

APRIL GLASER-HINDER

WORKS 1970-2000

April Glaser-Hinder is a fine artist and it is timely and appropriate that Wagga Wagga Art Gallery should show a selection of her paintings and sculptures now. The Gallery has held a selection of April's work for some time and she has long associations with this district. She tells me that the happiest days of her childhood were spent at her grandfather's home, 'Eulomo', in Bethungra, and she continued to visit the district because her sister, Jennifer Hinder (Mrs Baldry) has her home at Wallendbeen. April moved to Baden in Switzerland in 1976 with her husband, Peter Glaser, and only returned reluctantly after his death when she eventually settled in Cootamundra. On one of her visits to her sister she found a heavy old swage hammer which so impressed her that she carried it back to Switzerland where it inspired her last series of sculptures, one of which won the prize at the 13th Biennale Internazionale Dantesca in Ravenna in 1998.

This exhibition, *April Glaser-Hinder: Works, 1970-2000*, is timely in the context of current widespread critical revision of Modernism. For example, a one-thousand-page book, *Modernism and Australia: Art, Design and Architecture 1917 - 1967*, has reached me just as I write this. Unfortunately it stops just short of the period of April's training at East Sydney Technical College (now the National Art School) and the struggles of the members of that School for recognition. But the editors, Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara, and Philip Goad, insist on the continued opposition in Australia to Modernism in art throughout this period. Strangely, April was not affected by this. Her home, she told me, was one of the first modern homes in Sydney with white walls, functional furniture, hand-woven rugs on plain polished floors and no Victorian bric-a-brac. She and her sister visited the studio of her uncle, Frank Hinder, at the back of her grandmother's house and knew that his carefully prepared geometric designs and paintings were valued. April is a second generation modernist who took most of its basic principles for granted. She liked unadorned objects, plain juxtapositions and did not want things set up on pedestals. Argument and complex verbal exposition baffled her. Everyone could see the difference when she finally entered the art classes at East Sydney Technical College. Here she could take her time over one thing and bring it to perfection, and she was in the studio with others striving after the same objective.

When she was having difficulties in Switzerland getting her work shown she wrote me a letter dated 1 May 1989. "I think we will have to battle alone to reach the standard of the earlier work. I think Australia has very good sculptors. Some have come out of the Central School but when I think of Ron's work and his student, Ian. Then I know what a good school I went to." The reference was to two influential teachers, Ron Robertson-Swann and Ian McKay. Ron Robertson-Swann was not only a good sculptor – Graeme Sturgeon called him 'the best of Australia's classic-formalist sculptors' – he was a good painter and teacher, who used ideas from Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, Anthony Caro and other critics and practitioners pithily and sharply in discussing works in progress in the studio. Above all he emphasised the ambition that an artist must have and use. If, at times, he was too emphatic, Ian McKay was there to go along with him but also to look at alternative possibilities.

After art school April never stopped planning new works and making them. There were many difficulties. She went to the Panel Beating Workshop where she was allowed to do her own work and to learn the factory part of fabricating steel sculpture, she had no car, and had considerable difficulties arranging to lift and transport her work, and there was always the difficulty of getting work spaces and costly materials. Her diffidence was isolating her. At her first public exhibition at Gallery A, a mixed exhibition called 'Artists' Choice', I saw Douglas Pringle, editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, her uncle, Frank Hinder, and Mrs Ann Lewis, the gallery owner and

supporter of modern art, favourably discussing the works but she was too nervous to come up and join in. She was however sure of what her work was to be and went on to produce twenty-one series of sculptures and ten series of paintings, aiming, in her own words, "to make things work the best way I could."

The difficulties also seem to have led her to find new paths to sculpture. This first exhibition presented a new kind of sculpture: suspended from the roof of Gallery A, like Calder's mobiles, grey steel tubes held doubled over stained canvas which had been pleated. The two sides were equal and fell with a gentle curve partly hiding and partly revealing more colour within the folds. The rounded light colour, the suspense of these hangings and the well-chosen proportions articulated space in a distinctively sculptural way though they were listed as paintings.

There are some vertical paintings made in the 70's where she departed from the ideal of unifying the picture surface by equally weighted colour planes of matching size. Her aim seems to be to bring about a harmony between flat strokes and painterly insertions, while bringing the upward and downward indications of the vertical strokes. The result is more of an amiable discourse than a final conclusion.

The early period to 1975 was a time of restless searching in which she used a variety of processes to treat metal and started reassessing objects in relation to nature and everyday life. She made some pieces to project from skirting boards along the floor but soon saw that they could stand free. Three series, the 'Steel Ribbon', the 'Hooks' and the 'Belt', followed, of which the 'Ribbon' still seems to me to be outstanding. Less than fifty centimetres long, the steel band about fifteen centimetres across curls around a double oval space. The two ends of the bands just tip each other or project to complete the oval space and give it a distinctive mark. The simplicity of the space held by a simple continuous plain is enforced by carefully applied even-coloured paint. Some think that they are too simple to be sculpture but with the grace of an arum lily they are a delight to the eye. The series ended with an unforgettable figure – 'Between', its two sides tipped with a long pointing angle as a logo for an abstract Janus, the two-faced Roman god of beginnings and endings. The 'Hooks' are named from the sharp changes in direction where the steel band is bent instead of rolled creating a tricky and engaging cover of the space underneath. The 'Belts' tend to enclose an area from the side leaving the space open to the top. In these series she had found a smaller and more manageable size suited to her strength.

