

A Sculptor For The Australian Environment

Australian wood sculptor Peter Carrigy draws his inspiration from the grains and textures of native Australian woods as well as the elements of fire, water, and earth. Carrigy's oeuvre is deeply rooted in his Australian identity and he brings to life materials and themes that are natural, representational and sometimes symbolic, but always visually and aesthetically pleasing.

By Christine Nicholls



Peter Carrigy, **Coastal Rhythm**, 2005, fiddleback red gum, 35 x 36 x 89 cm. Photograph by Tom Roschi.

The wood sculptor Peter Carrigy grew up in the leafy, comfortable northern Sydney suburb of Hornsby. Carrigy has Irish ancestry on both sides of his family. As a descendant of the Irish Catholic convict Thomas Kind, a weaver transported to Australia for receiving stolen goods, who subsequently married an orphaned Irish girl, Mary Shaw (who hailed from Ireland's west coast, arriving with a shipload of Irish orphans at roughly the same time as her future husband), Carrigy is also able to lay claim to at least one forebear who was a skilled craftsman.

The shire of Hornsby where Peter Carrigy (born 1951, Sydney) grew up is still known today as the 'Bushland Shire', because it abuts two expansive areas of natural bushland. To the west is the Berowra Valley Regional Park, while the

Kuring-gai National Park lies to the east. While extensive areas of Hornsby remain semi-rural to this day, back in the 1950s and 1960s the natural woodland in this 'green belt' afforded children many happy hours of outdoors exploration and play.

As a child attending Hornsby's Waitara Primary School, Carrigy played in a beautiful bush setting. Regal Sydney red gums (*angophora costata*), striking Sydney turpentines (fibrous ironbarks, *syncarpia glomulifera*), and splendid native cherry trees (a sandalwood species, *exocarpus cupressiformis*) surrounded the small school. Carrigy and the other children routinely constructed wooden boats, using the rough bark of the Sydney red gum to fashion pointy ends on their small craft. Into these they would poke holes and insert masts, held *in situ* by the sap of the red gum, a natural fixative. The children would then

launch these small vessels, floating them in puddles or in the school's washbasins.

On one occasion, as a five-year-old, Carrigy had been occupying himself near a line of red gums growing along the school's fence line, when he looked up and glimpsed the face of a tawny frogmouth, a silver-grey bird commonly—though incorrectly—described as an 'owl'. From its perch in the tree the bird seemed to be staring right back at the boy. This was a defining moment for Carrigy. Soon after, he produced an accomplished watercolor of an owl on a log, to great critical acclaim.

Later, at Sydney's Asquith Boys High, Carrigy's passion for art was further nurtured. There he met one of his important mentors, Mrs. Murray, a controversial figure within the school who was generally viewed with suspicion and dislike by other teachers and the boys' parents, on

the putative grounds that this artistic woman was inappropriately "molding teenage boys who had artistic inclinations". Unusually, at that time, in Australian history, Mrs. Murray was an authority on Japanese and Chinese art history, conveying her knowledge, respect, and passion for those visual traditions to her students. She also encouraged the boys to make their own artworks. Carrigy and other art-loving boys began spending their lunchtime breaks in the art room, making work, eschewing the outdoor games of cricket and rugby that had formerly claimed their time and attention. In Carrigy's case this also led to family conflict, especially with his father, who regarded Mrs. Murray's influence as unhealthy, despite his undoubted pride in his son's artistic achievements. But Carrigy, inspired by Mrs. Murray, stuck to his guns, and began, very privately, to envisage a future as a professional artist, posing himself the question: "Will this be my path?"¹

"The child is father of the man", wrote William Wordsworth in his celebrated poem *The Rainbow* (1999: 532). Those pivotal early experiences have profoundly

shaped the kind of art worker that Peter Carrigy is today. Carrigy's work is founded upon respect for wood as a distinctive medium, and on his profound knowledge of the qualities of different Australian woods, with their idiosyncratic grains, patternings, and textures. When Carrigy talks about wood, it is with love: "Wood is a warm organic medium, life-giving."²

After spending a year in 1970 studying architecture at the Sydney Institute of Technology, Peter Carrigy moved to Bathurst to study at the Bathurst Teachers'



Peter Carrigy, **Thunderbolt Gorge**, 1996, red gum, ochre, paint, 12 x 43 x 46 cm. Private collection, Sydney, Australia. Photograph by Michael Haines.

