



# a silent walk

the sculpture of stephen hart

EDUCATION KIT FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

## Introduction

Stephen Hart's sculptural practice oscillates between an examination of the uncanny on one hand and a serious contemplation of the human condition and universal philosophical concerns on the other. His work is characterised by the choice of several recurring motifs, namely an 'Everyman' figure and a white angora rabbit, which he employs as metaphors to investigate existential ideas about the contemporary plight of humanity, the passage of time and life, the isolation of the individual and the complex range of human emotions. For Hart, sculpture is a way of making sense of our existence.

## Key areas of interest for students:

- Symbolic use of motifs
- Meaning of life
- Human condition
- Isolation, individuality and identity
- Working process - traditional hand carving of hardwood, polychroming technique, use of maquettes and inspirational ephemera
- Figure in contemporary sculpture
- Materials and their origins – recycled wood, found objects
- Art historical references

Left: Stephen Hart, *Endless column* (detail) 2003/2005, dimensions variable, carved, polychromed timber and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.

## Materials and their Origins

Stephen Hart's sculptures revive the aura of the handmade through the use primarily of native Australian hardwood, and working with local timber creates an important connection with place for the artist. A snippet of Brisbane's history has been preserved by Hart's use of wood from old warehouses and abandoned industrial sites. When Brett's Wharf was redeveloped in the 1990s, Hart procured a large stockpile of seasoned hardwood, which is an uncommon material in contemporary art, and carving in particular, because of its intractability. Many works in the artist's *Gravitas* series utilise this timber and explore the forms that can be extracted from each unique piece of wood. Hart views this as the liberation of a form or image from preloved timber.

By working with available found materials, Hart exemplifies the Australian ethos of 'making-do'. He strongly advocates inventing with what is at hand, a process that also informs the subject matter of his works. For example, many of the found objects he uses have appeared in his life serendipitously, in turn becoming enduring motifs. An early work, *Highway* (1994), is formed entirely from miscellaneous found objects in a process known as bricolage, which is a means of recycling or making the old new again.

In works such as *Everyman* (2001), Hart has transferred a carved work into bronze, a traditional sculptural material.

- What effect does this transference to bronze have on the work? Does it change the work?
- Rosalie Gascoigne is another Australian artist who employs found materials and objects available. In 50-100 words compare and contrast her work (two examples included on the right) with Harts'. You might like to consider the different usage of wood and found materials.



Top: Rosalie Gascoigne, *Africa* 1995. Wooden crates, 83 x 93 cm.

Bottom: Rosalie Gascoigne, *Winter order* 1979. Weathered timber, plywood, two rusty wire baskets and cut and pasted reproductions, 32.5 x 71.5 x 42.5cm. Purchased 1980, QUT Art Collection.



Above: Stephen Hart, *Reclining nude* 1999, Carved and polychromed timber and found object, 90 x 60 x 28cm, Collection of the artist.

## Working Process

Much like a painter may produce working sketches, Stephen Hart produces maquettes in order to investigate and map out sculptural ideas. Importantly though, these maquettes become works in themselves and do not always serve as exact models for larger sculptures. This can be seen between *Question and answer* (2004), which features a male figure, and *Memento mori* (2004), which substitutes the figure for a trumpeting rabbit.

Working with maquettes allows Hart to explore various ideas and to experiment with recombining miniaturised three-dimensional forms, thereby gaining a sculptural sense of how compositions actually work that sketching does not provide.

While various works, including the *Gravitas* series, are produced from single portions of timber, the construction of other works can be traced back to the production of a chair which often makes use of mortise and tenon joints. These joints slot into each other and they have allowed Hart to produce works such as *Memento mori*, which could not have been carved from one piece of wood alone.

The process of polychroming is also employed by Hart. This technique involves layering gesso over works to produce a specific surface and to add life and colour to his sculpture. An example of this is *Reclining nude* (1999).

- What is the effect of the surface Hart has created for *Reclining nude*?
- What is the difference in process between carving with wood and sculpting with a material such as clay?

