

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES ARCHIVE BALNAVES FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN SCULPTURE ARCHIVE PROJECT

Interview with Lou Lambert 18 November 2014

This is an edited transcript of an interview with Lou Lambert on 18 November 2018 in Perth, Western Australia, by Deborah Edwards, senior curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, for the Balnaves Foundation Australian Sculpture Archive Project.

The project focuses on significant Australian sculptors and sculptural practice. It was developed with a grant from the Balnaves Foundation in 2010, which supported the recording and transcription of interviews with artists and other figures in Australian art.

About Lou Lambert

Lou Lambert (born 1941) is a respected sculptor in Australia and overseas. His largest commission is in Adachi City, Japan. He was an assistant to Phillip King in London in the 1970s, and taught at Perth Technical College and Curtin University.

This is an edited transcript of a recorded interview. Some adjustments, including deletions, have been made to the original as part of the editing process; however, the accuracy of all statements has not been verified and errors of fact may not have been corrected. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not represent those of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Unedited audio files of this interview are in the Gallery's archive.

Interview on 18 November 2014

[An introductory conversation includes references to sculpture triennials in Bundoora and Mildura and the Australian Sculpture Triennials]

Deborah Edwards (DE): Let's begin at the beginning, if you are happy with that. You were born in [the Perth suburb of] Subiaco in 1941. The reason for dealing with your early life and family context is to move towards an approximate date or time for when you decided to become an artist or a sculptor. So the underlying question is: when did you become interested in being an artist?

Lou Lambert (LL): In my youthful days the role of the artist as a painter or sculptor as a career didn't occur to me. Sculpture wasn't very well known or established, particularly in Western Australia, and my first introduction to sculpture was through a touring exhibition of British sculpture, I think called *British sculpture now*.

DE: 1961?

LL: Yes, around then. Barbara Hepworth, Kenneth Armitage, those kinds of sculptors.

DE: The post-World War II humanists?

LL: Yes, all of those. And a lot of the work was, I thought, very tight, very calculated.

DE: You were 20 then. What were you doing?

LL: I trained to be an art teacher.

DE: OK, so you already had a strong interest in being an artist or in art in high school?

LL: At primary school. I would always win the pencil on Friday afternoon. We had our serial of *Magic pudding* followed by a creative period. I always looked forward to it. Moulding with Plasticine – that was a real bonus for me. We modelled heads; I enjoyed that – the matter and the material, the focus. I cherished my box of coloured pencils! I think that was the start of it. And there is a link between that and gardening. I remember I used to help the neighbour growing roses, and there is something about that link with making marks and thinking and nature – and that pervaded my work as I developed an interest in making and sculpture.

The next stage in my interest in sculpture was at WAIT – the Western Australian Institute of Technology, which was the forerunner of Curtin University. One of the design units required us to make a three-dimensional translation of something organic, a nut or a fruit. This was all totally new for me. I had no preconceived ideas. I chose a stephanotis fruit. The idea was to analyse it and abstract it, and this introduction to abstraction I found fascinating. It was something between the intellectual, the abstraction, and paring down. I really liked that aspect of breaking down the stages of this form, of thinking about its origins. Anyway I made a sculpture. I didn't know a lot about sculpture; I hadn't had much exposure to it.

DE: So if you were studying to become an art teacher was that on the basis of your interest in drawing?

LL: Partly, but I came from a large family and things had been tough. I mentioned to you that my father had emigrated from Britain. He came back from the war and the family started from nothing, so you learn to be very resourceful.

DE: So it was important re your family situation that you were on a path that would be likely to give you a livelihood?

LL: Exactly. My parents had Victorian values of being practical but also planning for the future. I also needed to contribute to the running of the family. Given a choice I thought teaching would be OK, that I would like that. My preference would have been to be an architect, but there's a parallel between studying sculpture in the 1960s and 70s, where in architecture you almost had to do an apprenticeship in an architectural firm. My other interest was scrap metal. I wanted to be a scrap metal merchant. I was fascinated with the idea of accumulating all this junk. I liked the materiality of scrap, its variety, its history and its associations. I didn't have a strong business acumen, but the romance of being able to sift through this ...

DE: Can I just ask when you were at WAIT? You finished high school and then ...

LL: I went to Claremont Teachers College. That was formative in my interest in art. It was such a new unknown direction I was going in, a journey of discovery. It was very rich in the sense that we learnt different things – how to make stencils, print material, design, paint, make objects, a mixture.

DE: And the history of art? This was the early 1960s?

LL: Yes, and a strong diet of drawing from models and still life.

DE: Were there teachers there who were professional artists?

