



PHOTO: ROB LITTLE

Michael Le Grand, 'Muse', 2002, painted steel, 50 x 122 x 49 cm. Collection of D and G Jacobs, New South Wales

The Art of Metal Bending

SCULPTURE BY MICHAEL LE GRAND

Michael Le Grand's teachers were all motivated and dedicated practitioners who were absolutely committed to their art and making it to a high calibre, which set the direction for his own practice. Text by Meredith Hinchliffe.

FROM the age of 11 Michael Le Grand was exposed to the vibrant art world of Canberra in the mid 1960s. His parents were both potters and after their divorce, his mother opened the first commercial gallery in the ACT in 1962. Sculptors Bert Flugelman and Donald Brook worked in the studio at his mother's home, May Barrie exhibited in the gallery along with younger artists such as Jeff Makin and David Voigt. Inaugural Australian National University (ANU) Creative Arts Fellow, John Percival, worked on his ceramic angels in the studio in mid 1960s. 'My art teachers at high school were recent graduates from East Sydney Tech and had a great deal of influence on me. The combination probably cast the first seeds of interest in sculpture,' Le Grand said.

Le Grand gained valuable life and environmental experiences through survey trips to Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia when he joined the Bureau of Mineral Resources (BMR) in 1970. In 1971 he worked on the Tanami Desert with the BMR which confirmed his decision to attend art school.

He completed his Diploma at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), Melbourne in 1974 and in 1976 successfully applied to the Australia Council for a Travel Grant which enabled him to study at St Martin's School of Art, London. This cemented Le Grand's commitment to the pursuit of sculpture as a practice.

During his time at the VCA, he was taught by Alun Leach-Jones, who instilled in him professionalism through his



PHOTO: MICHAEL LE GRAND

'Deshabillé', 1996, painted steel, 228 x 812 x 180 cm. Collection: Landcom, Nelson's Bay, New South Wales

own discipline and fastidiousness. Marc Clark helped him obtain a job at the Vittorio & Fernando Foundry that paid his way through two years of art school.

Bea Maddock taught him stone and zinc lithography, and painting. 'I was having difficulty with a painting and she said "paint gesso over, or remove, your favourite part of the work". This is a device I continue to use and I find that leaving an element in can often stalls the work if too much value is given to it. If it is important it will come back. I also found her suggestion to be a useful tool in my teaching career when advising students how they might break through the impasse in a work.'

His teachers were all highly motivated and dedicated practitioners who were absolutely committed to their art and making it to an excellent calibre. This set the direction for his own practice.

'I strongly believe that work must have character and must reveal itself to the viewer. When making work, an artist must not be driven by sentiment, and I always demand that the work is done with rigour,' Le Grand said.

At St Martin's School of Art, Le Grand was influenced by several teachers. 'Although Sir Anthony Caro OM, CBE

'Until the Party's Over', 2001, painted steel, 54 x 105 x 71 cm



PHOTO: SEBASTIAN MCINTYRE



'Tsunami', 1997, painted steel, 240 x 750 x 300 cm. Collection: The Gandels, Victoria



'Pamplona', 2007, painted steel, 57 x 52 x 27 cm

sometimes came in for the all day crit sessions and was very generous with his advice, he was more of a figurehead in 1976/77. I still get a buzz from images of his work, such as *Early One Morning* (1962) and *Fathom* (1976). Their economic use of elements and the directness of these works – and several others – appeal to me. In particular, *Early One Morning* has both expanded and compressed views and has probably informed me in the development of *Hashi Hana*, made in 2000.' Philip King was more influential in the manner in which he approached student work. 'He has a remarkable ability to gently unravel the intent of the work and leave any of his own subjective bias out of the commentary,' Le Grand said.

Michael Bolus had a quieter way of engaging with a work.



Michael Le Grand in his workshop: 'Florentine' is in the foreground

'He squinted and slowly moved from the edge to the plane and to the next element of my work. He was alerting me to the very subtle and important shifts that occur especially in large works. Often viewers move past them quickly and glance at them casually.'

Le Grand was a Creative Fellow at the ANU in 1979 when he first met Ron Robertson Swann. They share a similar philosophy regarding sculpture, perhaps owing to their education at St Martin's. They have worked closely together and are friends and colleagues.

Le Grand rarely produces drawings of his work before starting a piece. He works very physically, playing with elements and materials and he will often have several pieces on the go at one time. He explains: 'This is part of prob



'Salute', 2010, painted steel, 36 x 68 x 59 cm



'Ukiyo-e', 2006, painted steel, 270 x 700 x 200 cm

lem-solving and I often find a solution in one work that I can employ in another. In this way, I think they become "serial", with each work building on another. I also find that an early work might reference a much later work.'

From 1980 Le Grand was employed in a range of positions in the Sculpture Workshop at the (now) ANU School of Art, and was appointed Head of Workshop in 1999 until 2007 when he retired.

In 2010 Le Grand, through "Sculpture by the Sea", was awarded a Helen Lempriere scholarship. This has given him the opportunity to make two trips to Japan to research metal bending technique – steel and aluminium – using heat and water, with a third trip in the near future. 'The Japanese term is *gyou-tetsu*, or linear heating and adds to my repertoire of opportunities. I visited a factory that makes curved metal for ships and which is now working with architects and curving metal for roofs. However, it takes a great deal of water and I have to develop a way of capturing the run-off and recycling it.'

Le Grand lives and works on the rural fringes of Canberra and has a community of artists around him. It is a supportive group that often exchanges ideas and assistance.

Le Grand has regularly exhibited in "Sculpture by the Sea" in Sydney, Cottesloe, WA and Denmark and was inducted into the Decade Club of the organisation for exhibiting in 10 shows at Bondi. He was made an Emeritus Fellow in the Sculpture Workshop in recognition of his service to the ANU and has a non-teaching residency in the Workshop in the latter part of 2011. He has had several solo exhibitions in Sydney and Canberra and exhibits regularly in group shows.

Michael Le Grand continues to make a significant contribution to sculpture in Australia and his recent retrospective exhibition at the Canberra Museum and Gallery from March to June 2011 celebrated his work to date.

Meredith Hinchliffe

Meredith Hinchliffe is a Canberra-based arts advocate and freelance writer. Direct quotes are either from discussion with Michael Le Grand or from responses to questions by Peter Haynes, Director, ACT Museums and Galleries.

'Maketa', 2006, painted steel, 16.5 x 15 x 16 cm (6 x 6 x 6 inches). Collection of Robyn McDermott. Shown in the exhibition "Six by Six"



'Mollusc', 2002, painted steel, 64 x 175 x 60 cm