## The Everyman Motif

Stephen Hart's works are an exploration of the human condition and his optimistic views about human nature. Works such as *Everyman* (2000) demonstrate Hart's process of abstraction, stylisation, conflation and imaginative invention. His figures are not direct representations; rather they become archetypal figures that embody psychological states of being.

The 'Everyman', while male, is meant as a universal figure that can represent the notion of the individual and portray the trials and tribulations of a lifetime. While in some guises the Everyman conjures despair and feelings of alienation, overall Hart's works are imbued with a sense of hope for humankind

In particular, *Entropy* (2002) conveys hopelessness but also presents the Everyman as heroic and undefeated. The solitary figure may appear devastated perched amongst the rubble, yet he looks to the future ready to move on and restructure a new life. This quality of strength when faced with adversity can be seen in the facial expressions of the Everyman figures in many of Hart's sculptures.

Works such as *Still moving II* (2002) and *Guardian gateway* (2001) explore notions of individually, isolation and the place of the figure within the world. Further, they demonstrate Hart's underlying concern for the interrelationship between the individual and society, and the concept that everyone is inextricably connected to the larger entity that is humanity.

- What does the Everyman symbolise to you?
- What relationship does *Guardian gateway* suggest between the individual and society? How is this achieved?
- What effect does the scale of the different Everyman figures have in Hart's work?



Above left: *Gravitas no. 11* 1999. Carved and polychromed recycled ironbark, 58.5 x 9 x 14.5 cm. Purchased 2000, QUT Art Collection. Above middle and right: *Entropy* 2002, Carved and polychromed timber, 59 x 33 x 33cm. Gift of the artist and Sue-Anne Wallace, 2003 QUT Art Collection. Below: *Still moving II* (detail), 2002. Carved and polychromed timber, 62 x 44 x 18cm. Purchased 2003, QUT Art Collection.



Left: Stephen Hart, *Memento mori* 2004. Carved and polychromed timber, 172 x 79 x 68cm. Collection of the artist.



Right: *A victory of hope over adversity* (Maquette) 2003. Carved, constructed and painted timber, 60 x 30 x 30cm, Private collection, Brisbane.

## The Rabbit Motif

Hart's rabbit motif has a mixture of origins and explores serious themes, despite its harmless, playful appearance and resemblance to the white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. As part of his continual process of collecting, the artist came across a child's white rubber rabbit and was struck by its kitsch, banal grin that seemingly presented the antithesis of the complexities of modern life. Hart likens the rabbit's grin to that of news readers who are required to put on a smiling front at odds with the state of the world.

The rabbit motif also possesses more sinister origins, for it was partly inspired by a photograph of World War II criminal and key protagonist of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, holding a white angora rabbit. The incongruity embodied in the image of a supposed figure of inherent evil, alongside the innocence conveyed by the rabbit, encouraged Hart to further explore the contradictions and absurdities in life.

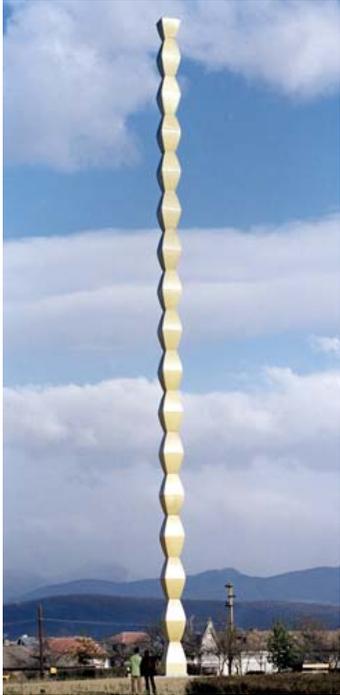
The kitsch rabbit motif injects an element of nonsensicality and dark humour into Hart's serious contemplation of the meaning of existence. The rabbit becomes a symbol of the ineffable, representing the things we cannot understand and cannot make sense of, such as the nature of life and death.

