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OH 710

Full transcript of an interview with

MAX LYLE

on 04 August 2004

by Rob Linn

for the

EMINENT AUSTRALIANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Recording available on CD

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J.D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA: INTERVIEW NO. OH 710

Interview with Max Lyle recorded by Rob Linn on the 4th August 2004 for The State Library of South Australia Oral History Collection and the National Library of Australia.

DISK 1

Now we're recording. I'm really sorry, Max.

That's fine.

This is an interview with Max Lyle, who'll be speaking with me, Rob Linn, for the Oral History Collection conducted by the National Library of Australia. On behalf of the Director General of the National Library, Max, for the second time, (laughter) I'd like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this program. Do you understand that the Library owns copyright in the interview material, but disclosure will be subject to any disclosure restrictions you impose in completing the form of consent?

Yes.

This being so, may we have your permission to make a transcript of this recording should the Library decide to make one?

Yes, that's all right.

Thank you, Max. We hope you will speak as frankly as possible, knowing that neither the tapes nor any transcript produced from them will be released without your authority. And this interview is taking place today on the 4th of August 2004 at Magill.

Now, Max, you were born in February 1935. Could you tell us a little bit about your parents and your background, please?

Yes. My parents owned a business in Brunswick in Melbourne and they were in the newsagency business, which was a six day a week commitment, and they stood eleven years of that, and I think towards the end of that they were very sick and tired of it, of course, which probably didn't help their health, and so they decided to move to Alphington and my father took up a different business of his own with a lending library on wheels, which initially was on Harley Davidson motorbikes with sidecars, and then later on with Austin 7 vans which were painted red and had '3d per book loan' on the back of it. (laughter)

So your father's business as such was nothing to do with art or sculpting or anything like that?

No. Well, I guess the only sort of connection with the arts was through my mother, my mother's brother, my uncle. He played in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, played clarinet there, and so there were some sort of artistic, I guess, genes in the family, perhaps. (laughter) But my parents were very keen on reading, and particularly the classics. My mother encouraged me to try and poke my nose into Dickens and so on later on, which we had to do for school anyway. But I just recently read a book that she always recommended, which was the last of Dickens' novels, *Our mutual friend*, and it's a kind of surrealist take, actually, which is very interesting. So they encouraged sort of scholarship with my brother and myself, so we were encouraged to read various books, and of course having a lending library, there were some books that (laughs) we seized upon. Some were absolute rubbish, of course! But nevertheless got used to reading as a pastime.

So, Max, with your father's business, I guess at the time it was one of those businesses that was much needed in the community –

Yes, yes.

– in terms of books were actually expensive to purchase for a lot of people and this was a way of reading and keeping up your knowledge?

Yes, yes. Although the books that were preferred, of course, were Mills and Boon's romances and mystery tales of various kinds. But those books got a lot of use. There used to be a code number in the back of the book and you could see how often it was loaned out. So often that was very densely entered up!

So are you suggesting *Our mutual friend* didn't get that many borrowers?

I don't think so, no! (laughter)

You also mentioned the other day that, as television came to Australia, that definitely affected your father's business.

Yes, yes, in his latter years. And I think he made some inroads by actually straight sales of books for Christmas and things like that. But eventually the business did fade a lot.

Now, Max, where were you educated?

Well, firstly, my first memories are of Fairfield State School, which was very close by where we lived in Alphington, which was close to Fairfield, it was the Alphington-Fairfield area. And I remember the school very well because there were air raid shelters dug and so on, it was of course during the [Second World] War, and at night there were searchlights in the sky and so on. But Fairfield State had a whole lot of teachers who were – well, to our eyes – very old, and I think some of them should have been retired out. But, because of the War and so on, there weren't the young personnel there. But yes, they were very happy years at Fairfield State.

And my father was an old Scotch Collegian and Scotch College was in Hawthorn, so my brother and I were sent there for our secondary schooling. And that was also an interesting time, although there wasn't a lot of emphasis on art. There was some of it, and an art club which I did a little bit of activity there. And the art teacher encouraged me to go later on to do art studies at what is now RMIT[1] in Melbourne.

Now, just backtracking a little, Max, did you have an interest in art from early years, that you recall?

Yes, I did. My parents had a whole lot of – or couple of picture books, which illustrated traditional art works, particularly from Egypt and Greece, of course, and that was of extreme interest to me and I got into copying some of those illustrations in clay and Plasticene. I can remember my mother going into town and coming back lugging a hunk of clay for me from Dean's art store.

From Dean's art store?

Yes.

D-E-N-E, wasn't it?

It was D-E-A-N, I think, but it – – –.

D-E-A-N. That was a very, very well-known art store, wasn't it?

Yes, yes. Yes, it was right in the centre of Melbourne. And so Mum brought back some clay for me to use and I sometimes painted it – if I was making a copy of King Tutankhamun's death mask, then (laughs) I got into painting the clay after it dried.

Was there something about the clay and that elastic feel that appealed to you?

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[1] RMIT – Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

Yes, yes, it was very tactile and very satisfying to get your hands into it and fiddle with it, I suppose, in the end. They weren't very large-scale works.

So was this from your earliest memories, pretty much?

No, I was about ten, I think, when I got interested, when I sort of started to get interested in sculpture – and architecture, too, that was an interest as well.

Max, do you think those first interests, in a sense, have carried on right through your life? I know we're getting a little bit ahead of ourselves here.

Yes, they have, they've sort of abided with me actually, yes, yes.

Isn't that extraordinary, that sometimes those first impressions still continue on?

Yes. I think those things are set probably early in one's life, and they are very satisfying, too, they seem to satisfy one's natural inclinations a great deal.

Max, you said that Scotch didn't have a *huge* emphasis on art, but did you have a chance to pursue some parts of it?

Oh, yes. Yes, I mean we had formal classes in art, and there was a Miss Scott, I remember, and Oscar Helms was also in the senior school, so I had some contact with them on a bit more personal level. But they were always very encouraging, but warned me that there wasn't a great deal of money to be made in the Australian context for artists and probably for sculptors in particular.

So what led you to Melbourne Technical College?

Well, my mother had a friend living in the same street, who in turn had an acquaintance who had contact with the then Melbourne Technical College Art School, and so he – his name was Bill Taylor, and he encouraged me to go and look there and apply for the course, the new diploma course.

Now, what did that course look like to you, the first time you went there as a, well, I suppose a teenager of seventeen or eighteen to have a look at it?

Yes, it was pretty formidable because there were a whole lot of, a raft of subjects that one had to study and produce evidence of activities in terms of folios of work and good examples or bad examples, whatever they were. But there wasn't anything formal like that in Victoria, anyway, in terms of an art course. So it was a four-year diploma, four years' full-time study, and then you were expected to spend a further two years trying to get some industrial experience.

Industrial experience?

Yes, so-called 'industrial experience', in your particular area of study. It was generally easier for graphic designers because there was a whole lot of work going for them, but not so much for sculpture. (laughs) And in fact there was an opportunity that came up partway through my course, and so I took it, to be employed on the Shrine, Melbourne Shrine, World War II Memorial, which was a large group of figures, which was eventually carved in Melbourne basalt or bluestone.

Could I come back to talk about the Shrine and the people you worked with on it? But before you actually enrolled at Melbourne Technical College, had you had any, if you like, outside influence of art, had you been taken to galleries or anything like that?

