
Juliette Peers review of Deborah Beck, *Rayner Hoff: The Life of a Sculptor*

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Since the early 1960s, contemporary sculpture in Australia has enjoyed both a secure market and appreciation, facilitated by state and corporate patronage of contemporary sculpture, that has continued to the present day. Figurative sculpture has always been placed in a marginal niche isolated from the dominance of the landscape and nationalist trends in the teaching and exhibiting of Australian art history. It took nearly three decades for the work of Bertram Mackennal to be celebrated in an authoritative survey exhibition, about half a century after curators and academics had collaborated to present ground-breaking overviews of his painter contemporaries such as Roberts, Clubbing, Streeton, Bunny and Fox, even though his achievements were far more significant globally.

Complex extended—and accurate—publications on historic figurative sculpture are fairly rare and thus Deborah Beck's recent biography of celebrity Sydney sculptor of the interwar period Rayner Hoff is welcomed for adding fresh and important visual and written material to the available literature. The rich cache of unfamiliar photographs and personal testament around interwar Sydney's professional art circles makes this an essential addition to any academic or curatorial library. Overall the detailed treatment of the life and work of a figurative sculptor is rare in the often repetitive treatment of Australian art history by publishers in this country, who are generally chary of committing to bringing non-celebrity artists into print. In many cases across the last three decades, monographs upon outlying figures in Australian art history are often self-published and self-funded, even by writers with academic training, given the reluctance of commercial publishing to engage with non-standard art histories. More often than not such narratives are by family members and amateur historians, with all the obvious limitations of such origins. Deborah Beck's thorough professionalism and her sophisticated and informed grasp of the broader art economy in which her subject flourished shines out against many similar studies. As noted above, any study of historical sculptors and sculpture in Australia extends knowledge in a limited field.

The only accessible overview history of Australian sculpture to this day, Graham Sturgeon's *Development of Australian Sculpture* (1978) is grotesquely marked by its author's intolerant mid-century haute modernism. His overt prejudice, obsession with the erotic as liberation and would-be clever one-liners remains a public indictment of not only Sturgeon's intellectual limitations but also those of his colleagues and peers who accepted this restricted and biased history as plausible, not to mention those in the book trade who brought it to publication. His voice and those of other Australian writers were embarrassingly out of date because Susan Beattie's and Benedict Read's publications, which appeared in London at the same date, transformed the whole field of nineteenth-century sculpture, rendering it scholarly and acceptable. In effect, the disconnect to global scholarship seen in Sturgeon's history actually confirmed Australia's status as marginal and out of touch in global terms, precisely in the manner that was feared by ambitious cultural elites and progressives in mid-century Australia and in the Whitlam era.

Ken Scarlett was more respectful of a wider range of sculptors than Sturgeon, and recorded all those who could be reasonably documented in his monumental *Dictionary of Australian Sculptors* (1980). Yet as curator, historian and critic, his loyalties lay more towards his contemporaries and colleagues: living practitioners. Curiously, female historians and curators have been more committed to historical sculpture in Australia across many decades, including Deborah Edwards of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a sole institutional voice, and many freelance curators: Judith Mackay, Robyn Tranter, Jane Lennon and the present author. Deborah Beck's biography affirms the trend of female curators and historians validating the back story of Australian sculptural history against a general trend towards apathy amongst the art history discipline. This gender divide is by no means a given, and the spread of writers and curators engaged with historic sculpture is more balanced globally in the English-speaking world across the genders with names such as Ben Read, David Getsy, Jason Edwards and Mark Stocker being consistent players. Figurative sculpture, far from being dull and pedestrian, throws up the strange and localised limitations of Australian engagement with historic art and presents a challenge to both tolerance and knowledge and, thus, there are multiple inducements to sideline it.

Noel Hutchison, alone amongst mid-twentieth century modernist writers on sculpture, found time for historic figurative sculpture. His was a different take, a quasi-Maoist approach that affirmed popular taste against intellectual pretension, suggesting that it was 'ordinary people' who stepped up to the plate when art professionals failed dismally. He wrote that council workers, gardeners, tradespeople and historians of local and folk culture, in particular, knew and loved outdoor sculptures and cared for them and their aesthetic presence within the public space

far more than university or public gallery staff. He discussed historic sculpture, particularly public monuments, as a medium for preserving both the aspirations and technical skills of past communities.

Some recent research around Australian local war memorials, such as Donald Richardson's, has also followed a similar diffused para-Maoist/regionalist trend of emphasising the importance of even humble monuments to the community that envisaged and erected them. Public sculptures enjoy multiple lives, and strange folklores and myths globally consolidate themselves around monuments in everyday experience. Sitting on certain statues late at night supposedly ensures pregnancy or conjures up the dead, depending on which location a traveller may find themselves; rubbing the foot or nose of certain statue brings good luck; beer cans are wedged into outstretched hands during New Year's celebrations; and rainbow scarves are wrapped around the neck of austere Christian and straight generals at Mardi Gras and Pride March time.

