



RAE BOLOTIN

Rae Bolotin's sculptures are as intellectually stimulating as they are exciting to look at. With an engineering background, Bolotin is highly innovative in terms of how she approaches her art, altering existing technologies such as metal beating and those involving the metal surface to produce her seamless steel sculptures. Her work is strongly influenced by shapes, surroundings and new technologies. Bolotin has been a finalist in the Wynne Prize (2007), exhibited in Sculpture by the Sea (2010, 2008, 2007, 2006, 2004) and the Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award (2007).

Bolotin was born in Uzbekistan and came to Australia in 1979. Initially, she worked as an electronic engineer. She studied for her degree in engineering at the same time she studied art with a focus on painting. She later studied sculpture but was not confined to a specific curriculum, "I designed my own sculpture course. I went and did many courses to get the skills that I needed to become a sculptor." Being an engineer she believes has been a credit to her artistic career, "sculpture needs engineers because they are good at problem solving. I love a challenge. I love a technical challenge and a lot of my work is very technical. I love research, I am a research addict."

Bolotin has travelled extensively, particularly throughout Asia. Travelling, according to Bolotin, has been an important part of her education, particularly her experiences in China. "I was born in Uzbekistan and I have traveled extensively throughout Asia. I have a particularly strong association with China because I did an artist residency in Beijing and I have gone back to that studio many times." She referred to herself as a 'citizen of the world. "I would like to go everywhere."

I asked Bolotin if she has always had a particular fondness for China? "I have a particular fondness for extraordinary skill." Bolotin here is referring to the skill of metal beating which she said goes back about 5000 years. "It is a traditional skill which is usually passed from father to son. It is not something that you can do short courses in." Unfortunately, Bolotin said that it is a 'dying skill.' "Because of the one child policy in China, if a family has a son, they would rather that son undertake computer studies rather than metal beating – so the masters don't have the apprentices." Bolotin worked with people trained in this art form in China to create her metal sculptures. "I make the process a lot more difficult because traditionally it is done using a flat panel and my work is all three dimensional. It is also made from stainless steel whereas, traditionally they would use copper because it is soft. When I arrived, they said it was impossible, but I did it."

Originally, Bolotin's renowned sculptures of apples, were made from concrete, however this became impractical when she started to create sculptures of apple peels which twist vertically in thin, delicate strips. Her sculptural works of apple peels were made using this traditional Chinese metal beating technique – strips of peel are hollow and are not cast. "It is hollow inside, it is not cast, it is beaten – small pieces of metal are beaten and then welded together. The surface is not treated with anything, it is just stainless steel. The joins cannot be seen, it is completely seamless."

And why an apple peel? "It is interesting because the apple peel is something that we usually cast away but the apple peel has a memory of the original shape, so it has its own language." Bolotin is well known for her sculptures of apples and I asked Bolotin why she created these works. 'I wanted to think of a very simple idea and I was just fascinated by the curve, the shape of the apple and that was it.'

Bolotin has recently moved away from the apple theme and has created a series of seeds – from her imagination as well as from real forms. "I think the life of the artist affects the work. A couple of years ago, I was looking for a studio... then I found the place in Bilpin in the Blue

Mountains which is the most beautiful place and that was a very important shift to me.” Bolotin’s studio is located near Mount Tomah Botanical Gardens that have a lot of international plants from which she has collected the many different seeds. “These seeds just fascinated me. The idea that this tiny little thing had enough information to create an entire tree. So, I made seeds out of stainless steel using the same technique of beating metal. Each of these seeds are very specifically associated with a real seed and I will have Latin names for them.” Bolotin has also created seeds and trees from her own imagination. Her trees comprise of different seeds – in place of both trunk and leaves are seeds. “...I decided to make my own tree out of my seeds. I created trees of 1.7 meters high.”

Some of her series of seed sculptures are brightly coloured which is not the result of the application of paints or any traditional art patinas – the colours are the result of exposing the surfaces to gases. “Colour was an unbelievable adventure. It is the reaction of the stainless steel to gases. The reaction depends on the shape of the surface, so the colours in the crevices are different from those on the flat surfaces.” The undulating forms of her seeds are completely seamless, so the colours appear to run fluidly, undisturbed, giving the effect of blown glass. According to Bolotin, the technology originated from Russia and was designed by Russian engineers for space ship production. “When I was in China I found people who had adopted that technique of treating a metal but they only used flat pieces of metal, and I wanted to create different colours using different shapes; I also wanted to use different gases.”

Bolotin said that it is difficult to have control during this process, ‘You cannot ever get the same thing ever again. Once it is done, there is no way back.’ Her work was placed in a vacuum chamber while she viewed the process through a small window from a chamber and gave instruction for the change over of the gases.

Bolotin’s work is very diverse as she is always searching for new ideas, technologies and forms, “I am constantly interested in new challenges. I am interested in collaborative projects and land art; different people. Any excuse to work with other people and share ideas.”

You can view Rae Bolotin’s latest work at Stella Downer Fine Art gallery, Danks Street, Waterloo from 26 October to the 20 November.

This Page: Seed Tree 4: 90 h 37 w x 42 d cm
 Page 19: Seed Form 2: 120 h x 80 w x 63 d cm
 All photographs in this article courtesy of the artist and Stella Downer Fine Art, Waterloo