Well, the school, Scotch, did have some excursions going to the Art Gallery and so on, and just actually to a couple of the commercial galleries. I can remember going to the Athenaeum Gallery, for instance, in Collins Street, and looking at I think William Dargie's work, if I remember rightly, (laughs) and being impressed by painting. So that was a possibility for me, to become a painter. But I did have a feel for the three-dimensional much more, and so I leaned towards sculpture.

Was it your mother who took you to see a Henry Moore show?

Yes, it was. And I think that was about – what, 1950? – there was a large travelling show of Henry Moore's work that came to the National Gallery of Victoria, which was then at the top of Swanson Street and shared its buildings with the State Library. And yes, I remember my mother being very shocked at the style of Henry Moore's work and the fact that it didn't adhere to the canons of Greek art and sculpture, in particular. (laughs) So she couldn't see too much beauty in it, if any at all. But I was intrigued by it because it was adventurous and it seemed to experiment with the human form to a very extreme degree.

Did Melbourne have much of a sculptural heritage, as such?

Well, I suppose, as I've mentioned before, the heritage was mainly in memorials, particularly in public sculpture, and there were a few sculptors that were active – Paul Montford on the original Shrine of Remembrance, and a number of others who set up memorials. And there were also memorials imported from England, which – Sergeant Jagger's figures outside the then National Gallery were very interesting

because they were very highly-textured and showed the clay modelling on the bronze surface, that was an interesting part of it to me.

Max, I'd like to come back now to the Technical College years –

Right.

– from 1951. Can you tell me about the studies and how they may or may not have inspired you? (laughter)

Yes. I think my worst subject was lettering, it seemed to be absolute drudgery. But anyway, I sort of forged my way through that. But we studied a number of subjects, including Design, History of Art, and particularly Drawing and Painting, and we were also able to opt to go and do more specialist subjects, like Metalwork and Ceramics and Pottery and Sculpture. So I did some studies in woodcarving under a talented teacher called Stanley Hammond, and my first contacts with the Sculpture Department were through the then Head of the Sculpture Department, George Allen, who'd been there for a number of years. And I think George Allen was very helpful to me later on, and in fact he was the one that won the – his design for the Shrine, World War II War Memorial, so that was a contact which later sort of fell in my favour somewhat.

Now, materials you were working with – you mentioned wood at the time – was it mainly the natural materials?

Yes. It was mainly – we were encouraged to work in stone and carve wood. Stanley Hammond actually helped us purchase specialist woodcarving chisels and gougers and so on, and also he taught the traditional methods of hand work, carving and shaping timber. And the problem was it was very hard to get a good carving timber and you had to pay for it, and most of us students were pretty flat broke anyway, but he managed to get us supplied with some timber on occasion as well. So that was interesting. The metalworking, metal spinning and copper knocking and things like that, which were traditional things, were also very interesting and of use to me later on, too, when I became a metal worker myself and making my own sculpture.

Max, am I right that even the chisels that one works with with wood sculpting are very expensive as well?

Yes, they are. They're relatively expensive, because they have to be specially made. They're fairly thin in the shaft and there's a variety of cutting shapes, gougers and all sorts of different-shaped tools that are used, particularly for ornament carving, yes.

Max, I'm very interested with this work you did on the World War II Shrine of Remembrance. So it was really through George Allen and Stanley Hammond that you came to that?

Yes. Stanley Hammond actually employed me, because Stan took over the more technical aspects of creating the Memorial. Firstly, George Allen didn't have a large studio and Stanley Hammond did, and Stanley Hammond had quite a large studio in Oakley in Capon Street, I remember, and he took over the business of creating a half scale model in the first instance, which was made in clay. George Allen and Stan Hammond were involved in that, particularly, because they were quite largeish figures, they would have been, I suppose, about two metres high, the standing figures of it, and that was created in clay. And then – it was 1953, in one of the vacations from the Art School a friend of mine, Kevin Ingish[?], and myself were employed to mix the plaster and be the (laughs) rouseabouts, I guess, in terms of making moulds from the clay and then reproducing the clay model as a plaster replica. And so that was a half – that was the half scale model. And later on, in 1954, I was employed for the full year working both on the Shrine War Memorial carving part of it, and also in Stanley Hammond's studio – I did some bronze finishing for him and some woodcarving and some stone carving, preliminary stone carving for one of his projects – and so it was just great experience.

Now, the actual Shrine, was that stone or – – –?

Yes, the full scale figures were carved in basalt, and the job was taken up to rough out the stones by a couple of stonemasonry yards in Melbourne at the time, one out at Footscray, at Standard Quarries, and one was Lodge Brothers in South Melbourne. And the masons carved, roughed out and carved the surface down to within an inch or so of the final surface, and then I and a Lithuanian-born sculptor who'd just emigrated, called Tisutas Sikaris[?] – we called him Joe, Joseph, I think that was his other name – and he and I did a lot of the finishing, and sometimes George Allen would come and do a bit of work on some of the detail, but Stan Hammond was absolutely conscientious in his supervision of the stone carving. And, you know, you

get to read tales of spoiled stones that sculptors have done in their careers, but because Stan was so technically adept there wasn't one stone spoiled in that.

Is that right?

Yes, it was – – –.

Out of that massive sculpture?

Yes, yes, oh yes. So it was quite an achievement. And I think that was due to Stan's great skills that the thing got done in a reasonable time, because it took a good year for the carving to be completed and taken up to the Shrine and then hauled up on top of a forty-foot column. So it's there today. (laughter)

Yes, for all to see!

Yes.

Well, that must have been a fantastic time for you.

Yes. It was very interesting, and I think it was worth several years of study at Art School to be involved just for that single year, you know. You learnt a lot of skills and you learnt a lot about the *traditional* methods of sculpture. I don't think a lot of large carvings are made today, and certainly not enlarged from a half-scale model to a full-scale by means of a proportional pointing machine, which was very often used particularly in the 19th century to enlarge small-scale pieces of sculpture into large-scale. They were rather like a three-dimensional pantograph, but I haven't seen or heard of a proportional pointing machine being used since that time, which is, what, fifty years (laughs) ago now.

Yes. So these were skills, Max, you possibly could not have picked up anywhere else?

No, that's right. Yes, it was just invaluable experience. And I know I was paid the princely sum of £7 a week to do it. But I think normally some sort of apprentices like that would actually pay for what they learned. So it was interesting and, even though the salary was so low, it was okay. I learnt a lot.

Were George Allen and Stanley Hammond the only teachers that had an influence on you?

No. There were a couple of other outstanding personalities. Lyndsay[?] Edward really taught me to draw properly, and he had a methodology which I later used for students studying drawing with me. And he was quite a conscientious and dynamic person. And there was also Victor Greenhalgh, who was a sculptor as well. He was later on Head of the Art School at Melbourne Technical College. But he was very dynamic, he would actually drive you and question you why weren't you working harder, (laughs) and things of that nature. And he encouraged us to come to evening classes to do extra drawing and extra sculpture. There were classes run in portraiture, sculptural portraiture, which was making life-sized portraits in clay of a sitter, they would hire a model to sit, and there were also life classes where one learnt to sculpt in clay from a nude model. So they were all very valuable skills, and I think they shape your perceptions of the world too, and your observation of phenomena in the world. You look at it in quite a different way in some ways, in some senses, to normal people. You notice details, you notice structures, you notice textures and things like that, that perhaps people don't normally note down in their minds – they probably *do* perceive it, sure, but as for having some meaning, I think that way of looking at objects – and I guess the nude model is an object like anything else – it was a structure which was terribly complex and of great interest. So we learnt to draw in a fairly conventional way, but I still have those skills. If I have to use them I'm able to draw on them, which is so valuable.

