

# ANDREW HICKSON

## BIG SCULPTURE & other obsessions

Julie Lenora Parsons



Andrew (on vehicle) repairing Warriu Sculptures with Reg observing, 2017  
5 m warrior, child, rainbow serpent, Warriu Park, Wyndham. Photo G. Piesse

*My studio is my meditation laboratory filled with binaural beats from YouTube, allegedly taking me to a high astral plane and stimulating my pineal gland. The experiment also comprises of a smoke screen around my work and low light punctuated by LED strobe lights turning blue then red then green.*

*All this is to unfetter my brain. BIG JOB!*

Andrew Hickson (2015)

Why would a sculptor of some significance strive to work without interference from his brain? With this question in mind Julie Lenora Parsons embarked on a mission.

We are in WA, walking through the Hickson family home during the annual George Street festivals. Sculptures sit on and in every nook, cranny and crevice in this rambling renovated Fremantle cottage. There is no mistaking that this is the home of an artist. This man's preoccupation with creation is only surpassed by his preoccupation with Instagram and his virtual gallery called ANDTIART where he has been taking art-lovers through his current processes.

Step outside the backdoor and you are immediately confronted by huge patina-covered metal works. These are set in the garden, venerated by the chooks and surrounded by sprouting veggies. A studio containing a round kiln, work station and shelving filled with sculptures lies at the far corner. This is where the alchemy is created in the midst of an immersive self-imposed light and sound installation. The artist has produced this in order to preoccupy his brain, allowing a 'stream of consciousness'. The results are more anthropomorphic than not, appearing to emerge from the clay as against being modeled in clay. The surreal nature of Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights comes to mind.

Andrew Hickson's metal studio occupies a large space under the house. He is a highly adept welder, metal caster and builder, among a multitude of talents. His start in life took an interesting path.

In 1966, Andrew won a scholarship to study Engineering at the University Western Australia, so following in his famous great-grandfather's footsteps. His great-grandfather, Robert Rowen Purdon Hickson, was Sydney's engineer-in-chief and president of the Sydney Harbour Bridge Trust. By 1912, Robert Hickson's contribution to the capital works on the Sydney waterfront and finger wharfage had transformed Sydney's massive harbour into a safe, world quality waterfront. His notable involvement in the bridge design and surrounding structures sits firmly in Sydney's history. Great-grandfather Hickson therefore cast a long shadow ... of expectation.

Try as young Andrew might, this choice of career path was not for him. After repeating the first year, he left university.

It was 1968 and with the threat of conscription hanging over young men, Andrew, already an anarcho-pacifist, decided to leave the country before he turned twenty.

Morrigan Crow 2016, paper clay h 500 x w 250 x d 200 mm  
Taken from the mythological creature of war Photo G. Piesse





Above:  
Warri Park Dreamtime Sculptures, 1989,  
executed in steel. The 5 metre tall warrior is part  
of a monumental cluster of sculptures two and half  
times life-size. They are placed over an area which  
includes the family group of three, with kangaroo,  
rainbow serpent, goanna and dingo pup. Concept  
design by indigenous leader Reg Birch, creatively  
realized by sculptor Andrew Hickson assisted by  
Margie Lippitt and Freddie Martin. A Bicentennial  
commission, the contemplative works signifying  
traditional owners of the Kimberley are now  
situated in Warri Park, Wyndham.  
Photo G. Piesse

Like others, he disputed Australia's involvement in the Viet Nam war. So, keen to discover his potential as a poet and writer, Andrew added a weighty typewriter to his backpack and set out from Perth to hitchhike to Brisbane. There he boarded a flight to Port Moresby, took a ship to Singapore and hitchhiked to Thailand, eventually ending up in Calcutta where he decided to stay.

By now it could be deduced that Andrew Hickson was looking for something—seeking the illusive Nirvana of the sixties perhaps? He took a room in a grunge hotel where junkies lived in rooms with blood-splattered walls. He wrote prose and poetry surrounded by occupants who were living in a drug haze.

One day while walking over the Howrah Bridge and carrying his precious typewriter and backpack, Andrew decided that it was time to move on, to continue his journey. He hitched rides in the highly decorated Sikh trucks whose drivers were happy to give a western hitchhiker a lift.

In Kathmandu Andrew met the original drummer from Pink Floyd, a man called Graham. Graham would be the inspiration Andrew needed. He told Andrew about his own journey which had ended (or perhaps begun) with the life he had just left in a monastery. This inspired Andrew and he was struck with the idea of spending time in that same Buddhist monastery on an Island off Sri Lanka.