Sculpture's vivid contribution to a democratic visual experience is now rendered impossible to uphold due to postcolonialism. Whilst one can understand arguments that monuments of the past alienate modern diverse communities by celebrating individuals responsible for crimes against subaltern people, one could also note that paintings' multiple colonial histories and complicities, particularly the cultural appropriations and the *a priori* indebtedness to racist inflections within anthropologies and museums, are subject to far less agitation and complaint, despite being equally discriminatory. The supposedly deserving sub-genre of sculpture can be treated as sacrificial because it is already seen as less important, leaving the centre unimpaired by new modes of thought. Debate around monuments celebrating the Confederacy, including when protesters remove monuments themselves when authorities have been tardy, makes discussion around figurative sculptures and public commissions complex, almost impossible in today's political climate. The suppression of debate registers even more because the best and most elaborate Confederate monuments are rife with unconventional imagery that undermines the certainties of Darwinism and neoliberalism and the near-universal confirmation of 'winning' and 'success' in the present day. Taking down these sculptures removes the public presence of unpredictable, non-standard content. At the same time, the virtually unanimous condemnation by scholars of such statues as abhorrent political symbols indicates how difficult it remains for aesthetic and art historical practices to embrace nineteenth- and twentieth-century figurative sculpture as aesthetic entities in their own right. The creative, technical and emotional aspects of a public monument are nonexistent in the face of the political and social oppression that monuments now are assumed to exert. Any ideational and visual potential is now erased, a highly reductionist and simplistic point to arrive at. Whilst fluid and accessible, Deborah Beck's biography of Rayner Hoff unfolds against an increasingly uncomfortable and acrimonious global context for public memorials and portrait sculptures—both of

which were important threads of Hoff's output—that renders the reception and reading of the book far more complex than it would have been even a few years ago. Never losing its moral footings, Beck's life narrative unfolds somewhat within an audacious inflexion as she takes her subject on face value, places him and his work at centre stage and narrates events and chronologies rather than drill down into politics and coded meanings. She prioritises her subject and his art above contemporary means of reading, relying upon the testimony and documents of his era to inform her narrative and facilitate her interpretation.

Beck's biography is both accessible in tone and impeccably comprehensive in its coverage. It matches the well-crafted literary nonfiction that is the staple of British and North American publishing industry, whereas Australian biographical and history texts tend to cluster at the far ends of the spectrum: direct, conservative narratives written often by ex-journalists and formal, thesis/argument-based academic publications, which prioritise issues rather than the lived experience and often are dense and austere. General readers will find Beck's prose clear yet rich and engaging, capturing ideas and events in evocative, but never forced and overwrought, imagery. The reader is swept along by a narrative that is as warm and direct as creative writing. Nor does Beck engage in self-aggrandising technical pyrotechnics to draw attention to her own skill set; instead, she keeps her subject and his wide range of colleagues always in the foreground.

The photographs, particularly the images of Hoff's studio and his many assistants, as well as images of lost works and family photographs, are a major resource. The images of work in progress open up the complexities of sculptural practice, and the intricacies of process and collaboration that were essential in producing the type of monumental public sculpture that was Hoff's speciality and is little understood beyond specialists within the sculptural history discipline. Beck makes good use of the oral history material collected by Deborah Edwards three decades or so ago, when many of Hoff's circle were still alive. She has also traced Hoff's early years in greater detail than hitherto outlined. Her treatment intersperses a life narrative with detailed thematic breakouts about particular aspects of Hoff's work.

Simultaneously, the narrative is rendered more complex by hints of an elusiveness about Hoff. Beck points out that the range of firsthand recollections reveal deep contradictions around Hoff's character and lifestyle. She outlines the divergences but does not second guess as to an ultimate judgement in light of insufficient evidence. Hoff was also enigmatic in that he was an unlikely figure to rise to social and cultural prominence in Sydney. He was born into a family of working-class artisans on the Isle of Man and could be a poster boy for the ideals of Morris and Ruskin, and Noel Hutchison too, exemplifying the inherent artistic abilities of the working classes. Concurrently, Hoff's career demonstrates how the 'new imperialism' of the

late nineteenth-century and pre–World War I era could offer unprecedented social mobility to white working-class men, and thus his story captures something of the loyalty that the system bought from its minor players.