Were there any particular forms that inspired you, even in your student years and in those early times?

I think I was inclined to experiment and look at the work of Modernist sculptures at the time, and I think there were – people like Henry Moore were influential, of course, but there was also the European Abstractionists and Constructivists, like Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner and people of that nature, which interested me too. So there was the Swiss sculptor, Max Bill, he'd created some very interesting abstractions. So those sort of influences filtered through and did affect my response to the problems that we were set in classes in the diploma course. And we were required to do sort of sculptural compositions, and they had to emerge from our own thinking, and so we had to supply a particular solution in a sort of – well, more personal way than just merely copying the work of artists. So there were some influences at work there. A lot of the material that I looked at was contained in the

public library, the State Library in Melbourne, which was just across the street, just across LaTrobe Street, where the Art School was, and so I spent quite a few evenings – – –. They had a specialist art library there and a librarian who was very sympathetic, and he would shin up the ladder and get you down the sort of rare books or whatever. So I used those illustrations to help me formulate solutions to some of the compositional problems that were set in the diploma course.

And your teachers, were they very rigid in what they would accept, or were they quite open to a range of views?

They were quite open, actually, which – – –. George Allen was sort of, I guess he was working in a kind of Art Déco sort of manner, and I guess the aesthetics were sort of based on Herbert Reid and that sort of person, that sort of publication. I think there were a number of Herbert Reid books that were referred to. And even some of the writings of Ruskin were referred to, and so (laughs) I did get an exposure to those lectures that Ruskin gave. And Victor Greenhalgh was more an intellectual person, and he would point us to various books, and he was interested in drawing and he had some pet books on drawing and also on sculpture. So there were a few rare books that were on sculpture that one could have access to in the library.

Max, what about the physical place, the Art School – what was that like?

Well, that was a multi-storey building, it had endless stairs to it, but there were several floors of it. And even the roof had a building on top of it and I think Interior Design inhabited that in the '50s. The sculpture studios were on sort of the first landing; there was a sort of sub-basement which held Pottery, Metalwork and so on. And then the sculpture studios existed just on the first semi-floor, and we had very large studios. There was a casting shop for plaster work, and there were a couple of rooms for modelling – one was a general modelling room and one was a life class area. And I don't know whether you can imagine, but there were a whole lot of reproduction plaster casts of various Classical sculptures which they had hung up on the walls. There were anatomical models that one could look at the muscles and the structure of the figure, and there were a series – I remember very clearly – there was a series which came from the skeleton to some of the – it had stages of illustration in relief of the human figure. So that was the kind of setting. There were some interesting colleagues there which I still can contact only one, but they were

interesting people about the same age. But there were also people who came in on – of both genders, that came in from the rehabilitation schemes after World War II, they were there and they were often teachers who came in at night, and so I met quite a number of interesting, more mature-age people. One of the influential people in my life was Lenton Parr, who came out of the Air Force, and he took up sculpture, and so Lenton and myself and a lady called Patricia Lowe, we were the first three entries for the Diploma in Sculpture course. Lenton was quite well-read and (laughs) more than a match for me in many ways, but we stayed good friends for a very, very, very long time. And he was able to go overseas to work with Henry Moore as an assistant, and came back from that experience and his contacts with contemporary artists in England, and spoke of those to me and others. So there was an influence happening there that happened right from Art School. So those were very happy and interesting years, and although the lectures – we had few formal lectures, there was a lot of contact, sort of tutorial-type contact, with the teachers, so it was excellent. And we had also a person who worked as a – he was a teacher of casting and moulding and modelling, and he'd come from the old school, he was a professional plasterer, but he was very skilful and taught us a lot of interesting techniques and so on to do with the manipulation of plaster, its moulding and casting and forming plaster.

What was his name, Max?

Yes, he was Eric Beemont[?], and he was a strange little man, but nevertheless he was just so skilful that it amazed us at times! So we had some artistic input and we also had some technical input at that stage in the Sculpture Department, which was very valuable.

Max, did you and your colleagues, in effect, stand as a bridge between the world of that technical expertise that Beemont had and the Modern era, that sort of, the sculpture coming out of England particularly at the time?

Yes, I don't know whether I can really answer that very well. I guess in a way it was a bridge from the past to the more contemporary methods. Lenton Parr was an ex-apprentice, I think, at some of the factories and certainly the Railways workshop. I think he had fitting and turning skills. But he brought back from England a technique which was used by English sculptors like Reg Butler of welding up sculptures with steel, and I don't think Henry Moore would have anything to do with steel, but Lenton seemed to buy himself a welding set and start making welded sculptures in

England which he brought back with him and exhibited here. And that stimulated my interest, so I started to make welded sculpture and dropped carving and modelling and things like that – for a time, anyway. Yes.

I'm interested, Max – just briefly, anyway – how did your family respond to what you were learning and perhaps your old school colleagues, too! How did they – from Scotch, I mean, many would have gone into commerce or any profession.

Oh yes, and lawyers and – (laughter) yes, that's right – into the Church! Our erstwhile Governor General was a classmate of mine at one stage, so I happen to know him. Better not mention names here. But yes, there were a few school friends which – I've re-contacted one recently and he thinks I've had a very remarkable, if fortunate, life, he said. (laughs)

What, he still can't believe that sculptors could survive, is that right?

That's right, yes, exactly! And certainly my father thought that, when I first went teaching, that, you know, 'Who pays twenty quid a week for just doing that,' you know, 'teaching art.' Yes.

He probably would have been pleased with the seven quid on the Shrine.

That's right, yes, yes! But Mum was always very supportive about it, and I think she talked to my father about it and so he concurred, and my father asked me whether I would work with him in his business and I made him a very firm 'No!' reply to that one.

So in a sense – I think I'm right in this, Max – it would be difficult for sculptors in Australia at that time to have survived just from their art.

Yes, yes.

And you were faced with, I guess, looking at teaching, as you've said. How did that come about?

Well, that came about through a friend who was studying painting, David Newbury, and I later exhibited with him, and my first sort of solo exhibitions were combined with him: his work occupied the walls where mine occupied the floor space. But he said, 'Look,' you know, 'you should go and see Mr Jolly,' who was the Inspector of Art, ' and talk to him, see whether you can get a position.' So that's in fact what I did and Mr Jolly was very kind and said, 'Yes, we have some temporary positions available for you.' Because the way into teaching in those days was to obtain a

studentship where you were paid a salary to actually do your Teachers' College studies. But I was a bit more independent, I chose to be a temporary teacher, and I arranged through the principal of my first school that I could go and do some part-time studies in teacher education, which took me three years to do part-time, but I eventually completed the Technical Teachers' Certificate, it was known as then. And the Technical Teachers' College occupied a very nice house in Toorak, so I went there in my spare time, which I generated from working night classes and then I got some time off in lieu of payment and did my Teachers' College studies in that time. So, as I say, it took me three years to do but it was a good experience and set me up so that I was a, you know, an organised teacher as against being fairly disorganised at the start, I think. (laughs)

So you had that professional qualification as well for that.

Yes, yes. So that took, the study period, basically seven years, if you want to calculate it up.

So what was your first appointment then, Max?

