

A Conversation with Jody Pawley

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Jody Pawley was interviewed by Judie Cross May 20, 2015.



Jody Pawley was drawn to sculpture from an early age. Although adept at different forms of sculpting, an inbuilt desire to learn how to mold and cast led to him specializing in bronze work.

Apart from pursuing his interests in experimenting with both figurative and abstract work, Jody also undertakes commissioned sculpting, specializing in portraiture. He still has the bronze foundry he built although it no longer functions as a commercial one.

Jody has carried out private and public commissions including Concord RSL Memorial, Northern District Miners' Memorial, Religious Icons, numerous portraits of both private and public figures and portraits of animals. He is now the owner, main teacher and Director of his Sydney Sculpture School: <http://sydneysculptureschool.com.au/gallery.php>

Can you tell us about your education, experience and important influences?

I lived in a rural area and had no exposure to other artistic people, other than in high school, going on to work in the coalmines and underground for 12 years. I had a passion for drawing and sculpting, but there was no one else to share this with, so I just did it by myself in the background. Anyway, I picked up a lot of skills in the coalmines and even did a trade there: I was a mine fitter, something akin to a mechanic or fitter machinist. We looked after all the machinery underground.

It was a great place to work in that you had to improvise.

Always ... on a lot of practical and common sense things.

Around the year 2000, I moved to Sydney and set up my business here – a small school and gallery as well as, eventually, a commercial bronze foundry. So, for example, other sculptors would bring their work to me and I would make moulds and cast their work in bronze for them. Later I built a much larger foundry so I could make life-size and larger works – something like four metres high. All my skills gained in the mines enabled me to design and fabricate most of my equipment; for example, I built my own furnaces and lifting equipment as well as my own kilns. Understanding how those things work would probably have been impossible without my mining background. Admittedly, I didn't enjoy coalmine work very much then but, on reflection, I can see its value.



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Wilderbeest 2014, bronze, black patina, full size render

Where do images or the inspiration for the sculptures you create come from?

For me it's how I'm feeling at the time, but I am fascinated with animals, which constitute about half of my work. I'm particularly attracted to the challenge of representing movement even though movement is very, very difficult to capture in sculpture. There's always the danger that it can look wooden or static, whereas it's the active power that enthralled me. Early on I sculpted many Australian animals, most of which I sold to survive and then, in 2011, I went with my wife on a safari to Africa – it was amazing.

I've also always been interested in figurative work. However, I became a little bored with sculpting a model sitting in a contrived pose. Still, that all has its place – you need to practise your skills when you're starting out. Anyway, over the last couple of years, I've started a Lovers series. I was considering dance, but then decided on trying to do something a little subtler; that is, try to capture emotions. That's where I'm going with this series.

I like watching how people interact with both my animal and lovers series. I love listening to the comments they make.

It may appear that my animal sculptures are almost the opposite of my lovers in that the former is motivated by my attraction to a wild, raw energy; in contrast, it's a much more gentle energy that I try to represent with my lovers. And yet, I create because of the joy it gives me. I'm not really sure why. As long as I can remember, I've been making things and drawing.

The need to do this is just there.



© Jody Pawley *Lion*

2014, bronze, brown patina

Can you talk us through your sculpture of 'Elephants' that is featured on your website?

The 'Elephants' was something I did after I returned from Africa in 2012. I was very unwell then, having been diagnosed with Stage Three Bowel Cancer, which had spread to my lymphatic system. I had full-blown peripheral neuropathy as a result of the chemotherapy and so, I lost feeling in my hands and feet – the nerve endings in my fingers had been deadened by the cancer therapy. However, I could still sculpt. I had been strong and healthy, but lost 20 kilos of muscle.

Sculpting helped me recover. I was in the middle of this crisis when I chose to sculpt 'The Elephants'. I felt creative and perhaps it was also therapeutic – I was motivated by the memory of the elephants' strength and resilience. It just felt right to sculpt them. Elephants are amazing creatures: they're so gentle towards one another, but they can go the other way, especially the bulls. The guides in Africa know how unpredictable elephants are.

The first sculpture I did was a bull and I believe I captured its strength and purpose. I also did a cow and a calf.