The journey to find the monastery took on biblical proportions. In Benares where it is said the Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, Andrew attained dysentery! His traveling companion at the time

Below:

The Big Crocodile, 1988, executed in steel rod, chicken wire, cement and paint, commissioned by Shire of Wyndham, h.3m x length 20m. The work is positioned as an entry statement to Wyndham. Photo G. Piesse

was a Dutch artist named Herman Hargenaar. Andrew became very seriously ill and Herman saved his life by getting him to New Delhi.

In New Delhi they rented an apartment on the river Ganges near the sadhus, or religious ascetics. Andrew and Herman, who had a monkey and two sets of Indian tabla drums, often hung out on the roof top where they played the drums and flew fighting kites. The fighting kites were so named because of glass in the strings which could cut the other kites in the air.

When Andrew and Herman joined up, the Dutchman had about a kilo of hashish hidden in a Buddha's head—an image not lost on Andrew. Together smoking half a dozen chillums of hashish a day they laid the ground for what happened next.

The two soon left this neighbourhood as Andrew's dysentery had worsened and the local hospital was at capacity and over-run with dogs.

They finally arrived at their desired destination in Sri Lanka and Andrew was preparing to enter the Buddhist monastery where Graham had stayed. The monastery, on an island near Hikkaduwa, was full of European Monks. Andrew had first to cleanse himself before entering the



*OH*



Above: Andrew Hickson with kangaroo, 2017, his method of creation easily observed, at Warri Park, Wyndham. Photo G. Piesse

monastery. He says: "I was faced with a different kind of challenge when I went into a house on the mainland opposite the island. I shaved all my hair off, gave up smoking marijuana and meditated for two weeks. '(However) the withdrawal symptoms overwhelmed me and I decided I had to get back to Perth!'

He made his way back to Colombo where he caught a bus but whilst on board a stranger threatened to kill him. The fear and mental confusion that followed put Andrew in deep jeopardy. After many terrifying events he found himself detained in the Angoda Mental Hospital, in an open ward where birds flew in and out through the bars. It took three months to secure his freedom. During this time, Andrew says: "I received four lots of ECT and a week of Insulin Shock Therapy, after which I was fairly fucked and tried to escape ... so they put a big horse needle in my leg which stopped me walking."

He was unaware then but all of these and some childhood events laid the foundations for a future of untamed imagery constantly pawing to get out. The things he saw and experienced in that time began to seep into his reality and like words looking for the pages of a Milton's Paradise Lost, Andrew's creative expression began to emerge.

On his return to Perth, mid year 1970, Andrew Hickson set out to discover the lifestyle he had so admired in his travelling companion and artist mate, Herman Hargenaar. Within days he had enrolled in art school. There Andrew rediscovered himself through sculpture, but more importantly this was where he embraced the complex technical procedures used to produce durable works. His knowledgeable lecturer Ken Hannen recognised Andrew's potential and gave the guidance in technical training the receptive Andrew required.

Porcine Chaos, 2019, image from Andrew's Instagram ANDTIART  
Photo A. Hickson



In 1972 Andrew graduated from the Western Australian Institute of Technology in Fine Art. By then he was 24, and married with a young daughter.

One of Andrew's first commissions as a sculptor was for the Department of Biomedical Sciences at the Western Australian Institute of Technology. He designed a work inspired by the D.N.A. molecule which he executed in galvanized mild steel. The work was made with various casts from his own body.

Although he was involved with the WA Sculptors Association and was exhibiting in group shows, it wasn't until 1978 that Andrew had enough work to launch his first solo show, titled 'Purgatory and Paradise', held at the Ithaca Gallery in Cottesloe, WA.

At this time Andrew was living in semi-rural Gelorup, near Bunbury, with a new partner and a studio fast filling with welded and cast metal forms. In 1981 Andrew was commissioned to create a welded steel sculpture for the entrance to the South West Recreation Centre. The magnificent work is reflective of the musculature of the human body with multiple steel rods all swirling about to form two bodies locked together and reaching for a future signified by a sphere. The work was a portrayal of Andrew and his new wife Gwendoline. He used a series of photographs taken from multiple angles and projected onto the wall one after another creating a series of profiles. Andrew then laid steel rod over each line shaping it to the contours, each time starting at the foot and ending in the reach of the hand. It took six months to build.

Children began to appear, four in all and Andrew's resolve turned to caring for his family.

In 1985 Andrew received a commission only a sculptor with engineering insight might consider. He was asked to sculpt a gigantic ram for Wagin, a Western Australian town with its heart in the wool industry. The work was to be a replica of a prize ram and a monument to the sheep industry of the area. Stationed at the entrance to Wagin, the ram is still a statement of consequence. Its presence continues to support the famous Woolorama, a district showpiece of quality wool, wool products and stud rams.