Yes, it was what I call a 'baptism of fire' at the Brunswick Technical College, the place of my birth – good heavens! (laughs) And anyway, that was a junior technical school, which is a secondary school, and those days there were two Art classes given: one was in clay modelling and one was in general painting and design, so I involved myself with that. And I spent six months there, and then I was called on to shift to Caulfield Technical College because the teacher of Sculpture there had actually died suddenly so I was sort of getting into dead men's shoes, I suppose you would call that. But I went there, to Caulfield, and the job was partially teaching in the junior technical area, and partially in the senior technical area, and I was required to take a life class at night and things like that. So I got stuck into that level of teaching. Mentioning teaching, with that comes sometimes a dilemma that a lot of, I guess a lot of teachers and colleagues of mine have sort of wandered in that area, and I had to make a resolution to that because I eventually decided that one was complementary to the other. So one, the making of sculpture on my own behalf, sort of fed into the area of teaching and *vice versa*, because the students were always very interesting and would challenge your ideas and the things that you spoke to them about, particularly about concepts and more the philosophical side. So that always worked for me very

well for a very long period, and I think it helped to shape the way in which I now work as a sculptor, not having to teach any more. (laughs)

Max, when was your first exhibition? I know this is aside from the teaching.

Yes, yes, yes. The first exhibition I was involved with was the Victorian Sculptors' Society was very active in Melbourne at that stage, trying to promote sculpture as a form of art, and particularly in relation to architecture and building, and I was invited as a student exhibitor, along with Lenton Parr and Patricia Lowe, we in 1952 were invited to exhibit our works there. So we very tentatively placed works up in the annual exhibition, they had an annual mixed exhibition of the membership, and we got involved and eventually were invited by George Allen to become members, and he sponsored us, virtually.

So this is '52, your first.

Yes, this is '52, and in '53 as well, and then the 1954 exhibition I was lucky enough to win a prize, so that was terrific. (laughs) Aubrey Gibson, who was an art collector, Colonel Aubrey Gibson, he sponsored a fifty guinea prize and I managed to win that, so that was a feather in my cap.

Gee! That's pretty formidable for the time.

Yes, it was, yes, yes.

So at that time were you working with metal by then, or not?

No, no, I actually won that prize with a marble carving, so that I was still working in carved and modelled pieces, also some wood pieces as well.

So was David Newbury one of your first exhibitions outside of that realm?

Yes. We decided that we should try and exhibit as frequently as we could, and we thought, well, okay, we could hire a gallery, which we did: we hired the Tasmanian Tourist Bureau Gallery, which was at that time in Collins Street. And it was an upstairs gallery, and we held our first show there. Mine was very much mixed media, I had some cast concrete pieces in it, some carvings, and I'd started putting metal in with the sculpture, which was scrap metal at that stage. And then again we exhibited in 1958 and we hire the Victorian Artists' Society galleries in East Melbourne, which is close to St Patrick's Cathedral – and I think they still have galleries there – and that

was quite a successful exhibition, we got quite a few write-ups and crits from that, which was great. So they were the first two one-person exhibitions that I held of my own work, plus, as I say, David occupied the walls and I occupied the floor space.

So, Max, did people actually want to purchase the sculptures?

Yes, we managed to sell two or three things each, I think, which was great news. So that was encouraging, as well as the art crits coming up – although they weren't terribly favourable! (laughs) I remember being taken to task because we were derivative of various European influences in our work and so on, which – and of course of the Art School. The Art School tended to have a sort of Cubist style in painting, so David got a serve for that from Alan McCullough, I remember. (laughs) But Alan McCullough was a very supportive critic later on for the work that I did, and he included me in one of his books. He used to put out periodic surveys of Australian art, and he always wanted to include me and my work, which I was very encouraged by all that.

Max, philosophically, or even naturally, what was pushing your sculpting at the time?

I guess it's a sort of – and it's probably abided with me – it's a sort of inner need to do it that one can't explain too well. I suppose it's an inclination to work in that way and to speak about your experiences of the world and how you view it. At the beginning we were quoted as being sort of Euclidean in our approach, but I'm not sure whether that was very well-based, but – – –. (laughs) Yes, it's more a desire to do it and to speak through sculptural form.

What I'm trying to get towards – and there may not be an answer to this, heavens knows – did that form have a genesis in something that, you know, the driving you, was it a very – did you have this strong natural urge, for instance, that was – what was the word? – environmental or organic or something like that, at this time, the early time?

Yes. Yes.

Or was it just that inner push?

I think it was just that push, yes, that comes from within, a conviction that you have some capabilities in this direction and that you should maximise your efforts in that area, and draw upon one's thoughts to try and make a poem with the sculptural form. So yes, I'm not sure whether I'm answering that properly, but – – –.

No, I'm more than happy with that, that in a sense you were driven to do what you did, and that – – –. I mean, were you surprised that you were getting a reaction to it at all?

Oh yes, yes, because I don't think Australia at that time was terribly attuned to sculpture and to painting, either. I think there were a whole lot of things happening post-War that drew people's attention. I think literature and maybe even music had a lot more sort of development at that time than the visual arts. I think architecture was starting to get a run on, but I think that only happened in the '60s when there was a bit more money around, and there seemed to be a lot more activity happening in the '60s. But the late – mid- and late '50s, it was fairly stagnant and the only activity was coming from the artists themselves and, yes, it was often ignored, I'd say.

So you count yourself fortunate that you weren't ignored, in effect.

Yes, yes. Probably because I was in the category of a younger, up-and-coming artist and that was viewed as something that was interesting and things were happening, yes.

Now, Max, back to the teaching side of things –

Yes.

– you were extended at Caulfield, obviously –

Yes!

– and even more so –

Extended at Brunswick –

– Brunswick, yes!

– certainly, yes! (laughter) The kids were great at Brunswick, actually, because there were some very intelligent kids there that pleased me in what they did. But, you know, discipline was always a problem. You had to be always on top of it, you know. The Teachers' College seemed to regard it like driving a car, you know, you wouldn't want to get out of control! (laughs) That sort of amusing analogy, I thought.

So you could have your foot on the brake and the accelerator at the same time.

Same time, yes! (laughter) Caulfield was interesting because we were asked to be involved in the training of art teachers who were sent from the Melbourne Teachers' College to Caulfield, and there were quite large numbers of these people, and they were required to do Art studies as well as do their pedagogical studies at the Melbourne Teachers' College. So they spent, I suppose, about four days a week at Caulfield for two years, and then in their third year they did a lot more study at the Melbourne Teachers' College and they also did some art studies at the Art School at RMIT, so I don't know how they ever cobbled that course together, but it was (laughs) a very – must have been a very strange one to have been a student on that one.

Now, from Caulfield you go to Geelong, to the Gordon Institute.

Yes. Well, I was asked to go down there and teach by a former teacher of mine, Edward Heffernan, and he taught us Design at the Art School at Melbourne, at the Melbourne Technical College. And he said, 'Look, we need someone to teach Drawing and Sculpture down here, Max, and perhaps some History of Art. Can you do that?' And I said, 'Yes.' So they offered me a little bit more in salary and so I agreed eventually to go. So that would have been about, what, '59, I think, was it? Yes, I think it was '59. And so I went to the Gordon Institute, and they were just starting up and trying to strengthen their diploma courses there, and they also had some teacher trainees, actually, as well, who emerged, so I didn't get away from them. (laughs) The problem for me was that I was just very slightly older than those students, so only had two or three years on them, as it were, and (laughs) so – yes. That also occurred, getting into teaching, occurred after I did National Service, did six months in the Royal Australian Navy, I've forgotten to mention that, and that was in 1956. So that was an interesting, if sometimes harrowing time physically, because we were expected to do all sorts of duties, especially when we were aboard ship, which was the aircraft carrier *Sydney* at the time.