- One of Hart's sculptures is titled *Memento mori* (2004). In a literal translation, 'memento mori' is Latin for 'be mindful of dying' and is a reminder of death or mortality. The work's title refers to the art historical painting traditions of memento mori or vanitas, the thematic exploration of life and death. What do you think the skull and book symbolically represent within this work?
- What do you think Hart is trying to convey by combining the rabbit and Everyman in *A victory of hope over adversity* (2003)?
- What art historical tradition does *Reclining nude* reference? How has Hart reworked this tradition?

## Constantin Brancusi and Stephen Hart's *Endless Column*

Stephen Hart's *Endless column* refers art historically to Constantin Brancusi's (1876-1957) iconic Modernist sculpture of the same title. Brancusi's *Endless column* is a monument for soldiers lost in World War II and is a stylization of funeral poles from the south-east of Romania. It is installed in the public sphere at Targu Jiu with two other Brancusi works, *Table of Silence* (1937-38) and *Gate of the kiss* (1937-38). Together the three works represent the cycle of human life, with *Endless column* symbolising death and ascension to heaven.

Compare and contrast Brancusi's *Endless column* with Hart's work of the same title. How do they differ stylistically? Are there any thematic similarities?



Left: Constantin Brancusi, *Endless column* 1938, metal-coated cast-iron modules on a steel spine, 98 feet high.

Below: Stephen Hart, *Endless column* 2003/2005, dimensions variable, carved, polychromed timber and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.



## A return to 'slow art'

Hart's involved process of hand woodcarving and predilection for the figurative, are considered outmoded in a society where time is money. Ricky Swallow is another Australian artist whose work involves the slow art of realistic carving and his work is currently experiencing widespread acceptance. Swallow's intricately crafted works mark a return to 'slower' art, in terms of process and viewer contemplation and their popularity allows Hart's sculpture to be received in a new light, also in tune with the current move towards the appreciation of moments of time in fields such as the culinary arts, which has seen the rise of the 'slow food movement', for example.

The work of a number of contemporary artists, not limited to sculpture, heralds a return by many to slower, intricate art, at odds with our fast-paced society. These artists value technique and attention to detail.



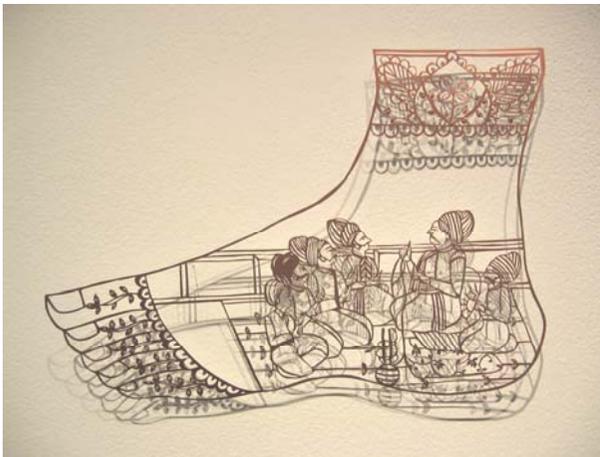
Ricky Swallow *Everything is nothing* 2003. Laminated jelutong (hardwood), 21.6 x 32 x 14cm, Courtesy of Karen Lovegrove Gallery, Los Angeles. Lindemann Collection, Miami  
Killing time (detail) 2003-2004. Laminated jelutong, maple, 108 x 184 x 118 cm (irregular). Collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased with funds provided by the Rudy Komon Memorial Fund and the Contemporary Collection Benefactors, Program, 2004



Left: Michael Zavros, *It is happening...again*, 2003. Oil on board, 13 x 17cm



Right: Lionel Bawden, Detail from the series *The Spring tune* 2003, coloured Staedtler pencils, Araldite, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and GRANTPIRRIE Gallery, Sydney.



Left: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, From the series *The Goddess of Flowers* 2003, paper cutout, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Mori Gallery, Sydney

## Credits

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