

The Creative World of Vince Vozzo

When 1979 was designated International Year of the Child, to express symbolic solidarity the Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education in Paddington commissioned a student to create a work in stone. Vince Vozzo was that student, and his large sandstone sculpture *The Children Must Love* still stands on the campus that has since been renamed the College of Fine Arts (COFA) and incorporated into the institutional framework of the University of New South Wales. Vozzo states that the celebrated Lebanese artist, poet, and writer Kahlil Gibran was the source of inspiration for the work. That year he also completed a second work titled *The Lamb and the Boy*, and these two large sandstone works, plus his having received his first major commission, confirmed he was on track to pursue an art career in which sculpture would predominate. In 1981 when he held his first major solo exhibition at Holdsworth Galleries in Woollahra, COFA purchased a small-scale sandstone sculpture titled *New Man*, further strengthening Vozzo's resolve to explore the potential of sculpture to satisfy his artistic impulses and aesthetic curiosity. He fully realised then that he would be working in a relatively barren cultural

environment, one where figurative sculpture commanded little critical attention as a genre of the visual arts.

Vozzo received his formal art training in Sydney, qualifying with an Art Certificate from East Sydney Technical College (1975-77) and a Diploma of Art from Alexander Mackie College



New Man

(1978–1981). From childhood he had been intuitively attuned to visual images, including written texts. An obsessive and prolific reader, his reading became intense and highly focused along with the development and progress of his art practice. He was drawn to the Renaissance artists Michaelangelo and da Vinci as well as to modern masters such as Rodin, Epstein, Brâncuși, Giacometti, Picasso and Matisse, and gained insights from poet-artist William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. For Vozzo human cultural history is endlessly interesting, and he is conscious of seeking to understand it in ways that transcend both spatial and temporal limitations as well as interrogate cultural crossings and fusions. His deep admiration for ancient cultures, particularly those of Easter Island, the Aztecs, Greece, and Egypt, is manifest in the purity of line that is achieved in his highly stylised sculptures of the human body, especially that of the female form. Vozzo's representations of women characteristically exaggerate the size of the buttocks, abdomen and thighs that together function to encapsulate the beauty, strength, solidity and fertility of an aestheticized 'collective' woman.

For Vozzo philosophy is an integral part of art creation. As an artist living in contemporary times, he has the advantage of studying an enormous array of ancient and modern art artefacts as well as written texts. He lists Socrates, Schopenhauer, Pascal, Descartes and Rousseau as important in his meditations on art, but singles out Brâncuși as articulating an aesthetics that he

fully embraces. 'Brâncuși refined everything into a simplified egg shape. I call myself the chicken out of Brâncuși's egg.' However, like most artists, Vozzo best articulates his aesthetics in his actual art creations.



White Goddess II

He is best known for his small- to medium-size sandstone, marble or bronze sculptures that generally feature in his gallery exhibitions, and also for his large-scale works that are a familiar sight at the annual Sculpture by the Sea event at Bondi in Sydney, and at other open air gallery spaces. The natural materials he selects for his works challenge the artist's stamina and ability to endure lengthy periods of sustained physical exertion while working in isolation. Vozzo's sculptures of varying size bear testimony to his confidence in the conceptual



Simple Man Walking



Woman Waiting



Tatlin's Tower or Shock of the New

truth of what he seeks to achieve in the genre, as well as the ecstasy he experiences after the lengthy gestation process of a creation.