So was that allowed to be used as part of your industrial time?

Yes. Eventually I applied and they hummed and haaed about it, but they said that could be part of my industrial experience. And the balance of the six months I spent trying to be a commercial sculptor, at the end of '56.

This is for architectural sculpting, do you mean?

Yes. It was – well, I remember making things for display, and things like that, for window displays in the city, and I remember making some inserts for shoes, women's shoes, and what an impossible shape it was to make of a foot that went easily into the high heels and things like that. Yes, it was a bit of strange experiences there! Yes, also did a little bit of work for other sculptors. I worked on some carving of a wood relief for Norma Redpath, who was another Melbourne sculptor of note, and she was going overseas so she needed a bit of help to get this wood-carved relief which was for the University of Melbourne completed, so I did quite a bit of work roughing that out and getting it to the finishing stages so she could actually just work over the surface. So that was good to do that too, it was interesting.

So you had many different experiences impinging on you all at this time?

That's right, yes. Yes, it was a varied and active life, yes.

Max, by the early '60s, had you pretty well decided that sculpting as a paid way of life was probably unlikely to succeed?

Yes, well, it didn't seem to be, you know, there was a promised building boom and it happened, but architects didn't seem to want to employ artists to embellish their architectural works at all. And I mean there were very few mural paintings or sculptures made in the early '60s. There were just starting – there was a start of some sculpture that was related to newer buildings, in the city of Melbourne particularly, and obviously in Sydney. Lyndon Dadswell had achieved some commissions for Sydney buildings – some are still in place, actually – and for Canberra, too, also the National University at Canberra. But as a National Serviceman I went (laughs) in my Navy uniform to visit Lyndon – he got a bit of a shock that this sailor suddenly rocked in the door! (laughter) But he was very kind, very interesting man, yes. He was the major teacher at the East Sydney Technical College, and he sort of taught there in a pretty dynamic way.

So you had that inspiration of knowing that there were others who were performing – – –.

Yes, there were sort of role models, exactly. And I managed to get a – one of my first commissions was for a Jewish Masonic Lodge in St Kilda, and it was a wall, a copper wall piece that I made for that, and that was another good start. And that came through exhibiting at the Victorian Sculptors' Society, they looked at my work

and thought maybe that would be good. So the architect contacted me and I eventually made that. That was in '59 as well, yes.

So right from the outset you have the link between teaching and sculpting, it's there all the time.

Yes. I think I was fortunate enough to be able to try and work the two of them as parallels and relating and complementing each other, yes.

Max, I suppose the coming to Adelaide was a turning point in your life. That occurred, what, '62, '63?

Yes. Also getting married in '61, (laughs) that changed my life as well, yes.

Sorry!

Oh, well, it added to it very considerably. And yes, the job came up here, I actually replaced a lecturer at the South Australian School of Art who was fired for activity unbecoming to a teacher and all the rest of it – I won't go into that. But anyway – – –.

Sounds pretty exciting!

Yes, it does! (laughter)

Perhaps you could do a sculpture on it.

I've been tempted! But no, the job came up and I came over here for interview, they were very good to me and showed me around the old Exhibition Building where the Art School was at that time, and then the new building that was being constructed at North Adelaide, in Stanley Street, North Adelaide. And eventually they appointed me as a temporary replacement for this person, and I did come over at the end of 1962 and really started teaching in '63, the beginning of '63.

At the Exhibition Building?

Yes, in the first instance we spent several months at the Exhibition Building, and I think in May-June we moved to Stanley Street, so I just had a few months' experience at the old Exhibition Building premises, which was being fast run down and allowed to go to rack and ruin, which is a pity because it was such an interesting building in its spaces and in its appearance, too.

This is on North Terrace, where part of The University of Adelaide is now on its eastern side.

Yes, yes.

Max, was it an unusual environment for an art school, in effect, to have an old building like that, a very old building?

Well, I suppose I'd got used to older buildings being used because at RMIT and at Caulfield the sculpture area existed in an older part of the building. But this one was extremely old, of course, coming from the 1880s and being used for various purposes, and then coming out to a sort of a pristine (laughs) environment at North Adelaide, so it was a bit of a jump in. But we were given a lot more generous studio spaces, and the school here in Adelaide had just started diploma courses so I taught in them and so on. And I had an interesting colleage, Owen Broughton, wh7o'd come from Sydney in '62 as well, but earlier than my arrival, and so he sort of started up the diploma course. And we developed that as a full four-year course.

Now, who were some of your other colleagues, Max, at the Stanley Street, North Adelaide school, the new school?

Well, the school had sort of gone into the doldrums in the 1950s, and in the '60s the Education Department was seeking to revive the Art School as a more dynamic force in the community and they were appointing new lecturers – they called us 'lecturers', which was very nice – new lecturing staff. And they appointed some interesting people in those early years of the '60s. Beside Owen Broughton and myself there was Franz Kempf, who came over from Melbourne in the printmaking area, and Udo Selbach[?], he was also in printmaking, he was a recent appointment. Udo had had experience in Europe and had brought that sort of ambience into the Art School. In Painting they appointed some younger painters from the Adelaide area, Barry Goddard and Tony Bishop. Tony worked in both painting and sculpture at the time, and still does, I believe. So they were kind of dynamic and they were younger generation people. The older generation people, like Dora Cant[?], Dora Chapman, the painter. She worked there. And the Vice-Principal at the time, Des Betany[?], he'd come from England as a designer, actually, but had also been in Changi and had a history, relationship there. The Principal of the Art School at the time was Alan Sierp[?], who was really a technical drawing person and had published a book on the

subject. But he was a very kindly man and he encouraged Owen and myself to spend money to develop (laughs) the Sculpture Department, which was great!

Never dreamed of, of course.

And then there was Douglas Roberts, who took over the Principal's job at the Art School for some years until his death. So it was kind of a new shake-up. There was a librarian employed to handle the School's art library collection, which there hadn't been before. That was Doug Hardy eventually, and he was a teacher-librarian, so that was – – –. That was all sort of into new territory, and the Art School was, however, still under the supervision of the Department of Further Education, or they had several names but basically that was the set-up, so it was under the Education Department.

END OF DISK 1: DISK 2

– – – of an interview with Max Lyle on the 4th August 2004. Max, you've been describing the South Australian School of Art, the *new* School of Art, in Stanley Street, North Adelaide, in 1963, and the staff that were there, and you were given the task to help form a new teaching curriculum, pretty much.

Yes, yes, we were, indeed.

Can you tell me about those early years as teacher and the students that you had coming in? Was it an exciting time for you?

Oh, yes, indeed. We had the opportunity to build an interesting course in three-dimensional artwork in sculptural terms, and we tried to include – after a common year, they called it a 'common course', a first year, where students were, like my own experience of study at RMIT in Melbourne, they were required to do a whole range of subjects and I was involved in that too because I had to teach some sculpture, and we had great fun carving rocks and bits and pieces and modelling and making some ceramic objects and wood carvings and so on. So that was a great experience. So that was the first year of the course. And then we had the opportunity to develop a more specialist course in Sculpture. There were also strands in Painting and Printmaking and, later on, Ceramics. And so, from second year onwards, the students were experiencing tutoring in the methods of production. And also we did life classes and portrait classes and things of that nature. And that tended to change over the years, as time went on. But we did quite a bit of figurative work, and also

sculptural composition, which required the students to use their own ideas, or develop their own ideas, and work hopefully in a more personal style. That also had Ceramics in the course, they went to the Ceramics area and they learnt how to throw pots and model pieces towards being fired in the kiln. So it was quite an interesting course we presented and people seemed interested in it.

