

Stephen Ralph – Life is long

text by Naomi Evans

It is certainly a miracle that a formless block of stone could ever have been reduced to a perfection that nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh.

Giorgio Vasari on Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498-99), St Peter's Basilica, Rome.[1]

The three sculptures presented in Stephen Ralph's solo exhibition *Life is Long* at The Commercial are the culmination of three years' work, starting in 2018 with the challenge of procuring marble from a remote quarry in Chillagoe, located 300kms inland from Cairns in Far North Queensland. Once a thriving mining town, now a few marble quarries and a small zinc mine are operated by a population of about 250 people. The 7 tonne block selected by Ralph was received in Sydney by the end of 2018 where its colossal size impelled Ralph to build from scratch a piece of equipment that was capable of sawing the marble into manageable pieces without compromising its structure.

During 2019 and 2020, Ralph cut several large sections from the block. Who could have known that a material so deeply associated with the so-called seat of Western civilization would also be found in great chunks across the country of the Wakaman people[2] with a colour comparable to the Carrara marble favoured by sculptors of the Renaissance. And yet, of course, it is an absurdity to think any place on earth was not the result of geological processes, pressures and forces. The timelines of stones far eclipse mortal histories.

The new sculptures by Stephen Ralph are titled *Looking for love*, *How to sleep* and *More dust*, and all completed in 2020-21. In the way that the exhibition title elicits a sense of time as distended and subjectively experienced, so too the name of each work is for Ralph 'a metaphor for eternity'.[3] The figures are redolent with sensuality and physical details that recall old myths like Pygmalion and Galatea, or stories of dryads emerging from trees. The whiteness of this Chillagoe marble, however, allows for the remarkable, lifelike representations to be read as abstractions; even with their fine grey veins and the occasional birthmark in iron rust, no living tree or being ever appeared with this pallor. Ralph's coaxing of limbs from rock is a study in light and shadow, phrasing the light-emitting radiance of marble in contrast with deep modelling, or areas of waxy polish and jagged chisel strikes.[4]

The way certain art materials are intrinsically vulnerable to damage is described by art conservators as their 'inherent vice'. In *Life is Long*, Ralph's marble never gives away its risks overtly, however the forms he echoes quote from 16th century sculptures; the tree stumps and logs which are set behind or beside figures served a function that was more than allegorical. Marble is soft when first cut, though it hardens over time to produce an extremely durable stone. When humanist Italian sculptors made marble copies of Hellenic bronzes, they conceived of methods to provide robustness, including supportive buttresses and struts to mitigate against the risk of fracture. As Ralph observed, more often than not, these took the form of tree stumps, an idea that directly gave rise to his first piece in Carrara marble, titled *Stardust* (2018).

The provenance of this idea can be traced even further back to a 2016 sculpture titled *My sister's doll*, made from glazed porcelain and carved wood that Ralph exhibited in an exhibition *UN LEG*, curated by Nick Strike at 55 Sydenham Rd, Marrickville. The smooth undulating timber was far from the perfunctory functioning of a peg-leg, and yet the analogy between legs and logs with surrogate structural or formal operations was there in its nascency.

Ralph's earliest artworks drew on his training in carpentry and from an interest in built architecture. His oeuvre has included series that feature windows, doorways, pedestal carvings and his highly regarded column works that explored the Surrealist's *exquisite corpse* method in three dimensions. The new group of marbles likewise hold with his sustained interest in engineering structures, and the observation that the framework that makes a narrative possible has a complex and intertwined relationship with final form of a composition.

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In *Life is long*, Ralph's marble sculptures explore lines of transformation and states of flux that we can appreciate in the 'S'-like shapes synonymous with contrapposto or dynamic poses. Detailed, naturalistic figuration frozen in rock coexists with the appearance of uncanny plasticity, tensioned and arced further into curlicues, ampersands, helixes. *Looking for love*, *How to sleep* and *More dust* elongate interstitial spaces for exploration. Logs and legs are no longer disguised as figurative elements and instead morph one into the other—their fortifying, doubling, and inextricable dimensions are simultaneous. Engineering considerations are conversely made invisible through Ralph's emphasis on the plot line – where plant transforms to human, where rough bark graduates into smooth epidermis.

It is the relationships between structural components and concepts like stress points and load that perhaps offer us insight into the mechanics of Ralph's art, where unity still allows for individuation. Ralph's visionary abilities persuade us that there are riddles still to be drawn out of megaliths and this aspect makes the existence of these sculptures all the more rare in the era of early 21st century contemporary art.

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Endnotes:

1. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists* (First edition 1550), translated by Julia C. Bondanella, and Peter Bondanella. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998
<https://britishinstitutehoa.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/vasari-the-life-of-michelangelo.pdf>, last accessed 11 May 2021
2. Register of Native Title Claim by Wakaman People (#5), lodged 26 March 2018,
http://www.nntt.gov.au/searchRegApps/NativeTitleClaims/RegistrationDecisionDocuments/2018/May/QC2018_001-1%2002052018.pdf, last accessed 14 May 2021
3. Stephen Ralph email to author, 13 May 2021
4. For a thoughtful exploration of Vasari's hagiography of Michelangelo, consider Stephen J. Campbell, "'Fare una Cosa Morta Parer Viva": Michelangelo, Rosso, and the (Un)Divinity of Art', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol.84, No.4, 2002, College Art Association (CAA), New York, pp.596-620