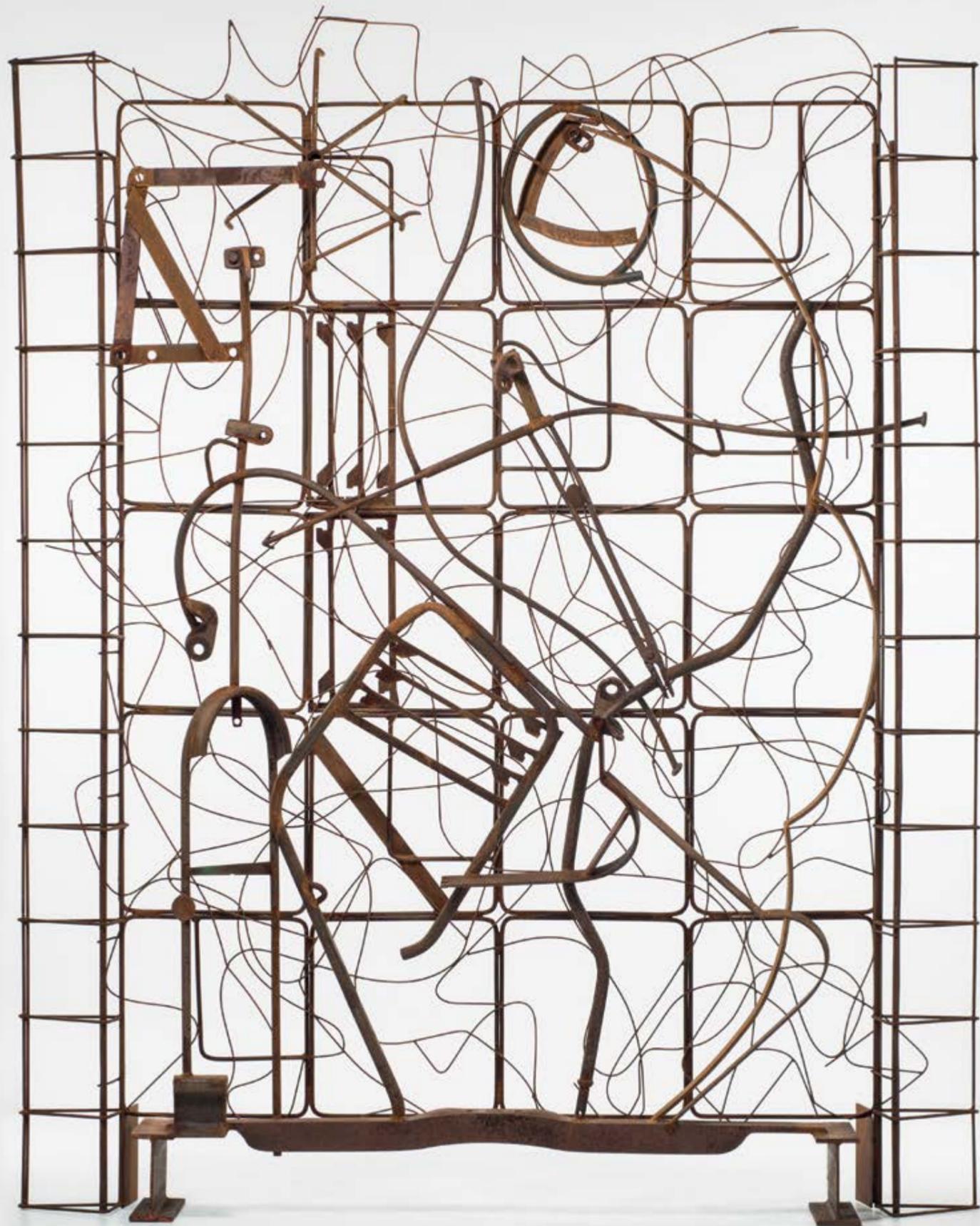




MICHAEL BUZACOTT

STORY **SONIA LEGGE**
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Recently, two great essays have been written about Sydney artist Michael Buzacott. Terence Maloon's piece to accompany Buzacott's stunning 2015 Survey at the Drill Hall, Canberra, is a nuanced overview of his sculpture from Buzacott's student days in the early 1970s. Joe Frost's eloquent analysis, penned for last year's Yellow House and Defiance Gallery exhibitions, considers Buzacott's newer work. Now, in this interview, ARTIST PROFILE explores something which taps into a deep Buzacott vein: the mystery that is art making.