Max, how many students in those years?

There weren't a lot in sculpture as such in the diploma course, but we also had teacher education people coming in, as had happened at Caulfield. So we had a fiar number, really, between first year studies and then the art teaching people. They called it the 'J' course, which is a terrible name! Like some sort of number or something. And those students also studied at the Western Teachers' College at that time, in South Road. So they were kind of split between those two institutions, which sometimes showed, unfortunately. But I think most students with any sort of character resolved that problem for themselves.

Western was run under a very old-style regime, wasn't it, in those years?

I have not a lot of knowledge of the structure there, but there was some Art being taught down there, for primary school students as well as secondary school teachers in training, yes. But I would imagine, yes, it would have been a little bit more hierarchical, I guess, sort of structure. We at the Art School were allowed to develop our own courses from what we felt was needed to be taught and the sort of experiences students needed to go through. So it was very good in that sense. We had to document it, of course, you know, and justify it! (laughs) In fact, justification, as the years went on, was a very big part of our job, to justify it to this person and that person who came to enquire or who was put in charge of the studies that the Art School was doing, and what not. Yes.

So the '60s for you was a really constructive time, in terms of teaching?

Oh yes, yes, yes. I think it was a very interesting period, and it gave you the opportunity to put your own ideas of education into play.

Now, how did you balance family life and wanting to exhibit yourself at this really, what must have been an incredibly busy time, forming a new course –

Yes.

– new building, young students at a time of a bit of radicalism.

Yes, oh yes, certainly a bit of radicalism, because students were associated fairly strongly with the University of Adelaide. They used to share Prosh Day[2] activities and things like that, so you'd lose them for a day when Prosh Day was on. (laughter) You know, that sort of manifestation of craziness that's probably a good thing, that there's an outlet for that. Later on it went in other activities, like when the Beatles arrived, you know, you suddenly just found you didn't have a class! But you just have to roll with those sort of punches.

My memory is that Western Teachers' College students were told that they'd be failed if they went to see the Beatles.

No, well, I knew very well it was happening and I turned a blind eye to it. How can you come down on young people for being young people?

The Vice-Principal, Des Betany, may well have gone himself!

I don't know! (laughter) Well, then there was an issue with the Vietnam protest marches and so on, you know.

So that did impact on the School?

Yes, oh yes. I can remember the then Principal, Doug Roberts, looking across the road. There was an encampment of students there that was there for several days with protest placards saying 'The administration doesn't understand the issues' and things of that nature.

Where were they, at the pub, were they?

Well, close to it! (laughter) They were just across the street, and Doug Roberts was very generous in a sense, he said, 'Well,' he said, 'maybe they're a bit right, you know. But,' he said, 'I've got a school to maintain here,' you know, 'can't appear to condone it.'

So how did you deal with that as a teacher yourself, Max? Did you encourage that type of enquiry or radical thought?

[2] Forming part of University 'rag' week.

Well, I didn't feel I should be encouraging it, but I thought that it was worth thinking about those issues because they seemed to become terribly important at the time, which they were, yes.

Just harking back to my earlier question about how did you balance family and exhibiting – – –?

Yes, we got a bit off that, didn't we? I found that the School, or the term holidays, or the term vacations, were very valuable because I could then concentrate and do some continuous work on the sculpture, and sometimes – well, yes, family things came up, but [I] seemed to juggle those activities, as it were.

So how did you sense your own sculpting going during this period?

I sensed some changes, and in the mid-'60s in fact I did change the style of my sculpture to a much more individual style that was peculiar to me, and I started to use sheet metal, crumpled and – in fact, I used some crashed car bodies, panels, too and cut those out and used those as a part of the sculpture, as well as going down and seeing what the crusher produced at the scrapyard. So I joined all those together, they were sort of action sculptures that I assembled fairly quickly and were very light, they weren't substantial at all because they were simply individual sheets joined and welded together. I had been working, in the early '60s, with a style of sculpture that was somewhat derivative of the English sculptors Lynn Chadwick and Reg Butler, and also there was an influence of Lenton Parr with the technique and the sort of sculpture that he was producing. The welded steel had a great advantage, in that it would hold itself up in thin sections and be more elegant than stone or clay or timber was, particularly timber, carved, or stone carvings. So I developed that in the mid-'60s. I did have cycles of work that radically changed at times, like the working from sheet metal into plastics and polyesters, moulded in moulds, and also they had inserts of polished metal in them. And that was influenced by the work of the sculptors of the West Coast of the United States – so-called 'funky sculpture'.

What years would that have been?

That was starting probably into the late '60s, '67 I think was the first ones I produced there.

So you say 'plastic' – was this fibreglass, or – – –?

Yes, a fibreglass, polyester, yes, reinforced polyester, which is fibreglass, exactly. And I also used coloured pigments in with the surfaces so that they were highly-coloured and contrasting often with the polished metal inserts. I also made wall sculptures with various colours included in the same piece. So it was quite a radical change.

And you were saying a lot of this was done in your vacation breaks from teaching?

Yes, that's right. Well, there was a good long Christmas break. And I did work at night when the family retired, sort of thing, I did work at night, did the nightshift. Still do it sometimes. (laughs)

Max, this formation of very much your individual style, through the '60s period, was that appreciated by people who came to exhibitions?

Yes. I exhibited in Adelaide at the Bonython Galleries, and I made a succession of exhibitions there. And I guess that put my name on the map a bit. And I don't think Kym liked my plastic pieces very much, he said so, which is all right. I had an exhibition of them up in Sydney and none of them sold, so from his point of view it wasn't so good. But I mean Kym Bonython as a personality always encouraged and took a chance with new talent, and that's what he did with me. He actually came down to Geelong and had a look at my work, and he also talked to John Reid who I'd had an exhibition with in Melbourne, the Museum of Modern Art of Australia, as he called it then. But he and Sunday[?] Reid were always encouraging young artists, and Kym consulted with them in order to get some idea of what I was about, and I had my first exhibition with Kym in '63, it was, yes. So I had a new appointment at the Art School, also I had to add some new works to the pieces that I brought from Melbourne to exhibit there, so yes, I was busy at the time.

Max, is Kym Bonython a very important figure in modern Australian art, do you think?

Oh, I think one of the crucial ones. He promoted a lot of the better-known names now, like Tucker and Nolan and so on, and I think that was probably the backbone of his sales at the time, those sorts of people. And he promoted them, which was good for us, and also internationally I know he had a lot of interest from the United States in the things that he was exhibiting here in Adelaide, which – – –. And I think Kym's interest in jazz and in new visual arts and painters and so on, that was vital to our

culture in Adelaide, too, made another facet for Adelaide to look at which was probably necessary.

As a sculptor, is somebody like that rare in our society? I really don't understand that. I mean, I know in America there are plenty of people who do it, but – – –.

Yes, I think rarer now. There don't seem to be so many outstanding personalities like Kym doing that sort of thing. It may be it's because we've become a bigger sort of population, particularly in the eastern states, and so it doesn't show so much, but entrepreneurial sort of activities are not so prevalent, probably, these days. Have that impression strongly, because the commercial side's taken over, the commercial galleries are a system in themselves, they have their own association and it tends to become a little bit spread and generalised, yes.