Hoff's rise was spectacular, from provincial art school in Britain, to winning the Prix Du Rome and then travel out to Australia. Once arrived he not only single-handedly developed the sculptural department of the newly formed National Art School, with the help of his brother who also emigrated to Sydney, but also energised and consolidated the whole public face and reputation of the organisation, in effect becoming what is now known as a brand ambassador. Although he was recognised as talented, his early British career was patchy and troubled by disputes. He did not initially show much of the potential that would rapidly emerge once in Sydney. Hoff was charismatic and both staff at the National Art School and a wide range of Sydney professionals gravitated to him and supported his projects. Beck documents Hoff's wide range of contacts and his productive friendships that enriched Sydney art circles with frequent collaborations and shared projects. His intellectual cogency shows up the febrility of his colleague Norman Lindsay, although sharing similar pictorial imagery. The confident development of a distinctly individual identity in his oeuvre, the melding of art deco and early modernist stylisation onto British 'New Sculpture' style ornament and nuance, achieved with more dash than his contemporary Paul Montford in Melbourne, also is spectacular.

Equally, there is a thread of unexpected melancholy within the positivist framework due to the rapid dissipation of Hoff's achievements and fame after his sudden and premature death, despite the stellar heights that he reached. His wife and children sank into suburban anonymity, and the family never spoke much about him in later years, although unlike other families they did preserve documentary material. Many of his *in situ* commissions were lost in the 1960s and 1970s building boom in Sydney. Again one notes that sculpture that does not meet fashionable expectations is neither appreciated nor advocated for. Beck implicitly reproaches the deployment of short-term and superficial judgement and makes a plea for approaching the past without preset templates. Hoff's story offers ambiguity and ironies; if the sexual energy and polarities of his gender representations evokes the imagery of fascism, at the same time he encouraged his female students wholeheartedly, trained them thoroughly and offered them unexpected, unconventional opportunities, especially his prompting them to work in heroic scale, far removed from the inaccurate yet tenacious stereotype of women artists of the past being hobbyists and watercolourists. Sadly, with the exception of Barbara Tribe, most of his female students' careers subsided into domesticity with the increasingly social conservatism of the later 1940s and 1950s. During the 1920s and 1930s, Hoff's students produced a large oeuvre of ambitious sculptures, also well covered by Beck.

Although often assumed to be a conservative artist, Hoff produced some of the most directly articulated antiwar artworks seen in Australia prior to the era of the Vietnam War (apart from some remarkable works by Hilda Rix Nicholas). Again we are back at the irony whereby monumental sculptures are both erased as artworks and yet are supremely vulnerable to the comments and opinions of those who share public space with them. Large figurative groups were excluded from the finished design of the Shrine in Hyde Park, Sydney, due to their confronting imagery, hidden by the nominal excuse that they were too expensive to produce and install. They remain percipient and controversial. The sculptural group named as the *Crucifixion of Civilisation* (1932), a nude woman hanging limply from a cross made of armaments, with rubble, discarded weapons, mangled and wounded bodies at her feet, is particularly confronting and cuts across much popular Anzac mythology, even today, let alone in 1932. The protests driven by senior figures of the Catholic Church, that the sculpture was an insult to the Crucifixion and a Protestant conspiracy to alienate Catholics from the Shrine and deny their voice in public commemorations of the war dead, offer a powerful insight into the mindset of sectarianism and its influence on Australian public life. On the other hand the religious protests, like the issues of costs, also masked the uncomfortable nature of Hoff's implied reference to violence against women in both peacetime and in war. It remains unlikely that these works will ever be completed. Beck has long been a champion of these censored works and devotes particular attention to this core moment of Hoff's professional life, mustering unfamiliar visual and written sources. Whilst one can find obvious links to the imagery and energy of fascism in Hoff's art and also some public pronouncements, these sculptures are the antithesis of both fascist and imperialist/right wing symbolism and ideologies, and also directly confront attitudes about power, gender and patriotism that flourish today.

Beck's documentation of Hoff indicates how much is left out of the traditional, neat, Bernard Smith-derived Australian art history teleology of an evolution towards modernism that remains silent about the possibility that so-called 'conservative', and, therefore, sidelined artists, could make a valid contribution to cultural life in Australia. Few books on Australian art reach this position of critique of the characteristic silences and omissions of art historical constructs, or share the deft authority of Beck in setting out an alternative vision.

Today's public sphere is increasingly dominated by sloganeering, Twitter's brevity, the single punchline logic of memes and a belief that the refusal to compromise or offer concessions is a desirable sign of political and social integrity. When parties act as if positions can only be absolute and when feeling aggrieved becomes a mark of *virtu* and a licence to do and say anything with impunity, Deborah Beck's biography of Rayner Hoff offers a thoughtful and valid alternative to, and mild protest against, the rule of stereotype, generalisation and certainly. Concurrently she brings her subject vividly to life for her readers and intervenes on behalf of the Cinderella of the Arts.

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