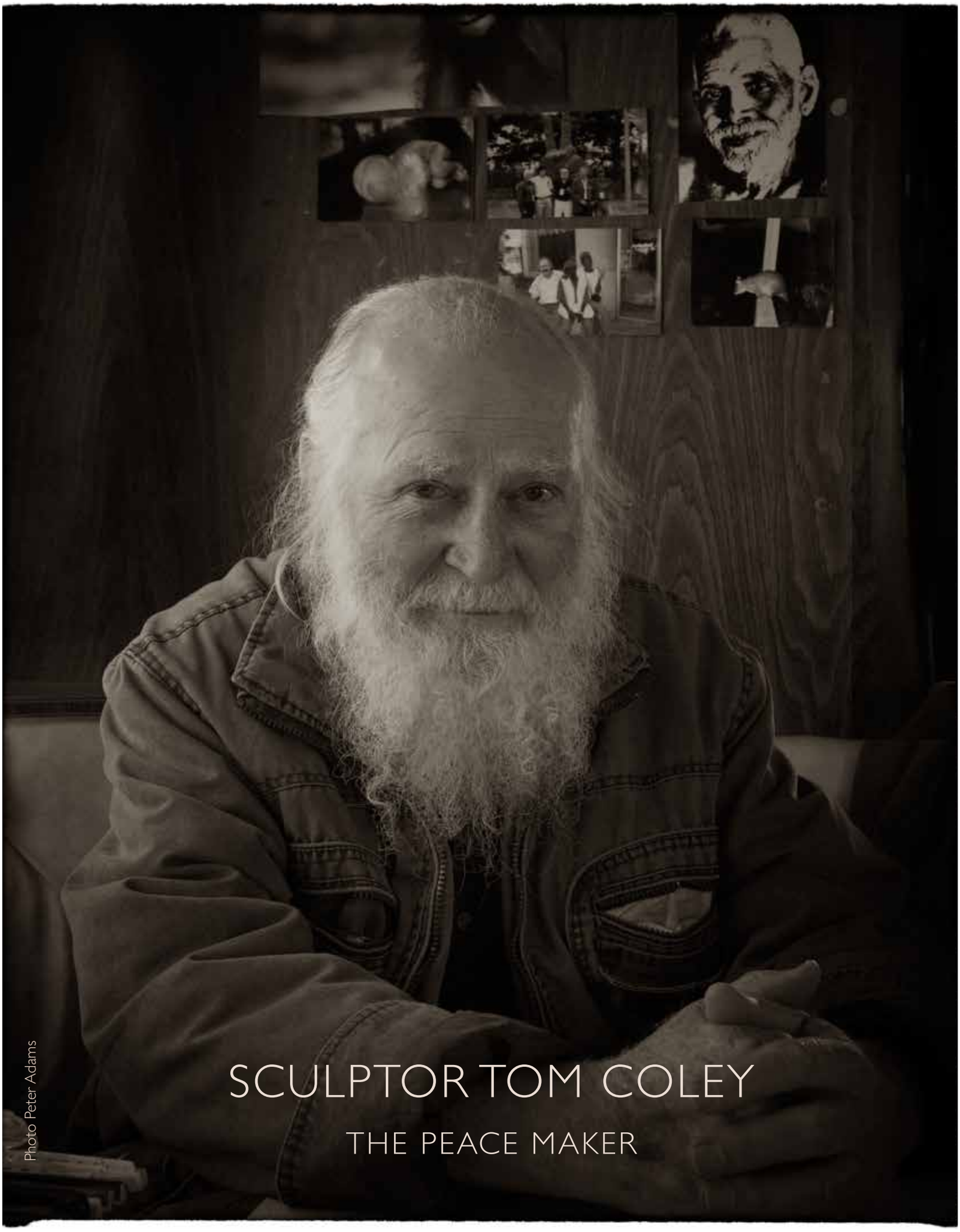

SCULPTOR TOM COLEY

THE PEACE MAKER

Photo Peter Adams

Sculptor Tom Coley

On Elephanta Island, off Mumbai, a big black stone face looked at me across the half light of a cave temple. To me, at least, it seemed to say: 'Welcome back to Mother India, Thomas.'

Travel can broaden the mind as well as affect the internal flora and fauna.

In the early nineties, remembering that 3-month visit to India, I worked out what I wanted to do in public stone sculpture. It was to give respect for the material, for the subject, and for the people who will see it.

The stone was forming and waiting for hundreds of millions of years. Then it takes energy, motivation, skill and the right equipment to cut a block out and carry it overland.

Then it takes the right motivation, time and energy to shape it the best we can.

After all, it might last a long time and be seen by many different people at different stages of their lives. Whatever mischievous thoughts we've had in the past, we can project goodwill into the future.