What I'm moving towards, Max, is I get the feeling from hearing you talk that the '60s and '70s, with people like Kym around, promoting, must have been an exciting time, in the best sense –

Yes, yes.

– for art and artists to be participating in.

Yes, yes. There were a few commissions coming as well, and that was encouraging too.

Tell me about them.

Well, I mentioned the first commission with the Jewish Masonic Lodge, the copper wall sculpture. And then my friend David Newbury, who was employed at the Teachers' College in Bendigo, said, 'Look, we've got a new building there, we want a sculpture for it, would you send some designs, work some designs up?' And so – I was still in Geelong at the time, and I worked in the shed at the back of the flat that I occupied and created a couple of alternative designs and they chose one. And it's about eight feet high, it's also a wall sculpture, and it was of the symbol of the Teachers' College which was the phoenix, which I was also interested in as a mythological story and traditional story of a number of cultures, actually. So I made this piece for them. That was the second piece that was of any consequence. And there was a bit of a break, too, things like the Adelaide Festival Centre, which was 1973, the architects and builders had made a bit of a mistake with the height of the landing on the staircase in the foyer of the Centre, so they wanted a sculpture fill-in

of this very awkward space that had been created, and they also didn't want to risk litigation, I guess, with people hitting their heads on the overhang from the landing that they'd created halfway up to the next floor. So I evolved a series of rhythmical sculptures in stainless steel, they were manufactured in stainless steel eventually, to occupy the space and sort of reach out and channel the populace around the dangerous spot! (laughter) But anyway, I mean, such things have been done traditionally in the arts, I guess, for a long time. So that was the next major piece that I made. And then there were a whole lot of pieces that they commissioned for the Centre, which was great, you know, the Bert Flugelman pieces, the 'Tetrahedrons' at the front entrance on the upper side there. And there were also the Fred Williams murals there of the Murray River scenes, which are still there, which is great to see.

What was there about Adelaide at this period, Max? I mean, I was in the music business at the time and it was really alive.

Yes, it was, yes. I think the Festival of Arts had a lot to do with that, I think that made a focus to bring in new works from various sides of the cultural effort, you know, and I think that was very good. Although there are a lot of imports to the Festival, I think one of the important aspects of the Festival should be to focus on Australian effort in the cultural area, and I think if it does that, as well as bring in new stuff to liven up the scene from overseas, I think it's doing very well.

Could we come back again to your teaching, then, to keep this sort of –

Yes, this double-barrelled business going!

– yes, well, I was going to describe it like your piece of sculpture in the Festival Theatre, it's rhythmic, almost, the in and out of the two things coming together. But the teaching at Stanley Street was going on. When did the move to the Underdale Campus occur?

Well, there seemed to be a move by the Dunstan Government to do something about the Teachers' College because there'd been a proliferation of teachers' colleges and they had also an interest in education and the arts from Music to Drama to Visual Arts and so on. And so the idea came up, with Hugh Hudson, I suppose, in the forefront, to make a larger important college out of the existing seeming bits and pieces. And from the Art School side there was also a problem in accommodating Industrial Design, which had just been developed. And so they evolved a sort of – I guess it was more on the American lines, I think that was the first Director, Greg

Ramsay, he'd had a lot of experience in the United States and was keen on the United States model. So that eventually evolved into Torrens College of Advanced Education. 'Advanced Education' was another strange phenomenon in a sense, because it was between sort of technical education and the universities. And so further education was also a part of it in the TAFE[3] area as well, so there were these two elements jammed between the various kinds of education. So – I guess I'm waffling a bit here.

No, no, it is the era, isn't it? I mean, the Whitlam Government brought in this revision of tertiary education –

That's right, yes.

– and this comes directly out of that revision –

Yes, yes.

– the whole TAFE, CAE experience.

And the idea of free education in the tertiary area as well.

Ah, yes, of course.

That's right. But in Adelaide it seemed to be – amalgamation seemed to be the name of the game. So there were amalgamations which succeeded Torrens College, which was Western Teachers' College with the Art School, and then eventually it brought in Adelaide College of Arts and Education, which included some of – oh well, I think all of the Teachers' College campuses like at Magill and Salisbury, and the one down near Flinders, I forget – – –.

Sturt.

Sturt, that's right. So it brought all those together as one college eventually.

Well, Max, how did it affect you, because the Stanley Street School of Art was a relatively new building in those days.

Yes, it was .....

But nonetheless you would have been, what, cramped for space by the mid-'70s?

[3] TAFE – Technical and Further Education.

Yes, it was, as I said, mainly because of Industrial Design, they were really cramped into two or three rooms on the upper floor. The Art School wanted to purchase land, and actually I think there was rumour of compulsory acquisitions, which upset the North Adelaide neighbours, (laughs) which was fair enough. Then the Underdale site was looked at and became a site for development, and eventually, in the '70s, in '79, we moved from Stanley Street to Underdale and occupied new studios there, and Industrial Design got a very good area and huge workshop which still exists down there. And so they were in a much better position to educate industrial designers.

Was your course changing all the time during these years?

Yes, it was. And it changed because the art, Visual Arts, changed, the practice of Visual Arts became more conceptual, and I refer to it as a 'conceptual wave' because it seemed to come at a particular time in the '70s, the early '70s. And it affected the kind of works that came out of art schools. It affected – well, people said that painting was dead and sculpture as practice was dead, and so on, but it would seem to me that the practice of the arts is an integratory thing anyway, and there were a whole lot of students who took on both studies in Painting and Sculpture and other areas like Printmaking and combined them very well.

You call it a 'wave' or a 'tidal wave' or whatever – – –.

Yes, it was, it was a completely new way of thinking, and Professor Donald Brook called it 'post-object art', he tagged it that, which was probably a very good title for it because a lot of the manifestations of the new art were videos or they were installations that came to be developed which were loose collections of objects or illustrations or materials that happened to be on a wall or floor and gave you a certain ambience from that.

Or even games.

Yes, even games, that's right, yes. (laughs)

Was there a certain aggression or adversarial feeling coming into the School at this time?

Oh yes, I think those people who were convinced of the value of this were very strident in their arguments, you know, very forceful.

So how did you respond to that? Did you find that okay to flow with, or was it getting up your nose a bit, so to speak?

Well, at the start it got up my nose and I thought, 'Well, hey, wait a minute,' you know, 'This is the way that the arts are going and one has to tune into that and turn it around and take advantage of it.' So I tried to educate myself, particularly through the periodicals that came through the library, and tried to pick up on it, so that I was at least knowledgeable about it and I could discuss it with students from an informed point of view. And so I thought that was pretty important, to keep up with my reading and know what was happening. But there were reactions to it, of course, but I think eventually it sort of settled down, and I mean it really has turned into, I guess, installation art fairly strongly. And I don't make installations, but I like some of the installations that are made, I think they can be very powerful, and there are sort of examples that one can quote. I remember going to Perth at the Institute of Contemporary Art there and they had a whole room that had suspended pairs of spectacles, and they were like personages there that you could imagine. And so that was very evocative, very strong. I related it to kind of seeing collections of heaps of spectacles, for instance, from the concentration camps in Europe, and they were very evocative, I thought. The boots and shoes and things like that were, but the spectacles most of all, it seemed.

I can understand that, there's a – – –.

So I think those sorts of associations – I suppose some people would say this is baggage that you bring when you look at artworks, but of course it does rely on your personal experience when you're looking at artworks, what you make of them, because some are very difficult to read, I think, and unless you've read the same text that the artist has been reading sometimes you can be left out in the cold, you know! (laughs)

But, Max, was there a change in the structure of the student population in those years too, did you have a greater number of mature age students, part-timers?