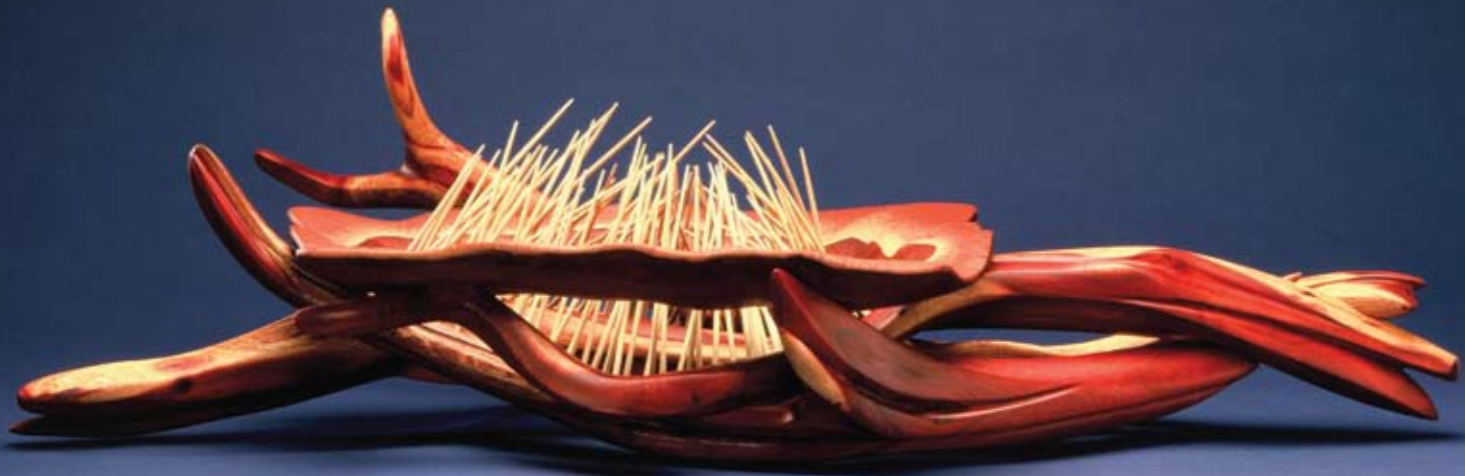
College with a view to becoming a primary school teacher. The latter stint was as unsuccessful as his first attempt at establishing a career, but during that time he began working on a large number of pen and ink drawings, in which his principal subject matter included local landscapes, old homesteads, and animals. At the same time, he experimented with different media, using vinyl paint, boot polish, and water color to develop a primitive kind of 'wax resist' technique.

In 1972, Carrigy was offered his first solo exhibition at Bathurst's Hayloft Gallery, and in the following year he was given a second solo exhibition in Molong, his grandfather's hometown in mid-northern New South Wales. By that time, Carrigy had quit teachers' college and was working in various jobs, including hotel work and assistant to an antique dealer. During that period, he spent time with a Mr. and Mrs. Henry who were toymakers in the nearby town of Cumnock Central West, and who had encouraged him to exhibit his work at Molong's Hayloft Gallery. In Mrs. Henry, Carrigy found another vocal mentor and strong early supporter of his work.



Above left: Peter Carrigy, **FirePod**, 1999, fiddleback red gum, grass tree resin, 50 x 47 x 16 cm. Private collection, Melbourne, Australia. Photograph by Alex Makeyev. Above right: Peter Carrigy, **Bush Fire Rain**, 1993, red gum, ochre, paint, glass by Alex Wyatt, 47 x 44 x 14 cm. Private collection NSW Australia. Photograph by David Cumming.





Peter Carrigy, Spinifex Country, 1999, purple heart acacia, red gum, ochre, paint, 20 x 39 x 53 cm. Private collection Christine MacPhail, Brisbane, Australia. Photograph by Alex Makeyev.

While he spent his early years in New South Wales, today Carrigy is best known for his work as a wood sculptor in South Australia, where he has resided since 1975, when he finally launched himself as a professional artist. His early works were mostly figurative, realistic representations of different species of Australian birds and other animals. Included among these was his 1983 depiction of an Australian Nankeen night heron, a stocky little bird with a large head, relatively short neck, and longish legs.

In these early works Carrigy lovingly rendered Australian wildlife in anatomical detail, while exploring the properties of native cherry, a soft wood. This early period, during which he carved bird life and animalia, culminated toward the end of the 1980s with Carrigy exhibiting his Henry Kendall collection of woodcarvings. (In 1983, the New South Wales Forestry Commission had inaugurated the prestigious Kendall Collection, named after a celebrated Australian poet).

