



UNITING A NATION

Sculptor Terrance Plowright

It was August 2013 when I received a phone call from Basil Sellers asking me if I could meet him the following day. He said he had an interesting project in mind but didn't want to go into detail over the phone. I felt I was on a bit of a magical mystery tour as I drove toward Sydney.

At the start of our meeting Basil Sellers explained that he had not been born in Australia but had arrived when

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he was 8 years old. He said that Australia had been exceedingly good to him: he had been educated at King's College in Adelaide, played basketball for South Australia—winning the Australian State Championship, and had achieved considerable wealth in his business practices. I would discover later that he had been especially philanthropic over many years, giving to charities, arts bodies and sporting teams throughout his



The very beginning...

business career. He said he had been wondering how he could offer something substantial, something unusual, as a gift to Australia, to the Australian public—a gift that all Australians would have an opportunity to enjoy. Given his love for the arts, he had decided to explore the possibility of donating a large sculptural work. He was very clear that at its core the sculpture had to express a positive national theme.

And that was it, that was the brief. We agreed to a design fee in case the project did not proceed, and given he would be in France for the next two months we also agreed that we would communicate regularly by phone about themes and progress.

Back in my studio I sat for some time, pondering, and the first concept or subject which came to mind was

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one of *indigene*. I needed to develop the design with a strong link to the First Nation's People and this to me was sacrosanct. I phoned Basil for his approval to use some form of indigenous symbolism at the base of my sculpture and to develop all other themes from this point. Without hesitation he agreed.

I then began to consider how I might develop some sculptural form or symbolism of the First Fleet, and a representation of the early colony. Other thoughts I believed were especially important revolved around the innovative ideas new settlers have brought from Europe: Western Philosophy, Science and Medicine. In addition, as a country of more than 200 nations and cultures, so the Australia of today is truly a micro-centre of United Nations and somehow this point also needed to be explored, since the sculpture would certainly be a celebration of our nation today.

Finally, I needed to consider my life-long passion and interest in philosophy, spirituality and the

extraordinary world and universe in which we live. In my very first bronze sculpture 'Inseparable from Nature', completed during the late 1980s, I wanted to convey that we human beings are simply an extension of nature and the natural world. We have evolved from the very first living cells, and now via evolution, we are the whole of Nature expressing itself as a human species—Indivisible and Inseparable. So a great desire emerged with my new commission to develop my overall design as a plant-like structure—as whole and glorious Nature holding and unfolding the symbolism of our human history.

I got started the same day. Two months went by, 12 sketches, but nothing jumped out at me. Frustration! When Basil arrived back from France he called me to see how my design was progressing. I told him I was displeased with what I had achieved thus far but had around 12 sketches/ideas I believed were worth further development. Basil invited me for a cuppa and to bring the sketches to see if any of my initial ideas worked

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for him. The meeting was productive. We eventually culled my 12 designs to 3. Basil then asked that I give myself three weeks to bring one or a number of these sketches to conclusion.

I worked on and off over the next 10 days but still struggled with an outcome I felt was worthy of this monumental task.

It was early Monday afternoon, only 9 days since my previous visit to Basil. I was at my computer working on one of the designs when the phone rang. 'Basil here Terrance, could you bring a completed design to a meeting tomorrow at 10 am, I have a number of meetings set up to further our project.' I agreed but suddenly sheer panic took over—I was not ready to show the completed designs. Even though I had focused on one particular concept, I thought I had another week and I knew that my design still lacked something. I cancelled everything I had organised for the rest of the day and night and got stuck in!

I realised that I needed to calm everything down, so I sat quietly for 10 minutes. Deeply quiet. Then unexpectedly an interesting idea began to emerge. It was as if a light had suddenly come on. Immediately I re-engaged with my first design, quickly moving one of the individual sections incorporated within the sketch from the left-hand side of my drawing to the right-hand side. Suddenly the work leapt off the page as if it was a new and exciting creation. I could see the waratah frond shapes I had placed at the front of my sketch were delivering too much aesthetic weight at the base of the sculpture, so I moved them to the side. They looked a little too sparse so I sketched up four more waratah forms and placed them to the side of the base, both front and back. Suddenly the entire sculpture was there, powerful and complete, and an inner excitement exploded within me. It worked! I tinkered and tweaked at the edges for a few hours but the overall form was there

All this had happened within a few of hours. After months of sketches, redrawing, whittling and whittling

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back, suddenly within a few hours, it had culminated as a whole and flowing continuum, full of visual excitement, balanced, unique, and meaningful. I was so excited, yet after all this work, when I finally looked at the completed design, I wondered just how all this had happened, as if I were not part of the process, as if it had come from somewhere else.

