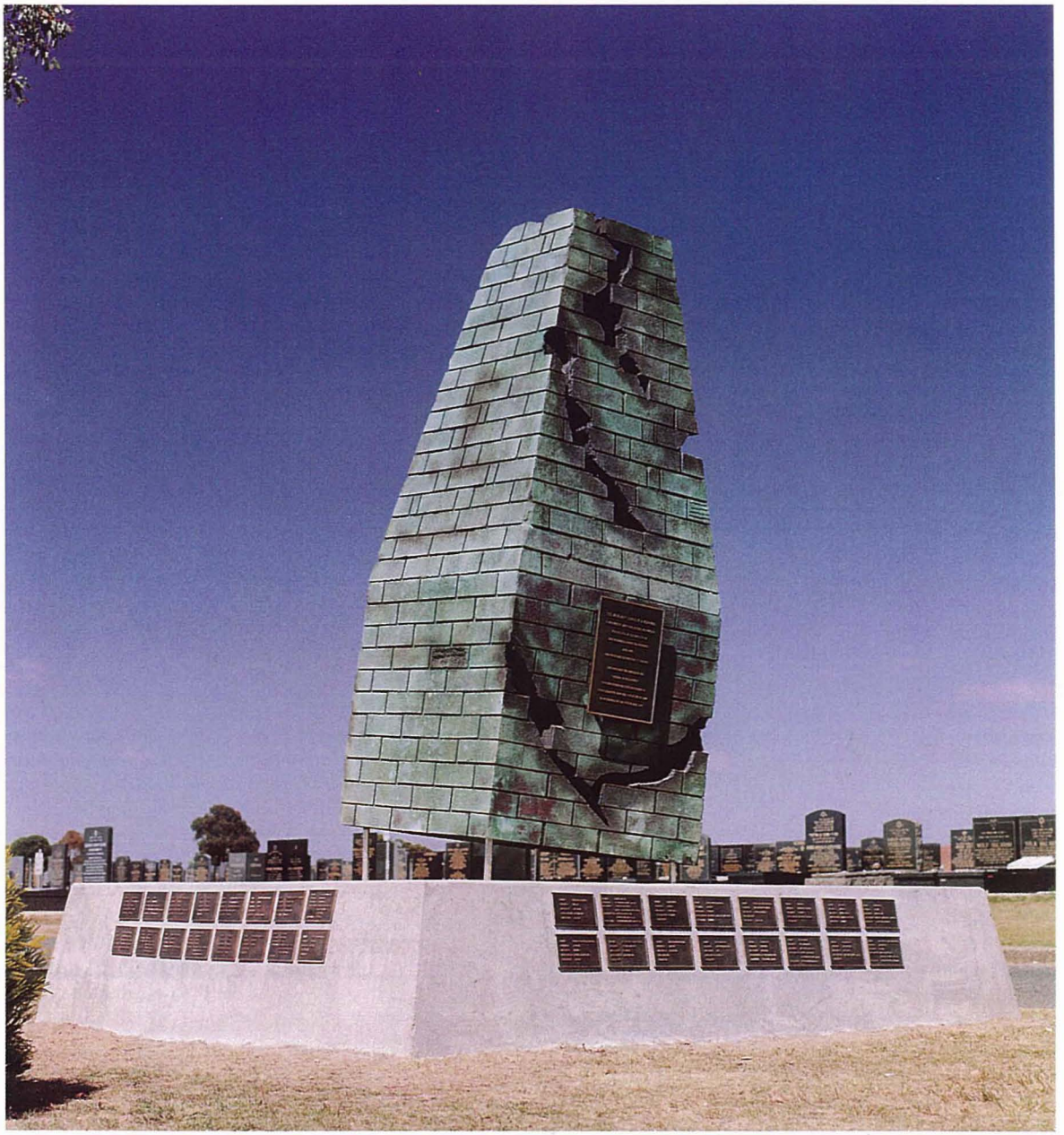
* Andrew Rogers: Monumental Art

The Challenge Of The Monumental

The making of monumental sculpture holds a special place in the heart of Australian sculptor Andrew Rogers. During the past five years he has placed monumental sculptures in locations as the ancient Inca city of Machu Picchu, Peru, the Arava region of the Negev Desert, Israel, in Melbourne, Australia, and Vienna, Austria. The heart of his work is the act of remembrance.