Once the 7.4 tonne block of granite arrived in Australia it took me 18 months to carve it, then as long again to find a municipality to accept it. That will be explained.

After Hobart City Council had paid me for the public sculpture for their 'Peace Park' (they were very prompt) I went to Xiamen, China, to look for green marble, but I didn't find it.

Really you need a 'fixer' there and I didn't have one. Fixers cost money. Never mind.

I returned home dejected but then a man at Gosford Quarries suggested granite. A formidable thought.

Realising that that's what it had to be, now I'm glad it worked out this way. Granite is twice as hard as marble to cut but lasts about twice as long, like a thousand years.

So I needed to use a 14-inch Stihl concrete cutter and a bigger hammer and chisel to rough it out. Then back to shallow cuts with a 9-inch angle grinder (don't breathe in the dust), and a hand grindstone, etc.

Faces are fascinating. How did I get that expression on her face? I don't think you can learn it at art school these days. Maybe it's like method acting – it has to come from inside.

I'm a veteran of twelve 10-day Buddhist meditation courses. That can iron out some internal conflicts. You work it out yourself. The lunches were divine.

They know it's not easy. Meditation is one of the many things I'm not very good at. However, I've been fortunate to meet some wise and decent people who are good at it.

Innocence can develop strength
And strength can develop innocence
The stone lady has the two.
So if you have five minutes with nothing to do,
She has an enigmatic smile especially for you.

If other people don't seem to appreciate your Finer qualities, she will. I've been there.

One or two likeable artists have politely suggested to me that the professional artist should not give his work away. That might well be true, to some extent.

For 10 years I worked as a cleaner at Katoomba Hospital to pay for the privilege. Only part-time: my refined sensibilities can only endure cleaning 30 bathrooms in a week. (Pause for laughter …)

After I'd struggled to fill in forms for an ABN, my accountant explained: "Tom, you don't have a business. You have an expensive hobby." That's okay. I'm a slow worker. People have been telling me that for 75 years.

So if I were on the Arts Scene, would I rather be Vincent van Gogh or a certain Flamboyant Australian Businessman?

The F.A.B. obtained van Gogh's "Irises" at auction. Then he locked it in his cellar 'for insurance reasons'. The auction house had to chase him over hill and dale for the money. Hah! Money! I don't envy either, but I have respect for van Gogh's integrity and bright, generous vision.

Now my eyesight has deteriorated so much I can't do good sculpture. That's OK, I'd run out of the ideas I wanted to present in stone. They were: a Buddha's expression, a woman's body, and a turnip or onion, like the dome on a Russian church or on a mosque - strong but beautiful.

The human DNA is 50% identical to that of a turnip, a reliable and nourishing vegetable. The prophets of old might have known that by intuition.

It seems I've used up all my best ideas on this Peace Memorial. You'd have to go out and stand on the pavement and peer through the bushes to appreciate the onion effect from the rear, the reassuring roundness of it, that is.

Having to give up the visual arts, I decided to set out to 'save the world' (pause for laughter). Anyway, we're still here! Success! Sorted! Thanks to a lot of help, of course. So now I have another career change, to Professional Eccentric.

Photo Peter Adams

Faces are fascinating. How did I get that expression on her face? I don't think you can learn it at art school these days. Maybe it's like method acting – it has to come from inside.

Above and right (photo Peter Adams)
First Dream, Lost Bear Gallery, Lurline St Katoomba, about 40cm long in Rosa Portugal marble.
Tom: 'Remember Bloody Mary in *South Pacific? If you don't have a dream, how you gonna have a dream come true?'*

I'm very pleased the Blue Mountains City Council accepted the Peace Memorial. Some Australian bureaucrats are nervous about the word peace. They think it necessarily involves headbands, bongs or tombstones. It ain't necessarily so. It's a more subtle, elusive state.

If we don't know what peace is now, when will we? When the mortgage is paid off? Oi oi oi! Sometimes I wonder if stone carving kills the art of conversation or if an innate lack of conversation skills might incline one to stare at a block of stone day after day.

Anyway, fate is fate and our words are ephemeral.

While looking for security and l'amour
There are three things of which we can be sure,
The efficiency of nature, constant change
And our own goodwill, while it may endure.

Carolynne Skinner: I remember where but not exactly how or why I met Tom – the art world is full of eccentrics and unexpected people and at that time, the 90s, Katoomba in the Blue Mountains had more in common with an Indian hill station than it did with the outer suburbs of Sydney. It was even more of a hippie heaven than it is today. The place was a haven for these kindred spirits.

