

A CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ARTIST IN FRANCE

BRONWYN OLIVER

My luggage contained two pairs of pliers, a pair of wire cutters, a hacksaw blade, a stanley knife, metal shears, a hand drill and various gauges of copper wire. My destination? Paris - and then the port of Brest, in Brittany. My occupation? (Terrorist?.....)

Sculptor!

While waiting for the flight to board it occurred to me that the contents of my luggage, revealed under X-ray, might be the reason for our delay.

How would these tools be of use to me? What would I find in my host city? What would I have when the nine weeks of working were over?

I had combed the travel sections of bookshops and libraries. The villages of Brittany were described as rustic and picturesque, laden with history and custom. It seemed that every town and village, every cottage and pile of stones was a mandatory site for the cultural explorer. But the city of Brest? This was not described at all.

One guide quietly stated that as a major port and centre of naval intelligence Brest had been the victim of over 100 air raids during World War II. I imagined my home for the next two and a half months: a Brutalist concrete high-rise where the damp-proofing and heating system in my "studio" would be 45 years old by now.

It was with some trepidation, therefore, that I disembarked from the train at the Gare de Brest. I knew my hosts as soon as the other passengers had disappeared from the platform. They were the only two people left. They were instantly recognisable by their look of uncertainty and hesitation. Immediately we had something in common.

As we drove through town they drew my attention to places of interest. The first, within five minutes of my arrival, was the exact location of the top secret Naval Intelligence Centre. The presence of this organisation tallied with what I knew of the city. The fact that this was the entirety of my knowledge about the city did not deter me from nodding wisely.

We drove past docks, warehouses, factories, old machinery and ships smelling of diesel. I felt comfortable here. Somewhere close by were the materials I could use in my work.

To my surprise I found that our journey ended with a long gravel drive curling beneath stately old trees. We stopped in front of a large chateau, surrounded by a well-kept garden leading down to a beach and a marina. This was to be my home!

(It was becoming clear to me why so many philosophers and practitioners from the history of art were French, if this was how they treated their artists!)

I put my tools in the conservatory. Here I would work. In order to begin I was hoping to find a large quantity of copper wire or copper sheet.

I started by looking up "Hardware Store" in my French/English dictionary, then "hard" then "ware". I didn't get very far with this one, so I looked up "Scrap Metal Merchant", then "scrap" then "metal". This particular exercise gave me greater insight into the meaning of the English words "hopeless" and "unintelligent".

Rather than overestimate the clarity of my French pronunciation (six weeks of first grade at the Alliance Française notwithstanding), I wrote the sentences I thought I would need to find materials in a blank exercise book.

Armed with this, a pen and a street map I began (literally) to walk from one end of the city to the other, stopping at every likely shop or factory. I would find the person in charge and hand them the open exercise book, the pen and the map.

At the end of two days I had a map with the exact location of almost every hardware shop, building material supply and relevant factory marked clearly with a list of the relevant items they stocked next to their name in the exercise book. I had also discovered many of the more interesting parts of town for myself.

Of course it was at the end of these two days, in the last possible place that I found the copper wire. It was in the factory of some kind of heavy electrical industry supplier. I introduced myself in French as an Australian sculptor. "Australienne?... Le Requin!!!" They all gathered around clamouring questions through the self-appointed interpreter. Having noticed two crates of wire in the corner I answered their questions politely, embroidering just a few of the facts for emphasis. "How big?" "How many teeth?" "Number of fatalities each year?" "Ferocity of attack?" "Distribution through inland waterways?" etc. etc. The drama of the detail did not appear to deteriorate in translation. Later when I had chosen the wire that I wanted I asked them how much it would cost. "For you?... Send us a book of sharks!"

I found some copper shim by accident. I noticed it in a pile of refuse - tangled plastic tube and cable cuttings which engineers had left as they worked on the signals at the railway station. It had been the sheathing wrapped around high voltage electric cable.

I did not have my dictionary with me so I knocked on the door of the office of the Stationmaster and asked (as politely as I could in hastily cobbled-together scraps of French vocabulary) "...May I have your... garbage?" Equally politely (in perfect English), he replied "Would you like a bag?"