Hickson modelled his creation on the local ram, blowing out its proportions until it stood at a height of nine meters. The work took eight months to complete and was assisted by Pederick Engineering. The ram with its steel skeleton covered in fibreglass fleece is believed to be the second biggest replica of a Merino ram in the world. But it is its impressive balls which are so breathtaking!

On the strength of his work on the ram, the Arts Council of Western Australia recommended Andrew for his next commission.



DNA Man, 1973, executed in hot dipped galvanised mild steel (the body of his old car melted down), commissioned by Department of Biomedical Sciences at the Western Australian Institute of Technology, Perth, h.3500 x w.1500 x d.1000. Photo G. Plesse

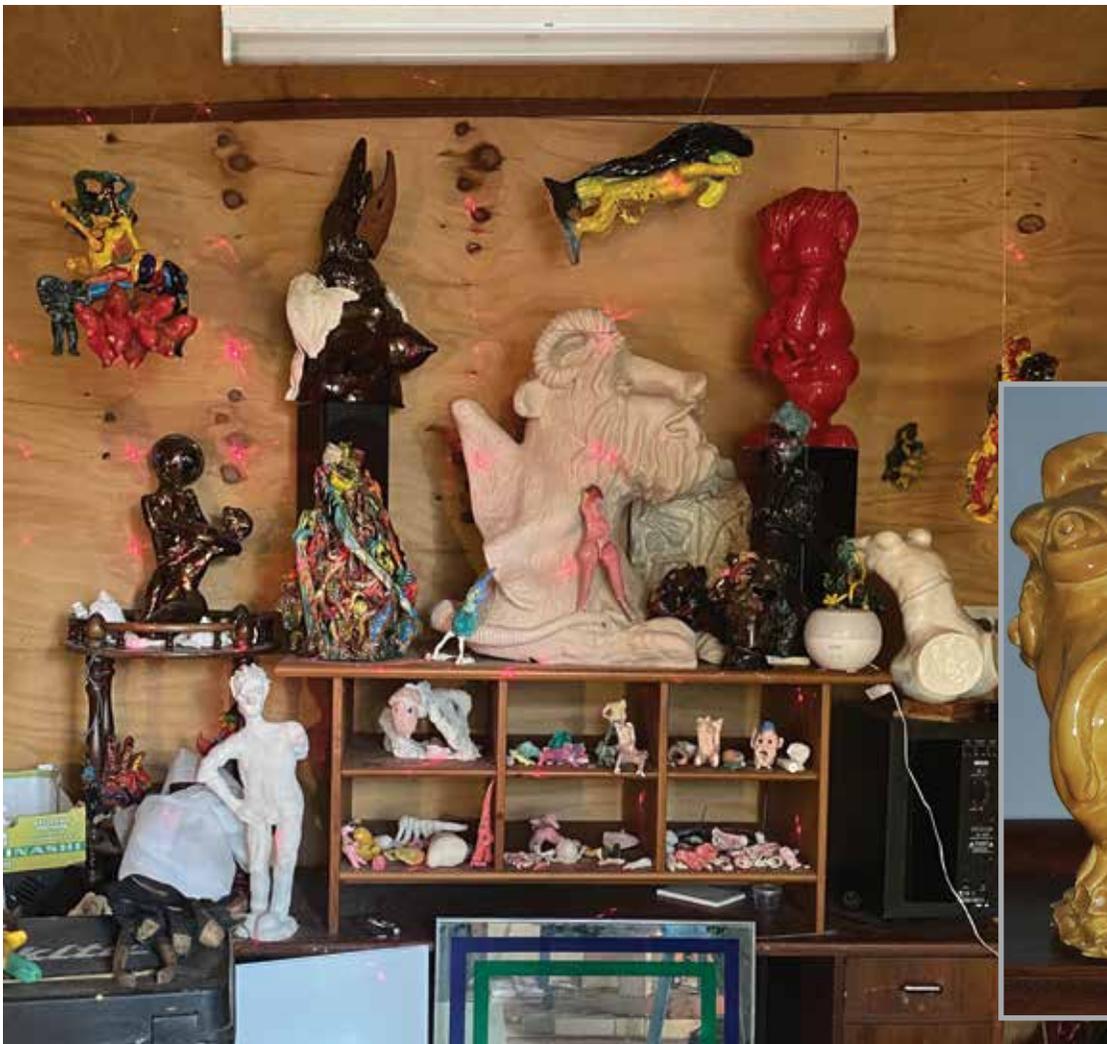


In 1988, Hickson took on another courageous project this time in collaboration with the people of Wyndham and the local TAFE students. With his project management skills well in place, he ordered 5.5 km of steel rod, ten rolls of bird mesh and six cubic metres of concrete.