When I displayed the finished concept to Basil, he was clearly excited, overtly enthusiastic and delighted, and then and there I knew we were on a winner. Basil then set up meetings with a number of State Art Gallery Directors, art critics and art aficionados, friends, family and his advisory board. There were no dissenting voices. Feeling quietly confident, he then arranged a meeting with the NSW Arts Minister, the Honourable George Souris.

This meeting was electrifying. George Souris was so excited by the concept that he said he would present the design to the Premier and cabinet that afternoon with the hope of achieving a clear and positive outcome from the Premier within the next few days. The offer to present the completed sculpture as a gift to the nation clearly gave him sheer delight.

Early that night my phone rang. It was George Souris and he sounded very excited. 'Terrance, the boss has agreed. You have a green light to proceed and he wants to unveil it!' He said he was in the middle of a meeting and would phone the following day with all the details, but rest assured, he said, the boss loved it!

Words cannot describe my response, an overwhelming excitement and joy that bubbled over and over and over.

The two years that followed are an auxiliary and extensive story in themselves, with joy and excitement delivering numerous personal rewards. In addition, working with seven committed and highly skilled assistants took a huge weight from my own shoulders and we would often talk through all the technical issues in order to find appropriate solutions. Without exception, every problem was overcome. Furthermore, working with such huge sections, 50 feet in length, 150 tonne cranes, two 50 foot cherry pickers in tandem etc. was hugely challenging.

Even finding engineers able to make the complex aluminium structure was another challenge. I finally agreed to work with a professor of engineering at Hanoi University in conjunction with my team in the Blue Mountains. Other challenges, by no means small, were constant aesthetic decisions, and at times especially difficult compromises were required between the engineering and the aesthetic.



In the end you will most probably not see where all the compromises were made, but for me they were stark as I had to wrestle with every decision in order to find a common ground, ground that would not undermine nor dishonour my original concept. Although there were many other challenges along the way and the project is now almost complete, my overwhelming daily experience has been one of great excitement and gratitude, especially given the huge amount of positive feedback from all those who have come to visit the studio.

Along with the numerous underlying stories and interesting narratives regarding the creation of such a large work of art, there has been the political process. The State Government finally arrived at a place and site to install the completed work. Four years have passed since being given the green light to the moment we now

have of a commitment from the NSW State Government re site, installation etc. Three State Premiers, five Cabinet Ministers and 28 departments, official bodies, foreshore authorities and councils etc. have at various times been involved and soon the work will be in the public arena for all to enjoy.

It has given me great joy to have worked with Basil Sellers. He has been consistently supportive and encouraging throughout the project and I would like to offer a huge thankyou to him and to his advisory board for their trust in my ability to design and, in the end, to bring this artwork, this sculptural creation to an exciting conclusion. Basil's generosity with this magnificent gift to the people of NSW, is truly inspiring and his continuing philanthropy in the arts, medicine and sport is a remarkable contribution to us all.

About the Sculpture

Sixty thousand years ago a single human footprint marked the birth of a new country, a new nation and under the Southern Cross, Australia was born. We were hunters and gatherers, using simple implements like spears, boomerangs and woven baskets to help us catch fish, gather seeds and plants and provide meat. We expanded across the continent, growing into many Nations and Clans, surviving Ice Ages, flooding rains, droughts and a dramatically changing landscape. We endured and thrived.

Two hundred and thirty-nine years ago, giant sails would calmly glide into Gubbah Gubbah (Middle Harbour) settling at Warrano (Sydney Cove). These people came to establish a new world and brought with them extraordinary new tools; developing scientific, technological and medical disciplines.

The past 239 years have been immensely difficult for our original Indigenous community, suffering dispossession and many brutal atrocities, yet, born from this fiery past, the amalgamation of many nations and cultures has forged a new nation. Now, this multicultural community, from over 200 nations and cultures, through diligently working together, has built a new inclusive and egalitarian nation, Australia. This evolving transformative period has given birth to a dynamically free and democratic society and for many, Australia is the envy of the international community. The sculpture represents 'Celebration of this new Nation'.

The Sculpture

Within the sculpture a number of important symbols emerge that tie the work to our 60,000 year history, including Indigenous life and the arrival of the first Europeans.

The sculpture alludes to Aboriginal hunting, harvesting and dreamtime, as well as Western science and philosophy. At the top of the sculpture sits the Southern Cross, a symbol under which all Australians can unite. This symbol also lights up at night.

The overall form is a Tribute to Nature, Nature profound and infinite which has not only given birth to us but underpins the whole of our existence.

The sculpture is 15 metres high (fifty feet) and has been built from 5 tonnes of aluminium.

Terrance Plowright