We always had a lot of mature age students coming through, especially in the '70s it would seem. I think sort of free education helped some people to re-track and do what – all they'd always wanted to was to get into the study of the arts. And it probably happened in Music and Drama and things like that as well, I think.

Yes, so that wasn't a bad thing, in other words –

No, no.

– that was a continuation of something that's already there.

Yes. We had an additional member of staff come into Sculpture, and that was Bert Flugelman, and he readily understood what was going on with conceptual art and was always a – made arguments for opening up the experience of students and allowing them to make their own decisions. So he was a good influence in our area, and very dynamic, too.

His name's forever with sculptures in various parts of the world.

That's right. Oh yes, he – – –. (laughter) From the Mall's balls[4] to –

That's right.

– onwards.

Oh, I think he's got fascinating stuff. Even today – I mean, it's lived, hasn't it?

Yes, yes, it has, yes.

It's one form of art for him that's just kept going on.

But he was also a painter, too, he involved himself in painting, which was another interesting aspect of his works, yes.

You've spoken about the politics of the period with the students, was there a lot of politics amongst staff in those years, or was it up and down – – –?

Oh, I think there always is in places like that, yes, yes, yes.

So, Max, you go on eventually to become – I don't know what the word is – Principal or Head of the School in the '90s.

Well, the last Principal became a Dean in the College at Underdale, so that was the end of the Principalship of the Art School, which I always regretted a bit. And the Head of the Art School became Head also of the teacher training art studies in both primary and secondary areas, and the Art School in the '80s was quite large, the early '80s. And I succeeded Cec Hardy who was in the Painting area as Head for a while

[4] Reference to a sculpture located in Adelaide's Rundle Mall, comprising two silver-coloured, reflective spheres.

in the early ’80s, and then Ian North was appointed, which was great, and he elevated the Headship of the Art School to Associate Professorship and then a Professorship, so it’s really good that the person who is in charge of the South Australian School of Art is at professorial level now, Kay Lawrence is the Head of the Art School and she’s a Professor, which is where it should be, I think.

I wonder, Max, could we spend a bit of time just talking about the way your own work has evolved? In front of me I have a couple of catalogues for exhibitions that you’ve been involved with.

Right.

Your work has a type of – well, the one that’s on the cover of them is this windswept feel, almost a natural fibre, even though it’s in metal. There’s a sense there of something quite natural.

Yes, yes. That was an interest that I developed for a while from the early ’90s and it’s still with me. But prior to that, when I first went overseas in ’68, I first experienced architecture as an art, you know, especially the interior environments of cathedrals and buildings in Europe, both traditional Gothic and rococo or Baroque to Modern structures, and when I came back in the early ’70s I developed a kind of methodology where I constructed a frame in aluminium or steel and then I filled it with skeins of wires which were sort of – well, they came from cables and I unravelled the cables and I used these wires as a filling for the framework. And that lasted a while, I guess up to the mid-’70s, and then when I got an opportunity to make the piece at the Festival Centre I got into more sort of volumetric pieces that had a mass to them, and I did a number of sculptures there. I received a grant from the Australia Council to make a large steel sculpture for North Terrace area, where they were holding an exhibition called ‘Twelve Sculptors’ – that was some interstate people. And I also developed, from that time too, sculptures that moved with the wind. So I made some wind-impelled sculptures which eventually became commissioned work, one in Broken Hill, which has a central wind spinner in there, and also down at Mount Gambier there’s a pair of sculptures collectively called ‘Performance’, which move with the wind. One has a tilting, quite a heavy tilting form at the top of it, and the other one is a sort of curtain of about thirty or forty pieces of stainless steel tubing which move with the wind, too. This was with the site in mind because it was in front of the Sir Robert Helpmann Theatre, so this was

called ‘Performance’. One is the performer, the one that has the tilting, sort of gestural, wavy piece on top, and then the curtain had all these suspended tubing pieces. So that was a kind of development up to the ’90s. I would still like to make wind-impelled pieces, but I kind of dropped that in terms of interpreting natural phenomena that I’ve encountered on trips to the Outback in particular, and the effects of natural forces and the weather on rocks and trees; and I think just the wind through a tree changes its shape almost magically, so some of the sculpture that you’ve been referring to in these catalogues are related to that. The detritus that’s caught on fenceposts and trees in the Outback, leaves and branches that get wrapped around those things in streambeds after winter rains always interest me too. Reed beds catch all sorts of bits and pieces as well, sometimes man-made rubbish like plastic bags and things! But still they affect the landscape and the way we perceive it. So the evidence of the forces of nature is there, so I kind of use that as a basis for the shape of the sculpture, but I’m also trying to make a parallel with my experiences of life. I mean, the ‘Survival’ series tends to celebrate the survival one can appreciate in life when you reach larger, older age groups. (laughter) Yes.

Max, you spoke to me, when we last had a talk, about this idea of ‘frozen action’ in sculpting, too –

Yes.

– and that’s something I’ve become more aware of as I’ve looked at your work, that you really do have that sense of capturing something that’s living, but just in a moment.

Yes, I like that spontaneity, that catching of a moment in these forms, and I hope the works reflect it. And I think the use of the rod and tubular constructions tend to do that because I bend them and face the individual pieces around in the same, pointing in the same direction, or radiating outwards, to give that feeling.

Is there a sense now – you’ve talked about survival and all that type of thing, Max – of looking back as well as looking forwards?

I guess so. Yes, I think so, because sometimes these objects can look like articles found in an archaeological site and it can – – –. (laughter)

I wasn’t thinking that far back!

But – yes, well – – –. Well, sometimes the patinas, the verdigris some people call it, the patinas that I use are in the blue-green range, and I've always been charmed by the Egyptian bronze object that has a marvellous, light blue, green colour, you know, it has that wonderful surface on it. And I like using the element of colour, which is so lacking in a lot of sculpture. I mean, I have an aversion now to rusted pieces of metal because I think they're so dull and uninteresting, whereas the copper alloys that I'm using respond so well to the weather. Even if you don't force the chemical colouring, like I do, if you place them out in the weather they eventually turn into and react to the atmosphere and produce a colour. So you sort of become a painter at the end of the process when you put chemicals on and force the colour to emerge.

Max, does it – if you do contemplate it, does it ever strike you that here you are, fifty years on, still involved in sculpting, in a profession that the people you went to school with would not have even thought was probably worthwhile looking at? And you've said that to me before, that was there, feeling.

Yes, yes.

Does it ever really speak to you that that's quite an extraordinary time?

Yes, I suppose it – I mean, I suppose, like someone said, I've led the fortunate life to be able to make art and be able to teach what I'm sort of about, and I think that's been a reasonable privilege in my life and I recognise it. And I think that sculpture is really a part of cultural fabric, I mean an object for contemplation seems to me to have some value. Basically, it has a, what I consider a utilitarian value, because people can look at one's work and derive something that they hadn't thought of before from the experience, and I think I tend to try and drop everything when I see something that's intriguing, a piece of architecture or design or painting, I try to sort of immerse myself in it and I think that's what people should do, because that's such a unique experience. I mean, sometimes you come out of the experience disappointed, but there are occasions when it's absolutely inspiring and it opens another leaf in the book of life for you. You become elevated by it or more interested in a particular aspect of life because of that.

END OF INTERVIEW.