Hickson used emerging computer technology available at Curtin University to plot 2400 mathematical coordinates which formed the crocodile's shape. According to Andrew: "We built the frame out of steel rods, covered it with chicken wire, put it onto a truck and took it out to the site. About 50 townsfolk turned up at 6 am one morning and when the cement truck arrived, they all helped slather six cubic metres of cement onto the frame. The job was complete about three hours later!"

With three more solo shows and following his collaboration with the Wyndham community in producing the massive crocodile, Andrew was invited to collaborate with the Joorook Ngarni Corporation, and Indigenous leader and activist, Reg Birch OA, who was involved with ATSIC and advocated for community on a national and international level.

Andrew worked with Reg's design concept to sculpt and project manage a Bicentennial commission originally intended for either an area near the Sydney Harbour Bridge or Kings Park in Perth. It was to be an Indigenous contribution towards



Top left: The Embrace, 2015, glazed ceramic, h 500 x w 200 x d 100 mm. Photo J. Parsons.

Left: Ceramic Sculpture Studio, 2019, various ceramic works. Photo A. Hickson

Below: Two Minds, 2016, glazed ceramic h 200 x w 200 x 100 mm. Photo G. Piesse



'reconciliation' and the development of a new Australian society, but both locations were rejected.

Following this in 1990 Andrew accepted a commission for a wall-mounted sculpture for the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Derby. These last commissions reflect Andrew's intimate involvement with the first peoples of Australia. Gwendoline, Andrew's wife, a nurse and midwife and Andrew frequently worked on 'the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunjatjara lands', south of Uluru. Around this time they moved the children there while Andrew worked identifying repairs required to homes in remote communities. The project was called Fixing Houses for Better Health (FHBH), and along with providing training and employment, the project received international recognition.

All the while Andrew maintained a committed studio practice, working almost daily modelling with clay and wax or making pen and ink drawings or welding large expressive metal sheet sculptures. Andrew's personal work creating figurative and anthropomorphic forms flourished. In 1994 he was commissioned to create a huge mythical bunyip for Medina WA and bobtail goanna for Fremantle.

Andrew has always presented as a very grounded no nonsense person, but in the early 2000s he made a creative decision to reconnect with his early mission to explore what he describes as alternate mind states and perhaps transform his consciousness through the medium of sculpture. This time he was using audio of binaural beats designed to shift awareness, pulsing light effects and a smoke machine to further ensure the shift. All of these effects were reflected in mirrors whilst he worked spontaneously in clay. His aim was to scramble his former aesthetic. In his documentation of these recent works he also includes their destruction. This way of working is an anti-aesthetic rebellion, a complete anarchy over his own creative dictatorship. Alongside this he often writes a haiku poem for each piece or at the very least a few words denoting his frame of mind at the time.

The images which materialise are well acquainted with chaos, procreation and the search for the goddess form. Mythology is an important ingredient. As with his art even a conversation with Andrew soon stretches the social niceties when it is realised his boundaries are in a different location. His fascination with the pre Norman and Romanesque quasi-erotic stone carvings of the Sheela Na Gig in the UK, is evident. Their grotesque and sometimes comical sexual

Top right: Humaning, 1978, from the Purgatory and Paradise exhibition, welded steel and wire, 400 x 400 x 400 mm. Aquatic creatures humaning for humans. Photo J. Parsons

Right: Ursula, 1987, welded copper, h.2500 x w.400 x d350 mm. Photo J. Parsons



expression appeals to Andrew. Comical because the Sheela Na Gig represent playful views of male genitalia against a backdrop of the predominantly carnal female 'old hag' and is to be found associated with Romanesque churches (again an image not lost on Andrew).

Like many children of the fifties and sixties Andrew was exposed to asbestos. Nowadays he sucks on oxygen for

Below: Energetic Whirl, 1981, executed in galvanised welded steel rod, commissioned by City of Bunbury for the South West Recreation Centre, h.3200 x w.900 d.900mm. The work is positioned at the entry to the SW Recreation Centre, Hay Park, Bunbury. Photo G. Piesse



his acquired Mesothelioma, the incurable asbestos-related cancer that affects the mesothelium, the lining of several areas within the body. There is no cure.

Diagnosis four years ago has not fettered Andrew's commitment to his studio work with a prolific output mainly in clay which he has been expanding in new ways on Instagram. We have been in the company of a true artist.

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Bart, 1985, executed in welded steel rod covered with fibre-glass, created pre 3D printing.. Over 100 topographical maps were printed. Andrew then cut out hundreds of polystyrene layers in the shape of each map. Commissioned by locals in the Shire of Wagin to commemorate the district's role in the Australian wool industry, h 9m x w 6m x length 13m. Situated at the entry to Wagin Shire. Photo T. Fowles