

Robert Klippel: No. 247

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An artist's work reflects their personal response to the micro and macro, the internal and external realms, the public and private spheres. In this, however, the artist then loses the work to the audience, which must come to its own conclusions about the piece, even as viewers share the artist's journey.

Robert Klippel's sculpture sits within the internal and private realm, but is no less powerful a public presence for that. Using found, often artificial objects, such as machinery that has lost its purpose and use, Klippel creates collages of sometimes exquisite brutality.

No. 247 (1965-1968), one of Klippel's most ambitious and complex works, is a metal construction of welded and brazed steel, found objects, such as cash registers and IBM parts, and wood. An extraordinary arrangement of delicate parts held together in a very direct, and confronting composition, *No. 247* is recognised as one of the greatest artworks produced in Australia.

I recently had the privilege to observe *No. 247* up close and was astonished by the amount of detail that went into creating the piece. Klippel's use of old discarded machine parts gives it a rusty and raw appeal. The naked, skeletal interplay of the metal creates an almost living animal effect, while at other points in the sculpted space the facial characteristics of a human emerge; grinning teeth in typewriter pieces.

As in his other junk sculptures of the same period, Klippel achieved a difficult morphing of organic and mechanical forms, the whole sculpture growing as naturally as a plant, even though entirely constructed of discarded, sharp edged and dangerous looking machinery parts. Reaching upwards and outwards, the branches are subtly balanced with their roots firmly planted in the ground, at the very same time as their claw-like shape suggests humankind's destructive raking of the natural world with its machinery.¹ The rusted structure of Klippel refers, ironically, to growth and fulfils the artist's aim to connect the organic world with the artificial, as the tools of humans must inevitably decay and return to a state of nature.²

[*No. 247*] is not only Klippel's personal masterpiece but one of the timeless works of art to come out of the present day. It owes its materials exclusively to the present—machine-made parts and parts of machines—and the techniques of its construction match the materials. That is to say there is no way at all that this sculpture could have been made at any other time.

(Laurie Thomas, The Australian, 18 February 1969)

Robert Klippel was born on the 19 June, 1920 in Australia, and died in Sydney in 2001 on his 81st birthday, observing over the course of his life, the transformation of Australia from a rough, largely pre-industrial society, to a post-industrial one. His very world was thus transformed and we should not be surprised at the strength of his reaction to that change.

Klippel was committed to the idea of sculptures as abstract, as occupying space and sustaining themselves in ways beyond any literary or narrative reach. Utilising the techniques of casting, assemblage, painting and collage Klippel completed over twelve hundred sculptures by the end of the 1990s.³

He came to art by a circuitous route. His family was not artistic, but as a young boy he was interested in building model ships. At the age of six Klippel made his first model ship after riding a ferry on Sydney Harbor. The exact detail and keen eye required in model building undoubtedly honed his skills. Model making became a passion for the young Klippel, and he was employed to make plane models while serving at the Gunnery Instruction Centre during World War II.⁴

Klippel attended evening classes at East Sydney Technical College, studying sculpting, and after his military discharge was able to attend this school for a full year. With the financial support of his parents he left Australia to join the Slade College in London, but during the six months he attended Klippel found that the school did not satisfy his need for freedom of expression. Whilst in London he met Australian painter and art critic James Gleeson with whom he formed a lifelong friendship. In November 1948 Klippel, Gleeson and Lucian Freud had a group exhibition in

London. Klippel's work was to be exhibited in Paris the following year by Andre Breton, founder of Surrealism.⁵

Klippel lived in Paris for a year and returned to Australia in 1950. However, he could not achieve commercial success as an industrial designer in Australia and his first sculptural work was not sold in Australia until 1956. He left for America in 1957 where he remained until 1963, teaching sculpture at the Minneapolis School of Arts from 1958-1962. Closely attuned to the aesthetics of the New York School he produced his very first junk assemblage in 1960 using parts and sections from old machinery. With these works he established his reputation as a radical new visionary of Australian art.

Klippel started moving away from 'traditional' sculpture and into what might be termed collage sculpture.⁶ His unrelenting instinct was to embrace fantasy, imagination and dream, but there remains in his work a powerful reality in the reawakened bits and pieces of discarded industry with its long lost purpose.⁷ Klippel was never one to be too direct in his work, firmly believing that the art does not have to say something. Many of Klippel's works are not identified by a name but simply by number, leaving the viewer to interpret what the artist is (or for that matter is not) saying with his art sculptures.

Robert Klippel was Australia's greatest sculptor and arguably one of the most significant sculptors of his generation internationally. Klippel's particular vision, inspired by the intricacies and the profusion of our natural and man-made environments and by his quest for a spiritually relevant form, stands alone in the history of Australian art.

(Deborah Edwards, Art Gallery of New South Wales)

If there is a purpose to Robert Klippel's artwork it is the expression of inner worlds, and a mediation of nature and technology. In *No. 247* Robert Klippel communicates ironically the growth of natural forms, but he does this through the use of found objects that have lost their value in the human world. Nature is his inspiration, machinery its form.

Notes

1. www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag04/april04/WebSpecials/Klippel.shtml
2. <http://visualarts.qld.gov.au/designyourowntour/details.php?id=207&pnum=60&project=APT5>
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Klippel
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. the blurb - <http://www.theblurb.com.au/Issue20/Klippel.htm>
7. www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media/archives_2002/klippel