In his 30th solo exhibition *Vince Vozzo: New Sculptures* held at Eva Breuer in Woollahra (26 October-6 November 2013), his small polished bronze sculptures such as *Simple Man Walking* and *Wisdom of the Earth* demonstrate the maturity and perfection he has achieved in his sculptural art. Sculptures of men do not frequently populate Vozzo's art domain, but the body shape of *Simple Man Walking* is typical: he is a chunky man with broad shoulders and it is hard not to suggest that this is a reflection of the male artist himself. *Wisdom of the Earth* is yet another manifestation of woman in Vozzo's signature style. For Vozzo the female body is the embodiment of beauty and its variations are never ending in his sculptures. Abstract woman inspires awe and admiration in this male artist as the title of the work confirms. Larger works in the exhibition include *Woman Running* carved in onyx, *Postmodern Goddess* carved in Carrara marble and *Woman Waiting* carved in sandstone. Several 'sculpture studies' in pastel on paper are artworks in their own right, and show how the two-stage development of his sculptures takes place.

Depending on the ideas he seeks to express, Vozzo will also resort to using other media. He has created sculptures in papier-mâché and oil paint such as *Tatlin's Tower or Shock*



Section of *The Trendy Left Wing vs the Charm School*

of the New (2000s) and *No Man Is An Island* (1990s) that formed part of his exhibition *Testa Dura - Mule Head* held at Casula Powerhouse in 2008. The exhibition also included a mixed-media work in papier-mâché, oil paint and collage titled *Duchamp's Readymade Time Machine or the Wheel of Fortune* (2000s); a large work in charcoal, acrylic and pastel on canvas titled *When Worlds Collide* (2008); a large work in acrylic on canvas titled *Apocalyptic Paradigm Shift* (2008); and a number of large works in charcoal, acrylic and pastel on paper such as *My Father is Dying I* (1984/89), *The Trendy Left Wing vs the Charm School* (1984/89), *World Gone Mad I* (1986), *World Gone Mad II* (1986), and *World Gone Mad IV* (1986). The diverse

media and strategies employed in the works of the *Testa Dura - Mule Head* exhibition allowed Vozzo to give concrete visual expression to his wide-ranging thoughts as a perceptive social critic with no compunctions about voicing his views. The exhibition title is a reference to himself as an artist and an individual: he is 'mule-headed', that is, uncompromising in his convictions, and will not be swayed by hype, fashions, trends, or any other authority.

Books such as *In Darwin's Shadow* appeal to Vozzo, and he ponders on the thesis of the book that Darwin's younger contemporary Alfred Russell Wallace had in all likelihood discovered the Theory of Evolution before Darwin or around the same time. Financial backing from wealthy upper-class friends enabled Darwin to publish his findings first, and Wallace's contention that evolution failed to answer questions about humankind's spiritual development, did not go well with the pro-science trends in English intellectual circles at the time. The claim of priority of discovery was hotly debated, but finally there was general consensus in the scientific world that both Darwin and Wallace had independently made this important discovery. However what is puzzling is that Darwin has entered the annals of history and is known worldwide, while Wallace has slipped into obscurity: presumably certain power groups at the time brokered Wallace's virtual obliteration, and this viewpoint was perpetrated without revision. Vozzo is intrigued by the workings of such insidious power mechanisms



God of the Gaps Goes to Hollywood

in society, and by how opinion and fashion can be easily manipulated. Believing that such social machinations continue to be replicated in present times, he makes a perspicacious observation: ‘Society usually only sees the top of the serpent, not the underbelly where all real movement happens.’

While formal art training and wide reading have been crucial to Vozzo’s development as an artist, they were superimposed upon a background that was hardly conducive to pursuing an art career. His Italian heritage may have drawn him to sculpture, but growing up in a working-class migrant family when he did in the south-western suburbs of Sydney may also have contributed to his irreverence towards the hypocrisy and

conceit he sees in many of the socio-economically privileged, and to his despondency about the death of spiritual life caused by the crass materialism resulting from global capitalism. His *God of the Gaps Goes to Hollywood* exhibition, held at Harrison Galleries in Paddington (4-30 July 2009), demonstrates this aspect of his artistic endeavours, and adopts the same outspoken critical stance of his *Testa Dura - Mule Head* exhibition. In the catalogue-pamphlet for *God of the Gaps Goes to Hollywood*, Nicholas Tsoutas, who is University of Sydney Zelda Stedman Lecturer in Visual Arts and director of four major art centres in Australia, makes the following general observations:

‘In his [Vozzo’s] quest for higher meaning and connections with the spiritual, his canvases are highly animated, dizzying with eclecticism in his composition of floating characters and motifs of religious, cultural or artistic, scientific, social and spiritual significance.’