Andrew Rogers, **The Buchenwald Memorial,** 2000, bronze, 3.6 meters (height). Springvale, Melbourne, Australia.

Andrew Rogers, The Chai "To Life," (a Geoglyph) 38 x 33 meters (125 x 128 ft.) Sapir, Arava Regional Council, Israel.

Humankind's need to bear witness to its history through art has been with us for millennia. Since the earliest cave paintings to the colossal sculptures of Easter Island or the enormous Buddha figures scattered throughout Asia the artist's mark has clearly been of central importance to collective memory and culture. In the modern world, with its myriad new technologies and materials, the construction of simple and complex monumental sculptures has never been more readily attainable. Yet the emotion of making sculpture is not lost on the sculptors when they turn their attention to monumental pieces. Indeed, the sheer scale of such works often intensifies the emotional impact.

For Andrew Rogers monumental sculptural is but one aspect of his art but his forms are of special significance as a conduit of remembrance. The very public nature of many of his monumental pieces is striking and supports his belief that "the eye leads and the mind follows." His 4.5 meter bronze entitled *Rhythms of the Andes* (2000) at Machu Picchu, Peru, speaks of a rich past and the trials of a proud people. His Melbourne bronzes *Rhythms of Life* (2001), *Buchenwald Memorial* (2000), and his dramatic monumental six-column *Pillars of Witness* (1999), which stands at the Holocaust Research Center, bear witness to one of the most harrowing of human tragedies. These are truly moving works filled with extraordinary details and cannot be ignored in the way much smaller public artworks sadly often are. Once seen, the mind does not forget either the subject matter or the presence of such works. These are clearly memorials that are deeply felt and as witnesses to history they are meant to stand throughout time.

Bearing witness is essential in some measure, large or small, within Rogers's work, including his abstractions. "It is important that subsequent generations, who are distanced from the immediate events, remember. This to me is the ethos of monumental memorial sculptures. It is the collective memory that is important and it should not be diminished because without memory we are nothing," says Rogers. "The resonating question is always: how can we expose and explain when tragedy fades from living memory, when no-one is left to bear witness? The challenge is to honor the individual lives of people that have gone before us, who breathed and laughed and loved. To be able to interpret the needs of many people to express themselves is even a greater difficulty. It requires total immersion in the subject at hand. It is a sensitive task in the case of the *Buchenwald Memorial.* To talk to older men who were children when they escaped the horrors of the Holocaust is sobering. Likewise the people of Machu Picchu are aware of the destruction that occurred to their forebears and the twisting of their beliefs.

"Interpretation is always open and conflicting because of different points of view. But it is the diversity of views that makes the creation of monumental works interesting. This develops into a journey through people's often turbulent and painful memories, where the sculptor can interpret what people are trying to say. Capturing the essence and the feeling is essential. But how best to show the truth is a constant quest. Does one use just the facts of realism or use symbols and myths from the surreal to deal with devastation?"

For Rogers to bring his work alive requires various challenges and processes that require both individual attention and the dedicated collaborative efforts of numerous skilled people. As he says, "Research is always involved, from wide reading to talking with descendants, and even victims, as from the Holocaust, for example." But to begin with he notes the "crystallization of ideas is always *the* challenge," and then "making the message always greater than the form." Working in bronze and stone, Rogers notes that for his work to be successful he needs "to get the materials to convey the message."