I began work in the conservatory/studio with this wire and shim. Every day I walked down along the marina watching the yachts and windsurfers, kicking my way through whatever might have been washed up by the tide. I explored the repair yards scattered with crusted hulls, rusted boat fittings, bits of old rope and pieces of machinery.

My sculpture has always had a feeling of the sea about it. This is due to the emphasis on structure and its relationship to the forms I use. The structure of an object indicates its purpose - from looking at the hull of a yacht it is clear that it is intended to cut through the water, a shallow dinghy with its hull "wrapped" with boards "elbows" its way *against* the water.

An object is constructed in a certain way in order to fulfil a specific function. Over time it changes as a result of wear and the action of the elements. It gains a history which can be "read" in the seams left by the mould, rings of the lathe, worn patches, dents, scratches, flakes of rust.

It was fascinating to pick up pieces of corroded metal in the boat yard and turn them around while trying to determine?/imagine? what purpose they might have had, or to sit on the marina and study the couplings on the riggings of different yachts or to compare the construction of the hulls on the traditional fishing boats beached on the shore.

The relationship between form and structure is my main concern as a sculptor. The objects that I made continued my exploration of these concerns - five works varying in size from 30cm diameter to 1.5 metres x 1.5 metres x 45 cm, and an edition of ten etchings. Three of these objects used copper wire and lead or iron, one object incorporated copper wire and shim and the largest object was made using aluminium and translucent sail cloth.

"Billow", in aluminium and cloth, "rests" lightly on 5 tips (hanging against a wall). Many small arches of sail swell out from the aluminium frame. The whiteness of the many translucent sails glares brightly. The

construction indicates that this is an object for swift, silent gliding. A kite? Wings? Sails?... "Billow" rests lightly awaiting the next breeze.

The objects in copper and copper shim incorporate the element of time. The surfaces are green, crusty and corroded. Their structure is purposeful - minimum of material used for maximum strength, perhaps handmade? perhaps... grown?? They appear to have a definite function, but the nature of this function is ambiguous - a lure? (animal or man-made?) a trap? a vessel?, the remains of an animal? plant?

They are the kinds of objects one might find half buried in the sand as the tide recedes. The structures incorporate tentacles? sinkers? gills? filters? mouths? openings? Space/water flows through them, they swell as if full to bursting, but are clearly empty. The knocks and dents, the crusty surface, the elements of the structure suggest a history of participation in the life of the sea. How? In what way?

My work is only complete when it poses these questions.

A cultural exchange allows an experience of isolation that I found particularly fruitful. It was a situation where I had to rely on intuition, common sense(s) and alertness in a way that is not possible in a familiar environment.

It was necessary to mobilize every one of my perceptual abilities in order to function. On the most basic level I had to interpret people's intentions from all of the "other" kinds of signs they communicated because their words were beyond me. Language is the most obvious example, but everything I could see, taste, hear or find was strange and unfamiliar. I am a curious person - I was unable to ask about strange objects or events, I could not "look them up" anywhere, I had to find out more clues for myself - find more objects? similar objects? find out where it fits? find a pattern? All of these objects/events became enriched with guesses, possibilities, theses, fantasies. This kind of enrichment is what I hope to generate in the minds of those who see my work.

I worked in the city of Brest for a period of nine weeks. As a result of this brief, intense experience, I have made discoveries and encountered ideas that continue to resonate through my work.

Works made by each of the ten Australians participating in the French/Australian Artist Exchange were exhibited at the Chapelle de la Salpêtrière, in Paris, in January 1989. This exhibition was reviewed favourably in French, English and Australian publications and was well received. The exchange, however, did not end with this exhibition. For many of us this comparatively brief time of working has been the

beginning of links that will continue to strengthen with return visits, exhibitions, lectures and writings.

P.S.

The last sculpture that I saw before boarding the return flight was a massive nineteenth-century stone carving by François Rude. Emerging from a three metre block of stone were three dancing nude figures. Two lithe young nymphs frolicked around a supple and smiling young man, garlanding his shoulders with flowers. Three metres of stone pulsing with the warm joys of youthful energy, vigour and sensual pleasure.

At the same time as François Rude conceived this celebration of joie de vivre the English were casting small bronzes of their hunting dogs!

A cultural exchange offers unique opportunities for learning about ourselves and others.

Leichhardt, N.S.W.