Another defining moment of Carrigy's career was a 1989 meeting in Okayama with the Japanese Living National Treasure Ono Showasai. An august presence, Showasai, a cabinetmaker and carver, presented the Australian with a calligraphy card inscribed with the words 'One Enjoyment'. Carrigy interprets Ono's philosophy as one based on perceiving the deep connections between all things,

including, *à propos* of successfully working with wood "... the connection between an idea and the creative techniques used to give it form."

This influence, particularly Showasai's underlying philosophy of 'oneness', imbues Carrigy's approach to art-working today: "When you achieve that oneness, there is a natural flow to your work. Time becomes unimportant. I go with the flow, allowing elements ... to filter through ... I do not impose my will on the wood." To this Carrigy adds, "I allow the

wood to dictate to me, and if it says to do something differently, I go with that. I did not choose wood; wood chose me."

The vigorous, living tradition of woodcarving and the obvious visual pleasure that Japanese collectors derived from beautifully carved objects, and from particular wood grains and textures, influenced the youthful wood carver. His impressions of Japan and its rich woodcarving traditions resonated with Carrigy at the time and continue to do so to this day. "I realized on that occasion that Japanese are what could be described as 'wood literate,'" says Carrigy, "and that has had a huge impact on me and my work."

The end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s marked a transitional time in Carrigy's work as an artist. That first trip to Japan had deeply influenced the direction and development of his *oeuvre*. A second trip to Japan confirmed this, and as Carrigy explains, he learned a great deal from the Japanese approach, including the imperative of going "... with any natural cracks or dry rot or defects that exist in the wood itself—to align oneself with the energy flow."³

The major change that occurred as a result of that initial visit was a move away from strictly literal renditions of animals, birds, and other wildlife, and toward more abstracted forms. This could be summarized as a progressive moving away from creating wood sculptures in which he sought likeness of form, toward



Peter Carrigy, Windsong, 1998, she-oak, kaolin, paint, 25 x 30 x 53 cm. Private collection, Melbourne, Australia. Photographs by Alex Makeyev.

making work wherein 'likeness of spirit' played a relatively more significant role.

At this critically important transitional point another highly significant mentor was to appear in Peter Carrigy's life, an influential man who lived in Adelaide—David Wynn, a prominent winemaker, businessman, and visual arts aficionado. Wynn was to greatly assist Carrigy in successfully making this transition: that of striking the 'right' delicate balance between a likeness of spirit and likeness of form.

David Wynn (1915–1995) was the son of Polish Jews who had migrated to Australia. Initially his father Samuel settled the family in Melbourne but later David moved to Adelaide to establish Wynn's wines. Wynn Junior was also a keen and knowledgeable collector of visual art, with Japanese connections. When Carrigy met Wynn, he felt that he had found a kindred spirit. Wynn's most significant contribution to Carrigy's career, aside from championing the still-youthful artist's work, was the sound advice that he gave Carrigy about the direction his art should take. As a result Carrigy turned away from his earlier highly naturalistic representations of Australian

fauna. More important, he heeded Wynn's advice and completely stopped carving certain items that he had been aiming at a populist market. Sometimes these early carvings had bordered on the kitsch—for example, wooden Akubra hats and carved 'baggy' cricket caps. No longer did he attempt to depict nature—or cultural items—in a style of unadulterated realism. With the woodcarving phase of his career behind him, Carrigy was poised to extend his reach into the fine art market, emerging as a wood sculptor.

While each work that emerged during this transitional phase is strongly associated with nature—often his subject matter is bushfire or flood—Carrigy's works began incorporating abstraction and indirection to a greater extent than in the past. Exemplifying this well are his 1993 works, *Landscape Vessel* and *Bus Fire Rain*, and his 1999 work *Firepod*, created from his beloved fiddleback red gum. *Firepod* manifests both naturalistic and abstract stylistic elements. Thunder and lightning are referenced in *Thunderbolt Gorge*, 1996, and flooding is evoked in his *Channel Country Flood*, created in 1998, and in which he used the Australian timber coolabah, natural ochre, and paint.

Spinifex Country and *Seedpod*

(both 1999) sit right on the cusp of the directional change that Carrigy made in the late 1990s under the influence of his Japanese mentors and of David Wynn. Both works demonstrate characteristics of his earlier and later phases, the latter work especially.