Henry Moore said "there is truth in material," and this is something with which Rogers both identifies and agrees. Yet in obtaining this "truth" he is not guided by one simple formula or idea. It is in essence the result of a lifetime's experiences, an awareness of the collective cultural mind, time, and place, the fundamental knowing that life is important even in the most tragic of times. Rogers notes that the locations in which his sculptures are made and are placed also "create their own dialogue which affects the form. For me an essential ingredient is that a memorial should be of the moment and distinctive in form, and, at the same time, be harmonious with the surroundings. Reality always fights to reassert itself over any form."

Though Rogers says, "Sculpture is the expression of the heart, not just the application of the skill," the physical reality of making his monumental works is balanced to some extent against the physical and emotional reality of locations as different as the high mountains of Machu Picchu, the urban world of Melbourne, the open spaces of Texas, and the searing 35-40 degree dry heat and sun of the Arava Desert, where the only shelter are sparsely leafed acacia trees. In such conditions, as Rogers notes, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. "Steel reinforcing bars were heated so hot by the desert sun that they burn the skin on your hands when pick-

ing them up. Ordinary rocks can take on a special meaning."

Yet for all the problems of arranging permits, materials, and people, approval of historical, heritage, safety, and municipal, as well as engineering approval and the permission of religious authorities the adventure of creating the first works at various sites has always been exhilarating for Rogers and his collaborators. For all the discomfort of any particular location and the uncertainty of achieving one's goals, each place, along with the people collaborating in raising the work to a physical reality, adds significantly to the emotional impact of the experience. In the Arava, Rogers says, "From the dangers of the foundry process through to the satisfaction of putting a sculpture in place and seeing the poignant expression of the people looking at the sculpture—watching them touch, expressing themselves in tears and joy, through to the simple act of placing stones and flowers on works, means a deep satisfaction for the sculptor. In Machu Picchu, too, the unveiling ceremony involved local descendants of the area, who each used granite stones to fill the sculpture to signify their identity with the land. Without this memory we cannot function as human beings. That is why I think it is worthwhile to depict in sculpture icons, as in the *Rhythms of the Andes*, which embody the spirit the people derive from their heritage. It is very satisfying to help people recall their heritage in a way they can be proud of. At the unveiling of *Rhythms of the Andes* one could not help but think about spirituality when the wonderful astronomy of the Incas was demonstrated 500 years later as the sun rose cutting across the Condor rock to shine in a cave behind it, as it was meant to do on the day of the Ante Zenith. What clever people went before us is a very humbling thought."

As people view the completed works in their intended scale, it is easy to forget just how monumental the task has been. *Chai – To Life* is 38-meters-long and comprises 650 cubic meters of material, yet it is insignificant within a vast landscape. *Rhythms of the Andes*, made of bronze and granite, is at 4.5 meters of significant size, but it pales against the physical reality of the Andes backdrop. Erection of monumental sculptures creates dangerous work sites and in strange location there may well be language problems, for mis-communication could well result in serious injury. *Chai – To Life* required 20 people communicating in English, Hebrew, and Arabic, as well as sign language as they brought the work to life and shaped

Andrew Rogers, Flora Exemplar, 1999, bronze, 2.5 meters. Vienna, Austria.

it. "Even in the modern City of Melbourne, to get the right crane and the correct welding device to erect bronze columns representing the Holocaust was not a simple task, while in Machu Picchu it took two days to acclimatize to cope with the thin air," says Rogers. "In Vienna, too, intense cold had to be fought as well as the clearing of snow to put up the *Flora Example* sculpture. So one has to respect one's helpers, their commitment and skill, even when tempers flare."

While many people may see Rogers's monumental sculptures as merely about man's inhumanity man, as in the Holocaust or the Inca persecution, these are symbols that give voice to silent masses and to some of the most indescribable events of modern times. But this is just a part of the message of his work. At the very core of Rogers's work is the affirmation of life, that, while we live, we ought not to forget the past and we should hold close the memories of others, and that there should be a significant way of passing these memories on to future generations. For Rogers, and for many of the cultures he has dealt with, acts of remembrance are in essence acts of life. Δ

[Ian Findlay]