LL: It had well-established art teachers but the art teacher training was paralleled with an option to go to the Perth Technical College and that's where we had professional artists. We had some very good draughtsmen. People like Howard Taylor; he was on staff there at the Perth Technical College from the early 60s. It was when the formal issues, the mechanics of teaching as well as psychology, philosophy, were there – a bit like a watered-down experience of university. But the rich part was the opportunity to go to the tech college, and I loved painting and I loved drawing. Making sculpture was totally new to me and totally unknown. It's not too difficult to make marks on paper or to charge your brush with pigment but sculpture was a new discovery. And again we worked mostly from the figure.

DE: In such a context I guess you could either be grabbed by the three-dimensional or you could think, 'What is this about?' Art schools were conservative then too, weren't they?

LL: We learnt those formal basic sculpture processes, armature making, basic welding.

DE: Carving?

LL: No, we didn't do a lot. Predominantly a diet of modelling with clay, linked with drawing. A lot of issues were solved around the drawing. We had an exceptionally good lecturer in Hugh Child. I should add that 99 percent of the staff were from Britain so it was an offshoot of British traditional art school experience.

DE: Probably the Royal College of Art model.

LL: Indeed, and many lecturers had their early experiences in those British institutions. The very formal early days of modelling were great. I like making. Going back to the stefanotis – there is something between the making and the analysis, the challenge of thinking and imagination, that underwrites the whole experience of sculpture.

DE: Is there then a particular kind of intelligence you use when making sculpture?

LL: You can't define it or put a handle on it.

DE: Is it a form of contemplation?

LL: Yes, and it has a meditative element to it.

DE: By the early 1960s when doing these courses, you were beginning to think, 'I might be an art teacher who specialises in three-dimensional work'. When did you start to think, 'Teaching might be good but I want to be an artist'?

LL: Teaching fed the artist. I used teaching as a financial means of being able to pursue my love of art.

DE: As have generations of artists.

LL: So teaching enabled me to have that opportunity to be an artist, I guess, or to make sculpture, to follow that luxury, because it was a luxury.

DE: You finished your course and qualified as a teacher in what year?

LL: 1963, and then I went into high schools.

DE: So were you sent to Woop Woop?

LL: Initially I was a form master, teaching mainly English and maths which I really enjoyed.

DE: You could teach English, maths and art?

LL: Yes. My first teaching was about 70 percent English and maths and the rest art, but as the years went on and I established myself as a good art teacher, I really enjoyed offering kids experiences which were in lots of ways similar to the experiences I'd had, exposing them to discover, opportunities, possibilities.

DE: It's also a two-way street, isn't it?

LL: Sure, I used to feed off those young ideas as well.

DE: Teaching also, of course, takes away from the time that ultimately you would want to spend making art.

LL: Yes, especially in those early years. Just the marking was very time consuming. It's hard work to do it well and you can come home exhausted, which is not really the right frame of mind for creativity. I think I taught in high schools for eight years and then I applied to go to Perth Technical College as a staff member and I was selected. It was fantastic as it was competitive. I had spent three years in the country, in towns in wheat-belt country – two years in Narrogin and one year in Katanning.

DE: Were you a rebel at all in the 60s?

LL: I was pretty tame. I did a lot of surfing and I had motorbikes but ...

DE: So after three years in the country you came back to Perth.

LL: Yes.

DE: And the technical college was offering positions after a few years in the art department?

LL: Yes, and that was the year that the [Western Australian] Institute of Technology was established at Bentley, which was the forerunner to Curtin University, and they skimmed the best staff from Perth Technical over to the institute, leaving vacancies which I applied for. The technical college offered painting, sculpture and drawing, and a lot of part-time teaching for people who came in after work. The main focus was graphic design and my role for the seven to eight years I was there was to help coordinate the drawing program. In a given week the full-time students would have 16 hours of drawing, which was quite amazing, but sadly over the years it was whittled down and then became 14 hours, then 12, and these days Curtin University – which is a very similar pattern to other Australian universities – has the expectation that drawing is worked into your major area. It has almost disappeared as a discipline.

DE: When you were teaching in the country were you making sculptures?

LL: Yes.

DE: What kinds of sculpture? Wood seems to have been intrinsic to your practice for a long time, or were you welding?

LL: No, very expedient forms of materials like papier-mâché. I use a lot of it. It is a very quick, expedient way of arriving at a finished idea, a work in itself. Because I was transient in the country, I didn't make large works. I also made works out of found forms – bones, pods etc.

DE: An assemblage practice? From the beginning?

LL: I enjoyed the modelling experience, the traditions of that, but I like bringing together, pulling apart, the challenge and the thinking involved in different materials – pods, bones, paper – I could fairly immediately play with them.