Like one of Beckett’s characters in *Waiting for Godot*, Vozzo discovers that in the same moment that he can’t go on, he finds the strength and determination to realize that he must go on. He does so in a distinctive style where the seriousness of his concerns is mediated with creative use of humour, irony and parody.

Exhibited for the first time are Vozzo’s tree root sculptures, all titled *God of the Gaps Goes to Hollywood*. These works



God of the Gaps Goes to Hollywood

demonstrate his willingness to experiment with various media to convey his anxieties about contemporary society. Tsoutas says of these sculptures: 'Exploring possibilities reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno* or Breughel's psychotically surreal underworld, Vozzo inverts and collapses reality into a valueless formless world'. A few of Vozzo's bronze sculptures are also on display, including *Mama Murders Dada with a Chess Piece as She Descends the Staircase* (2009) and *Philosopher, Artist, Poet, Mystic* (2009). In the former work the woman's abundant buttocks and thighs convey strength and movement, while in the latter the reclining Buddha head with closed eyes and very thick lips exudes sensuality and boundless contentment. While Brâncuși's notion of the sculptured head tilted at an

angle may initially have inspired Vozzo, he has developed this strategy further by endowing his sculptured heads with the face of Buddha or a face suggestive of Buddha.

Vozzo's sculptures in sandstone, marble and bronze were showcased in an earlier solo exhibition at Philip Bacon Galleries in Brisbane (11 November-6 December 2003). John McDonald, editor of *Australian Art Review* and director of New Contemporaries Gallery at the time, and now art critic for the *Weekend Herald*, writes perceptively on Vozzo's sculptures in the exhibition catalogue-pamphlet.

Vozzo's figures are not to be seen as naturalistic sculptures of women, but as distillations of human sensuality. They resemble swollen, stony teardrops, wherein the weight has settled into the base. The mass and solidity of flesh is conveyed in a haptic fashion – that is, in a style that corresponds to the claims of feeling rather than observation. As in the case of children's drawings and Expressionist painting, these works exaggerate those aspects of a subject that are subjectively most important to the artist. What is critical for the viewer is the recognition that a beautiful and sensuous artefact needs no further justification.

Vozzo who was born in 1954 attended Cabramatta Public School and then Liverpool Boys' High School. He was a loner until classmates noticed that he was good at drawing cartoon



Vince (centre) aged 8, with his parents and elder brother in 1961.



Where it all started — sand sculptures at Bondi Beach in the 1970s.

heroes, such as Superman. Suddenly he was in high demand for his tattoo-like Superman figures drawn onto the arms of classmates. Like most youngsters growing up in the southwestern suburbs of Sydney, Vozzo was a comic addict, as well as a serious comic book collector. When his father mistook his collection to be old newspapers and burned them, young Vozzo was inconsolable with grief: comic images such as Superman still emerge in his paintings. After completing high school he tried working as an apprentice hairdresser, but soon rebelled and enrolled in an art course at Liverpool TAFE. It was there that he decided he would become a sculptor. The teacher left sandstone blocks and some tools on the workbench and

asked students to make something. Vozzo was the only one to persevere, and when finally eyes and a nose appeared, he was reminded of the ancient stone sculptures of Easter Island.