Many of Australia's native, shrubland plants need fire to release their seeds; the seeds develop inside a very hard case and in order to germinate they need the fire's extreme heat to free them from their pods. As Tim Flannery explained in his book *The Future Eaters*, for many thousands of years Aboriginal people profoundly modified the Australian environment by the deliberate use of fire. Fire was a particularly dominant theme in the earlier part of Carrigy's career.

Further evidence of this lengthy transitional phase is Carrigy's evocative sculpture *Windsong* (1998), carved from she-oak then painted. Carrigy's technical skill lies in his ability to make the high level of workmanship and artifice that he deploys appear to be natural; his technique entails a good deal more than simply 'revealing' nature. The marvelous *Rock Stack Sky* (1999), now in a collection in Hong Kong, and his lyrical, intriguing *Contour* (1999) both exemplify a significant



Peter Carrigy, Rock Stack Sky, 1999, red gum, ochre, paint, cast glass by Annie Lipschitz, 38 x 36 x 19 cm. Private collection, Mr. Siu On Mak, Hong Kong. Photograph by Alex Makeyev.



Peter Carrigy, Hot Spot, 1999, red gum, paint, grass tree resin, 56.5 x 14 x 19 cm. Private collection Dr Noris Ioannou, Adelaide, Australia. Photograph by Alex Makeyev.

departure from his earlier more naturalistic forms, as does *Hot Spot* (1999) and *Bushfire Ridge* (1997).

Today, through his wood sculptures, Carrigy explores the essence of the natural world and of the South Australian landscape in particular, gaining inspiration from observed natural phenomena, but not attempting to copy these directly. "The ancient Australian landscape inspires me artistically and spiritually. I utilize wood collected from coastal and outback regions—wood which has been felled by fire, wind, rain, and old age," says Carrigy. There is something stubbornly and distinctively Australian about Carrigy's approach to his wood sculptures, including his propensity to idealize nature in this way. He refuses to fell trees for use in his artworks, limiting himself to using wood that has succumbed to natural processes. But while he only minimally intervenes in nature in his choice of materials, the actual making of his works sometimes involves power tools. In this regard Carrigy's art is situated at the cusp of nature and culture.

Obstinately, Carrigy uses materials that, bower-birdlike, he gathers, meticulously selecting just the 'right' piece of wood, natural resins, ochre pigments,



Peter Carrigy, Desert Dance, 2005, desert she-oak, flame oak, paint, 86 x 43 x 30 cm. Photograph by Tom Roschi.

and other flotsam and jetsam. In recent years, he has expanded his repertoire to create sculptural works that closely resonate with the natural forms of the Australian seascape as well as the landscape. It is as if, in his work, Carrigy is seeking to uncover nature, revealing its elemental materiality, textual characteristics, patterning, and variations in form.

Recent works that embody Carrigy's coming-of-age as a sculptor who works in increasingly abstract idiom include his gorgeously suggestive *Ironstone Ridge*, fashioned from red gum, red mallee, and white mallee (all Australian natives) and finished with ochre and paint, the equally evocative *Bush Moon*, and the beautifully animated *Desert Bloom*, carved from purple heart acacia (all 2001). The astonishing, quasi-figurative *Desert Dance* (2005), which at first sight appears a little awkward, but continues to draw viewers back toward it through its magnetic power, evinces Carrigy's great respect for Australian Aboriginal artistic cultures, in which natural forms seem to be imbued with spirit of place. Like an animate being, *Desert Dance* pulls you into its vortex.

More recently, Carrigy has moved toward incorporating water and marine themes into his oeuvre. As a direct result

of this development, in 2009, Carrigy won the prize for the Best Indoor Sculpture at Adelaide Airport's *Brighton Jetty Sculptures by the Sea* competition, held annually in South Australia. The winning piece was his carved red gum sculpture titled *Submerge Emerge*, which took as its inspiration the sleek, shining, undulating bodies of a pair of conjoined bottle-nosed dolphins. While the dolphins' fusiform bodies, the distinctive shape of their pectoral flippers, their melon-shaped heads, and their well-defined, idiosyncratic rostra were beautifully and realistically carved, *Submerge Emerge* was equally interpretable as elegant polished driftwood, carved and honed by the weather and waves. It is an artefact that could equally well have been human-created. Carrigy's great strength is that he does not create artworks literally or naturalistically: *Submerge Emerge*'s potency derives from its formal ambiguity. Elucidating on the work's title, Carrigy says: "The name of the sculpture—*Submerge Emerge*—implies and describes the mystical action of a marine mammal form diving and resurfacing in the ocean."