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“ Pantheism is the belief that all of reality is identical with God, who is manifested in the material world, as opposed to being transcendent, or sovereign.”

COULD YOU REFLECT ON THE PLACE MYTHOLOGY AND the spiritual impulse have in your creative life?

I'm a pantheist, always have been ... it's important to understand that for me there's no centre, no periphery: I see the "centre" as being everywhere. That's the only definition of God I can come up with.

Is there a correlation between pantheism and art making?

A sculpture is made up of multiple parts that all work at the tiniest level, motivating everything else. That interconnectedness, the seamlessness between one element and the next, that's the definition of nature.

As for actually making ... to get a sense of scale, I might lay the materials on the floor, but I'll be making the part-to-part relationships in my hands, building up multiple units which then become one big thing later.

Your 'Sydney Summer' (2012), and 'Family Portrait' (2016), are both large works that seem to sit in chaos, full of questions. But on reflection what's revealed is an underlying harmony, which is very different from "order".

Order is rigid, something imposed. Harmony is response in the moment to what's happening around it. Harmony has mutability to it. Working is a kind of prayer; for me, there's a direct connection. I can't distinguish – why should there be a difference? And I don't make art, I make sculpture: a physical entity, suffused with thought.

Your recent, dark, attenuated figures remind me of earlier sculptures, such as 'Number 4' (1977).

Terence Maloon did me the most wonderful favour: in preparation for the Drill Hall survey he forced me to look at previous work ... We each leave behind us a lot of unfinished business, and we have to come back to it somehow. When I saw that 1970s work again I thought there's an aspect of this that I still want.

From your most recent exhibition there's a 'Tall Seated Figure', a 'Ladder Figure', a 'Chair Figure' ... is figurative representation their subject?

I spent years asking myself what "subject" meant. You can't have story and form separately, there is no hierarchy. That's what sculpture is – a material personification of intangible feeling, force, emotion ...

As this year went on I was feeling increasingly saddened by the fact that my son and grandchildren are overseas, absent. Somehow that darker feeling, that unhappiness, manifested itself in these very tall figures that seemed to represent their far-awayness. I painted them black only at the end, feeling black would make them disappear.

01 Acteon and Artemis, 2015, steel, 255 x 201 x 46cm

02 Suzanna Bathing, 2011, steel, 57 x 32 x 15cm, photographer Keith LoBue

03 Nymph and Satyr, 2011, steel, 106 x 85 x 38cm, photographer Keith LoBue



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(2016); 'Europa and the Bull' (2010-14); 'Escape Ladder' (2006) – I'm trying to deal with some aspect of my relationship with my father. But how would I know what my motivation is? I'm living it.

How do you prepare for work?

I watch the material and it tells me what to do. There's no point at which any work begins, most is previous work that's been pulled apart. It's very difficult to get something to resolve ... you have to be honest, ruthless. Here's where the moral aspect comes in to making – you have to be onto yourself, self-aware.

Lately I'm being more explicit about human portrayal, but I think everything I do is a portrait. I don't make any distinction between figurative or non-figurative work. I have never understood what "abstract" means.

In 2016 I did about 70 or 80 figures; 40 or 50 heads, but a lot might just be me asking myself a question: what does a generic head look like? What does my tribe look like? Next I want to do life-size portraits: the whole body, in context. Sculpture is always about the body. The implicit question behind all art and all art making is "What is the human condition?"