Tom Coley came to Australia as a 'ten pound Pom'. He describes himself as a seaman, miner, feral, sculptor and writer. Recently he has added activist. By the late 90s I was running Gallery Lane in the trendy village of Leura and it was there that I gave Tom, then a part-time cleaner at Katoomba Hospital, his first art exhibition: of an extraordinary collection of sculptures. The sleeping baby in Rosa Portugal marble stole the show and was bought by Geoff White of Katoomba Fine Art (now Lost Bear Gallery where it is on display). It was at this show that the owners of the beautiful residence Bisley in Mount Wilson approached Tom to commission a sandstone sculpture for their garden.

And so all of Tom's dreams and schemes came to fruition. He was invited to China where he created a beautiful Motherhood sculpture in marble in 2001, then South America and later he worked in Tasmania before returning to the Mountains where he produced his last piece. I remember on my daily commute, watching the slow and steady progress as he worked on the Peace sculpture on a friend's property beside the highway at Bullaburra.

Tom is a simple and a very complex man. You can see that as a young man he would have been small, tough and wiry. He has led a frequently solitary life with a couple of experiments with communal living. With regard to his own health and wellbeing he has lived very close to the edge, in an isolated place in Tasmania, presently in the Blue Mountains in a caravan, in the past often without the money to buy food. And yet he has alone created very substantial and serene and beautiful works of public art, even at his own expense. Payment for a large work commissioned by Hobart City Council financed the materials which allowed him to create the Peace Memorial which he has gifted to the people of the Blue Mountains.

In between these times and projects Tom travelled to Vietnam and gave all his savings to a charity working with Agent Orange victims. In another heartfelt act

'Laughter, Tears, Peace' in marble was completed during a symposium in Brusque, Santa Catarina, Brazil, in one very interesting month. The director wanted to strangle me. He thought I was too slow also. All the other sculptors were Italian speaking, unlike me. I told him it was like being in a Fellini movie. He decided not to strangle me. They really liked the finished article.

of protest which he describes in his autobiography he decided to demonstrate at the American Consulate in Sydney and after an emotional outburst and a self-inflicted injury found himself taken into custody.

Tom takes pleasure in writing about his personal experiences, his philosophy and on the many issues which he feels passionate about, self-deprecating, peppered with a quirky sense of humour. He has self-published a biography *(Laughter Tears Peace,* 2014), writes a blog *(laughtertearspeace.wordpress.com)* and is a regular writer on serious matters to newspaper letters to the editor. He was raised without a father in England and his mother travelling to Australia to visit him was a high point in his personal life.

Tom describes his Peace Memorial as unique in the world, Australia's first and only public Peace Memorial. He says: 'I like rounded shapes. There is a Chinese saying 'no sharp corners, no harm'.'
And visitors like the evident twinkle in her eyes.
He regularly visits the sculpture and cleans and maintains its perfection.

Jennifer and Ally Mosher as MoshPit Publishing and Mosher's Business Support assisted Tom Coley in publishing his memoir, *Laughter Tears Peace.* Described as a humble and amusing collection of observations on life in England in the fifties and Australia from the seventies to now, it traces Tom's travels to Vietnam, China, India and Brazil and that 'awkward incident' at the American Consulate in 2013.

Ally relates how 'in 2010 Tom walked into our office in Hazelbrook looking for typing services. We're very fortunate to now call him a friend. Helping Tom self publish his memoirs was a fascinating experience for

Photo Peter Adams

us both. Having only known Tom as the gentle soul he is today, it was amazing to read about the incredible and adventurous life he's led.

'What stands out most in Tom's story is how he's always tried to do right - by others, by himself, by the environment and by the world as a whole. Tom is an incredibly giving and generous person - evidenced in the fact that when he finished creating his beautiful Peace Memorial sculpture, he not only donated it to the Blue Mountains region, but chose to do so anonymously.

'It is a joy working with, and for, Tom. In his words, we're helping him 'save the world one letter at a time', and in our words, he's an 'oasis of peace' in our chaotic modern lives.'

Below: Motherhood, in Changchun, China. 2001 during a 2-month symposium.,2 metres tall in marble. At bottom: my original sandstone version at *"Bisley"* in Mount Wilson, Blue Mountains.

Laughter, Tears, Peace in marble 2.2 metres. Completed during a symposium in Brusque, Santa Catarina, Brazil, in one very interesting month.

The director wanted to strangle me. He thought I was too slow also. All the other sculptors were Italian speaking, unlike me. I told him it was like being in a Fellini movie. He decided not to strangle me. They really liked the finished article.

Ice Maiden in Carrara marble, somewhere in Tasmania. Carrara marble is very special.

In Blanket, Hobart. 2.2 metres tall in sandstone. Commissioned by Hobart City Council. That paid for most of the Peace Memorial.