Carrigy's artwork is recognized not only in Australia but is becoming increasingly known in China and Japan, where the poetic vision informing his oeuvre is highly valued. In turn this 'Asian connection' exerts its own continuing influence on Carrigy's work, both in terms of the materials that he uses and the attitude and approach that he takes to his subject matter.

The 2010 *Brighton Sculptures by*

the Sea featured Carrigy's lovingly rendered *Coastal Rhythm*, fashioned from the Adelaide Hills red gum, with its characteristic wavy fiddleback wood grain, so named because it is a wood commonly used for making the backs of violins. The contrasts in the wood's texture are emphasized to create, in Carrigy's own words, "An abstract flowing form implying the movement of wind and waves, of dorsal fins and vessel forms." He has made deliberate use of the fiddleback wood grain to heighten the sense of movement and energy in his fine work. In his wood sculptures, including *Coastal Rhythm*, rich complexes of movement co-exist with refreshingly simple motives.

Coastal River (2009), exhibited at the recent 2011 *Brighton Sculptures by the Sea*) and his dreamy, poetic *Moonlit Lagoon* (2010) also make reference to bodies of water and other aspects of the natural world. The latter, along with *Desert Dance*



Peter Carrigy, Moonlit Lagoon, 2010, ebonised red gum, paint, 5.5 x 42 x 51 cm. Photograph by Tom Roschi.

and other recent works, are to be exhibited in Carrigy's solo exhibition at Adelaide's JamFactory scheduled for May 2011.

Drawing his inspiration from the grains and textures of native Australian woods, and from the elements of fire, water, and earth, Carrigy's work is forged by his love of the Australian environment. Taken as a whole, this sculptor's oeuvre is deeply rooted in his Australian identity. Through the ancient practice of working with wood to create sculptures, Peter Carrigy brings to life materials and themes that are natural, representational, and sometimes symbolic, but always visually and aesthetically pleasing. Δ

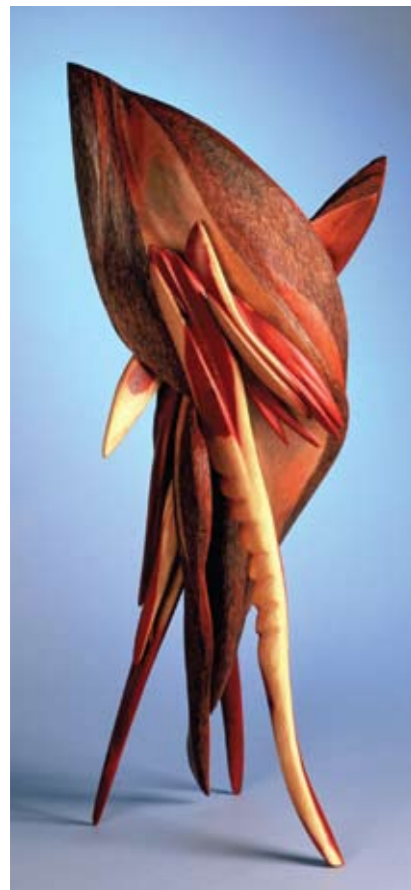
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1. Flannery, Tim, 2002 (first published 1994), *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*, Grove Books/Atlantic Monthly Press, U.S.A.
2. Quiller-Couch, Arthur (Ed.), 1919, *The Oxford book of English verse: 1250–1900*, chosen & edited by A.T. Quiller-Couch, Oxford: Clarendon, online edition Bartleby.com, 1999, www.bartleby.com/101/, accessed December 30, 2010.

Notes:

1. Personal communication, Peter Carrigy to Christine Nicholls, January 15, 2011.
2. As above.
3. As above.

Dr. Christine Nicholls is a contributing editor for Australia for World Sculpture News and Asian Art News. She is based in Adelaide, South Australia, where she teaches at Flinders University, specializing in Indigenous Australian art.



Above left: Peter Carrigy, *Desert Bloom*, 2001, purple heart acacia, red gum, paint, 38 x 38 x 30 cm. Private collection, Sydney, Australia. **Above center:** Peter Carrigy, *Bush Moon*, 2001, red gum, paint, 66 x 45 x 31 cm. Private collection, Sydney, Australia. **Above right:** Peter Carrigy, *Ironstone Ridge* (view 2), 2001, red gum, red mallee, white mallee, ochre, paint, 96 x 47 x 26 cm. All photographs by Alex Makeyev.



Peter Carrigy, Submerge Emerge, 2008, red gum, 24 x 60 x 69 cm.