The way to the smaller scale may have been prepared. There was much discussion at the School at East Sydney of the scale for sculpture made from manufactured parts such as T-bars and girders. It was felt that they should be seen in relation to the human body. But when Anthony Caro led the way in making smaller table sculptures and placing them on raised planes, opinion and practice changed. In *Art and Australia* from 1978, Ian McKay wrote of Caro's exhibition of table sculptures in Australia: "This exhibition beautifully demonstrates small sculptures can exist as richly in space and maintain their existence as forcibly in larger works – although differently."

April Glaser-Hinder was to make even smaller works in the 'Small Iron' series, still using iron pieces but using great care in setting the pieces together. Most were about twenty centimetres across and some only used two parts, but the solid and varied contrasts were so sure and the proportions were so appropriate, that all had to agree they were sculpture and very fine ones indeed. There is an intensity about these small works that makes them quite different from somewhat similar shapes on a larger scale in later series such as 'Division of a circle within Curve' in 1988-89. Here the carefully finished spray painting and rusted upright balance obtained by spreading the arc of the circle creates a spritely and bold stance.

In the 1980's the work became steadily more exacting. The 'Platten' series in stainless steel used precisely marching oblong frames and steel mesh to create cool small triangular shapes with broken light. The 'Rod and Ring' series wove wondrously together: Number Three in this series is probably the best. But all the series are cool and unassuming. April hoped that the twin T-bar sculptures she made for Macquarie University would be placed near the paths and that the students might take them for granted and sit on them.

Around this time great changes came into her life. When her husband died in May 1991 she made a bronze

capping for his gravestone – a small monument with a geometric Star of David on the top and bands and pointed flanges at the corners. It was the first step in a new direction. In Munich she saw and talked to poor people in the streets, her friends and relatives became more emotionally linked to her and she nightly saw on television scenes of trouble in Eastern Europe. Best put the change in the words of her letter of thanks to Giovanni D'Incau who introduced her to the techniques of bronze casting: "Unexpected was the idea for the next project – on the table was a small piece of wax. I started to form it and something like a nail or hammer appeared. Perhaps in my subconscious I remembered the swage that I found many years before under the very old gum tree near the blacksmith's shop at Eulomo. From now on I was to work alone. Every night I sat at a small table and worked..."

Eventually she made over ninety small bronze pieces in this series and then changed to making staffs. This exhibition has been lent ten pieces by the Australian Catholic University and their symbolic force is unmistakable.

What she had learned from the swage was that material takes its form from a process of undergoing force, suffering, if you will, from the fire and the blows inflicted during forging. For this series she constructed out of distinct parts new wholes, but the parts instead of being machine made were a limited number of shapes in bronze – the hammer head, the nail with its long sharp triangular point and round head and leather strips, some straight shafts and rope bonds. The crosses which emerge were built out of the parts so that they look from all points of view like something that has already experienced suffering. The pieces chosen illustrate phases of development. In the first phase, hammer bends and nails simply cross each other and the idea of the cross arises incidentally. In the next series the hammer head and the nail are bonded together so that they cross. In the next they stand erect and these erect crosses conjoin or emanate new haloes of simple bars or other forms. One sculpture is notably different from the others: a bullet stands upright in a notch where the bound arm of the hammer cross joins its shaft. The incongruity certainly drives home a message but it also drives home how much is conveyed by purely formal means, how she succeeds in what she says in one of her poems written at the same time:

I embark upon unearthed assembled fragments...

I reach out to touch those cautious hands of men

For those who think that these solemn and even cruel pieces show the artist stepping backwards to the figurative, making abstract art the victim of narrative, it was significant to see that the pioneer of the new modernist movement in sculpture, Anthony Caro, made a series of sculptures between 1993 and 1994 about the Trojan war representing character and divine figures in the story by symbolic stylised forms. These developments may show not retreat but advance in the use of abstract sculpture – they are not merely tributes but a revivification and revitalisation of sculpture by an alliance of two traditions.

It must not be thought that April was carried away by one series of bronze crosses and staffs. In the same period she completed the series of paintings called 'Division of an area', also in this exhibition, which are very formal and feature a jug with an extended handle. Angularities, projections and pale coloured geometricised areas create a variety of impressions. The jug theme came from the steel construction in the installation called *Corner of a room after 2000*. At the same period she was still making video works and documentations as well as putting together two small books of poetry.

April Glaser-Hinder's work over thirty years shows her to be an innovator and a gently forceful contributor to the Modernist movement, especially in the field of sculpture. This exhibition is a mark of recognition of her good art.

Harry Nicolson
October 2009