Before getting cancer I was very business oriented and had lost a lot of my enjoyment in my work. I was doing 14hour days but the illness pulled the rug out from under my feet. I emerged from this period with a deeper appreciation for my studio and my clients. After my illness, I think I became a better and more sensitive person and this attitude permeates my teaching approach. I'm not as stressed as I was before and I guess there's more joy in work. In other words, my teaching is more akin to facilitation and guiding rather than instructing my clients in a specific way or using a particular technique. It's about the client, not me.

How does teaching inform or relate to your practice?

When I first started my business (about fourteen years ago), I was very naïve, so it was a massive learning curve for me, interacting with completely different people. Teaching started off as a necessity because commissions weren't running in the door – I wasn't doing portraits every week and I already knew that would be the case. Hence, I planned early on to get a small group and just do a little bit of teaching. Now I teach six hours a week: two classes. I don't have the energy to do more.

Initially the lessons were a survival thing and I quickly learned that each person learns in a different way. My

approach is individualized and I keep the classes small. Anyway, we have a good retention rate here and we don't judge. A lot of people who come here are very busy and stressed, so you can see them unwinding while they work here – this is therapy for them. Usually they start off in clay or plasticine and from there they can have their work reproduced using a rubber mold and casting in resin, plaster, glass or even bronze (depending on their preference and budget).

If some of my students want colour and use bronze, then there's a variety of patinas available for them to choose from. I allow the client to decide, but my preference is for black patinas. I realize this is not everyone's cup of tea and as a result I do colour as well – I also wish to sell my work. Still, even within black, there is a spectrum and a subtle highlighting.



© Jody Pawley *The Lovers* 2014, bronze, brown patina

What is it about bronze that makes it a preferred medium for you?

My preferred medium for casting is the lost wax process, which has been around for thousands of years. It's the texture, the responsiveness or lack of responsiveness, of sculpting in wax that engages me. I've always been interested in casting – even as a young boy in high school I experimented with metal in our backyard, burning myself a few times. Then in my twenties, I built a centrifugal casting machine. There was no Internet then, so a lot of this know-how I gathered from books and my

own ideas. I started off casting in pewter and low grade metals, making the transition to bronze at a later date.

The idea is that before casting something in bronze, you have a wax copy. Whether you take that wax out of the mold you make, or work directly in wax – it doesn't matter. Then you make a refractory mold over the top of the wax. Once that's complete, you melt the wax out, which leaves a void exactly the same shape as the sculpture you envisage. Next you pour the bronze in to the refractory mold. When that's cooled, you break the refractory mold away from the bronze and work the bronze casting. It's an incredible amount of work: very intensive and time consuming, but an amazing process. The bronze is beautiful and it's about reproducing something that will endure – something like 50,000 plus years for silicone bronze; hence, bronze has always been the preferred medium for casting.

I still cast my work in bronze because I love it – the only changes I make are for selling; for example, by choosing a lighter patina. Since we have a foundry here and so I spend a lot of time casting work for others (such as that of my students) or taking commissions. I don't have a lot of time left for my own creations; hence, they're usually small. It's an exhilarating experience when I can work on larger pieces, such as that of Jim Comerford for the memorial service at the Jim Comerford Miners Memorial Wall, Aberdare, NSW, 22 September 2013.

Here we've got our own bronze foundry although recently I'm exploring working with a glass casting facility and using resin; hence, some of my Lovers sculptures are in bronze, some in a clear translucent resin.



Jody Pawley *Lovers* 2015, translucent resin

And what's the attraction of moving into working with glass now?

I like the glass castings I see even though this medium is quite opposite to bronze: instead of being a solid, opaque colour, it's translucent giving a completely different effect. Maybe things are becoming lighter for me, but I'd never drop the bronze. Glass is durable, but it's more fragile than bronze. It doesn't have the same permanence. Yet, funnily enough, that is also its attraction.

I'm still working in the translucent resin though because it's a steppingstone to glass. Before setting up a glass casting facility, which means investing a lot of time, retraining and money buying more equipment, I have to see if I really enjoy it.

Eventually I might like to revisit abstract work because I like the challenge of it; that is, something that flows and works but is not so recognisable.

However, since I'm teaching, casting and taking commissions as

well as doing the administration part of the business, I keep creating in the crevices of time.



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Lovers 2015, in the making ...

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