Lastly, is working a kind of personal renewal?

Absolutely. I go into work with delight, no matter if I'm in agony over a piece that's not working, because I'm processing my feelings, because I know who I am by having made what I make. That's the only way I know what my identity is.

If I didn't I wouldn't be accessing part of my brain. The studio's a different kind of space in which you're asking different kinds of questions on a different level. It's not theological, it's not doctrinaire, it's not ideology.

Look, you just have to let things happen. I had to learn to get out of my own way to let the totality of what I am as a human being, body and soul, function properly. That's what we are all searching for. ■



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www.michaelbuzacott.com

Michael Buzacott is represented by Defiance Gallery, Enmore, NSW
www.defiancegallery.com

EXHIBITION

Makers Mark
Group exhibition, with Michael Buzacott, Ana Pollak, Peter Godwin, Ann Thomson, Charmaine Pike and Roy Jackson
15 February – 4 March, 2017
Defiance Gallery, Enmore, NSW
www.defiancegallery.com

04 City Man, 2010-2015, steel, 118 x 120 x 17cm
05 Europa and Bull, 2010-2014, steel, 278 x 97 x 31cm

Courtesy the artist and Defiance Gallery, Sydney

There's a lot of psychological meaning attached to space: how close you are to somebody, how distant. A work of sculpture is always here, but the subject matter can be about remoteness. So there's a tension between the physical entity and what it represents. You can touch something that is actually too far away to touch. Sculptors are tangible people. My hands, my brain, are fusing right here, where my arm ends.

Sections of 'Two Figures' almost disappear ...

I think it's something to do with how my anxiety is expressing itself. I'm dematerialising it all. Matter is full of holes. What's an atom? It's almost no matter at all – we are illusions of solid substances! Lately I've gone back to Giacometti ... he comes out of Cezanne. Cezanne and, before him, Giotto, they depicted space in a way we'll spend years analysing, working out implications of what they did. You look at a Cezanne watercolour; although he's representing solid entities there's a thinness to the sensation that the medium translates. Look, maybe the world is becoming less and less concrete for me as I get older. I've become more conscious of the fleetingness of things. But I can't make sculpture out of that – sculpture is a physical entity you bump into ...

Your house is alive with objects and the work of other artists, and the selection of your own work downstairs is beautifully displayed. The effect is of an environment full of family ...

Pitt Street Uniting Church is a rare community; going there is partly ancestral. My family came out from Devon in the 1950s. Some worked at the David Jones department store and probably attended Pitt Street. When I went looking for a community to belong to, that

was the place. We come out of other people. You can't live without a community, without a sense of connectedness. And the art world is a pretty nasty place, basically.

A number of your sculptures' titles include names from Greek myths and biblical stories: 'Europa and the Bull', 'Suzanna Bathing', 'Fall of Icarus', 'Herod's Feast', 'Actaeon & Artemis', 'Actaeon Spies Diana Bathing', 'Ganymede's Run', 'Cassiopeia', 'Io'. These aren't just names. In Western culture they point to very big themes (chaos, creation, transformation, power).

These themes are a way of accessing parts of myself that I can't put words to. One of the first things I made, around 15, was a figure carved out of wood. Rather than Daphne being turned into a tree, I was turning a tree into a female. Greek mythology is about psychology, about how the human brain works. Gods and goddesses represent all the instincts and forces within the human being. They're like family ...

These myths are not about remote times. I often see my friends' children ... one day the girl was getting her own back against her brother and the dog was jumping up – and that's what 'Actaeon & Artemis' is really about: a scrap in the kitchen that suddenly reminded me of another story with wider implications.

I've been thinking about my parents a lot, trying to resolve things that are still unresolved. My father had a farm; I go to the Easter Show every year and look at the bulls ... and in my studio there's a ladder that belonged to my father that I'd always coveted. So I realise that whenever I make a sculpture with a ladder in it – 'Ladder Figure'