At the age of seventeen Vozzo began making sand sculptures at Bondi Beach, and was quick to observe the spontaneous reactions of ‘real’ people to art, and how art was able to communicate, especially with children. He loved working with natural material, such as sand, even while knowing the impermanent nature of sculptures in sand. In 1982 he won the First Prize for Sand Sculpture at the Royal Institute of Architects competition held at Manly as part of Architects’ Week: his winning work *Rebirth* depicted a man and a woman locked in embrace. He is today one of the best-known participants at the annual Sculpture by the Sea event at Bondi where he exhibits large-scale sandstone works. In the 1998 event his *Running after the Ball* won the Jackie Prize.

In 1983 Vozzo’s sandstone sculpture *Renaissance* won the Prestige Aluminium Sculpture Prize in Camden, and in the following three decades his sculptures have been shortlisted for numerous awards, most notably the Wynne Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney (1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1992, 2004, 2006 and 2008); the Blake Prize in Sydney (1985, 1986 and 1991); the International Dante Bronze Biennale in Ravenna, Italy (1990, 1992); the *Italians in the World* exhibition at the Venice Biennale, Italy (2011); and the

McClelland Sculpture Survey Award in Melbourne (2012). On being rejected in the 1996 Wynne Prize for his sandstone sculpture *Different View* he feigned charges of sour grapes to make public statements about sculpture being sidelined in Australia. His strident stance caused shock waves in the upper echelons of the art community, and reverberated in the local media. The Wynne Prize is awarded annually for: 'the best landscape painting of Australian scenery in oils or watercolours or for the best example of figure sculptures by Australian artists.' That year five sculptures were shortlisted and exhibited together with thirty-four landscape paintings, but the Salon des Refusés exhibition at the S. H. Ervin Gallery did not contain a single sculpture. Vozzo organized a protest exhibition called *The Real Salon des Refusés* at Ardt Gallery in Leichhardt, and two other shortlisted artists joined him in exhibiting their 'rejected' works. He rationally argued that it was nonsensical to compare sculptures with paintings: 'it was like comparing chalk and cheese'. In his view, Australia should emulate other parts of the world, and have national awards dedicated to sculpture, and maintaining that sculpture had a future in Australia, he bluntly stated that the custodian-role of the arts establishment was the main problem.

Vozzo mainly used sandstone or bronze for his sculptures, but around 2000 he began to experiment with the local marble used for cemetery headstones or kitchen bench tops. During a two-month trip to Italy in 2006 he purchased a consignment



Where is God?



Philosopher, Artist, Poet, Mystic

of twenty-two tons of marble from the Cave of Michelangelo in Carrara. His trip took him to Pietrasanta, Carrara, Milan, La Spezia, Assisi, Florence, Rome, Venice, as well as Roccella Ionica (the birthplace of his mother), Caulonia (the birthplace of his father) in Calabria, and Taormina (the home country of his wife's family) in Sicily. While reconnecting with his Italian cultural roots and exploring the vast treasury of ancient and modern art and architectural artefacts, Vozzo was always aware of his strong cultural roots in Australia, roots that were unique to his formative years growing up in a labouring-class migrant family in the south-western suburbs of Sydney during the post-war years of the late 1950s and 1960s.

Alongside his art creation Vozzo also taught art in the Sydney area. During the 1980s he taught art at Charlton Boys Home in Ashfield, and at Busby High School where he was artist-in-residence; he also held sand sculpture workshops at Bondi Beach. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Vozzo was also employed as professional illustrator for magazines such as *Arts Alive*, *The Hub* and *Wellbeing*.

As an artist Vozzo is continually drawing and making sketches of ideas that he intends to realize in art. He likens the process of creating a sculpture to a woman giving birth. Each work is a long and painstaking process, but as in the case of parturition for the woman, the completion of a sculpture brings joy for the artist. The long process involved in the carving of a sculpture provides him with much time for meditation and deep contemplation on existential issues, and he concurs with Schopenhauer: 'Art makes life bearable'.

The above essay is based on a lengthy interview with the artist during late October 2013.

Mabel Lee PhD FAHA
School of Languages & Cultures, University of Sydney