



The crew of 'K' for Kitty, Captain Howard Holmes standing FAR LEFT. Taken in front of a Wellington bomber, part of 45B Squadron stationed in England in 1941 and featured in the BBC/ABC documentary **Bomber Command**.

For Personal Reasons

Taking pride of place in the foyer of the **Dubbo Regional Art Gallery** in New South Wales is **Mitch**, a woman of one man's imagination and another's reality.

This iconic rendition of a mythical being was sculpted by **Michael Gill** in 1987. A lifesize vision of a goddess, *Mitch* is struck in a pose of arrogant self-admiration, declaring with her hands, 'Look at me! I was conceived in a piece of wood this big!'

Her beginnings were in a weathered waterfront factory on Sydney Harbour. It was Michael Gill's studio and workshop which usually echoed with the sounds of production of finely crafted furniture and group workshops in wood carving, but on this day everything was still, empty and silent.

A large electric sawbench stood in the centre and on its surface lay a bloodstained slab of timber while Michael Gill lay in hospital recovering from an accident. For years his only volition was making furniture; being known as a sculptor was not one of his predilections. Suddenly the accident changed all that with astonishing repercussions.

While the injury itself seemed insignificant, the implications horrified him, awakening him to the realization that not only might he lose the use of his hands through some misadventure, but, far worse, lose the ability to achieve the best within himself. The profound effect was to change his view of his purpose in life.



Compelled with a sense of urgency to try new things, to extend his abilities to the utmost, he was to embark on his very first sculpture of the human form.

Back in his studio, Michael faced a solid charred block of Huon Pine salvaged from the wreckage of an ancient forest in Tasmania. This he chose to become his first human form and as he proceeded to carve, the vision of what he wanted began to take shape.

In just twelve weeks *Mitch* was born. Precisely where she came from or on whom she was modelled Michael cannot say for sure. The source of his motivation was his new found sense of adventure, but the source of his vision remains a mystery.

Carving her face was left to the last possible moment. There were several attempts in clay before turning to the sculpture, but all of them were failures. Michael admits that he was afraid to make the first mark and had no clear view in his mind of the face he sought to capture.



Anger and frustration with his inability to see clearly the face he wanted finally overcame his fear of cutting the wood. The face that emerged epitomizes beauty of a kind characterized by the absence of fear, pain, guilt and malice. For Michael, *Mitch* represents that value in a human being that he cherishes most: the capacity to achieve sublime happiness in the acknowledgement of one's existence.

Mitch was exhibited for the first time in the Summer of 1987 at the Dubbo Regional Art Gallery and remained there for three years before she was purchased and bequeathed to the gallery by a benefactor widely known and admired in the district, the late **James Howard Holmes**.

By all accounts Holmes was the quintessential Australian, a driving force in the wool industry to which he devoted most of his life and a man who loved life enough to offer his own in defence of it. As a young bomber pilot with the RAAF in Europe in World War II, Howard Holmes was considered extraordinarily lucky to have survived over a thousand hours of active duty while all but one other of his squadron of 52 perished in a manmade storm of unimaginable violence.

The motive behind the purchase of *Mitch* was never clearly established, but from subsequent research into the war diaries and flight logs of Captain Howard Holmes, *Mitch* may well have existed nearly half a century ago in North West Africa in Lagos where he was flying American bombers to secret destinations.

There are numerous references to Lagos in his 1943 diary, all of them routine, with one exception, an entry which reads simply: 'Arrived in Lagos.' The notation itself was not unusual—there are others similar in their brevity—but what followed is decidedly curious and unpredictable: Captain Holmes made no further entries for six consecutive weeks.

This aberration of habit went unnoticed and may well have remained so had it not been for a chance event nearly half a century later, in another land half way around the world. One day in 1990, Howard Holmes and his son Gregory entered the foyer of the



Dubbo Regional Art Gallery.

According to Gregory Holmes, the sight of *Mitch* stopped his father short and after a considerable period of quiet study, he remarked, more to himself than to his son and almost inaudibly: 'She reminds me of someone I once knew in Lagos.'

Gregory Holmes did not seek an explanation for his father's remark.

The possibility of a woman in his father's life during the war was never considered.

Howard Holmes was not a man known for his extravagance and his sudden decision to acquire *Mitch* and donate her to the Dubbo Regional Gallery led to speculation amongst his family about his motives. Howard Holmes never saw *Mitch* again. He died soon after in July 1991 and the mystery surrounding one of his last acts of generosity remains.

To Michael Gill, *Mitch* is a woman born of imagination and artistry, but to Howard Holmes she may well have been the embodiment of a distant but none-the-less valued memory. An art gallery has acquired a sculpture with an inherent mystery and the story of its acquisition illustrates the importance of the connection between artist and viewer in the notion that it takes two kinds to give art value: the creator and the one who acknowledges the worth. This is the language of art.

**Text and photography by
Peter Donovan**



Mitch has been worked from a single block of Huon Pine, including the headpiece which is a stylization of the head feathers of the Major Mitchell Cockatoo. The sculpture was first exhibited in 1987 as part of an exhibition with a theme of Australian birds and animals.

Michael Gill: 'I wanted to make a headpiece in the style of the London punks, but I didn't want to have anything malicious about it. There's no malice in her whatsoever. That face shows no fear; there's no pain and no guilt.

'I wanted her to be beautiful and to say that by imitating a bird which she really admires for its beauty, she too will be beautiful, like the bird. That's why she's looking into mirrors (held in her hands)... to admire herself.

'She's also saying with her hands that she was once a huge block of timber which has been burnt in a forest fire in Tasmania and that just millimetres on either side of her used to be charcoal... She can also be saying other things with her hands and that expression, but that is for others to see for themselves.'