DE: Not figurative-based?

LL: No, never. Obviously there was a diet of life-drawing and modelling at art school but, no, I wasn't excited about that. I actually made a work, about 40 centimetres high, which was very significant in that it was my first serious sculpture, where I took on the challenge of analysing and making decisions about how I would go about abstracting the form, its essence, using expedient materials which suited the idea that developed – in that case, it was papier-mâché, balsa and wire. And I still have that work; it's very precious and significant in a way. It goes back to somewhere between the intellectual challenge – probing into your own sense and ability to see and make decisions, discover – and fusing all this together with some kind of tangible, convincing, three-dimensional idea.

DE: Did that come with a spiritual dimension? For many earlier artists there were very important cosmologies or spiritual systems underlying their creative practices. For Frank Hinder's generation, it was theosophical and anthroposophical ideas; for Robert Klippel, more about Zen Buddhism – a journey of the self, involving self-realisation. And I assume you are also finding out about contemporary art as well through various magazines?

LL: Yes, we mentioned yesterday *Art International*.

DE: Would you have been reading those in the country? Early on?

LL: No, I used to go to the state library in Perth to read them. That paralleled my early interest in sculpture. I became very interested in natural organic structures – the Fibonacci series, which is perhaps an obvious direction but was perhaps a way of giving some sort of, not direction, but ...

DE: The notion of 'abstracting from' nature and the natural world and the idea of paring down to an essence are quite firmly attached to certain philosophies of the 20th century, don't you think? There was a lot around about underlying systems.

LL: That spiritual ... framework; no, not a framework, it's more subjective. The mathematics of naturally occurring structures I got really deeply into, and that became a vehicle in a way for teaching myself or discovering ways of finding myself.

DE: So sculpture is both a creative and a rational way in which to work? Just like architecture?

LL: Sure, I think I used the rational, the analytical, formalist abstraction, that seeking and translating into ... It's been a long evolution of myself. I started using those very formalist, subtractive, analytical, structural means as a way of articulating or developing a vocabulary, as a way of expressing yourself, your thinking, your spirit. And I can see now, thinking back from those early student days to the path I've followed, that I've grown through those stages to the point now where I like to think the work I am doing is about myself, it's about the environment in which I work. I spend a lot of time in the landscapes or in marinescapes, and there is something about distilling feelings and your observations of the environment and your feelings about yourself into the work.

DE: It sounds like you established the core of these things very early on – the attachment to the natural works, for example.

LL: And I feed off that.

DE: But, at the same time, a lot of artists in the 60s were throwing all of that up in the air, with conceptualism. You were working through decades of enormous debate about sculpture but you are completely anchored in the real and in your relationship to the environment. In the 60s did you have to make larger decisions about what kind of sculptor/artist you were going to be? The framework for being an artist was beginning to disintegrate in this decade.

LL: Yes, I think conceptual attitudes contributed to bringing that about.

DE: Did you also look at *Artforum* and other contemporary magazines?

LL: *Flash Art* was a bit later, almost parallel to conceptualism. Yes, all of them, but can I go across to Phillip King? I should get onto that tack because it has some interesting associations.

DE: OK. You were at Perth Technical College around 1971, 72, 73, 74, and it was in the midst of that time you decided you wanted to go and work with Phillip King?

LL: Yes, just prior to that I accessed lots of opportunities with machines, with being able to play with lots of rollers and presses, using planar elements and making very simple combinations of intersecting planes, and juxtaposing these and then playing with colour, and I got interested in people like Ellsworth Kelly and I could see ways of transposing some of those exciting elements and qualities that some of those American painters of the time were

achieving, sideways, into three dimensions, with steel, with colour, and I think this must have been one of the aspects of Phillip King's work that appealed to me, and I heard that he was coming to Australia via the British Council and the Australia Council, touring various parts of the country, including Perth, in 1975. I went to some of the talks he gave. He was a very thinking person. I will leave that there for a moment.

One of the organisers brought Phillip up to Helene and my property, where I had a big workshop. I had a lot of ideas spread across the floor. Phillip made the comment that he liked the way I thought and said, 'But I think I've seen some work made in a similar idiom' [laughs]. One concedes that! That's OK. You are emerging, you are out there trying to find yourself in a way, you glean aspects and attitudes that appeal to you and you fuse them, and reject and add.

DE: These are the decades when Australian artists turn very strongly to America to see what their artists are doing.

LL: And we were on the fringe of an international overview of contemporary art, of the modernist movement. People like Clement Greenberg, who was very influential, very powerful.

DE: Did you read much of Greenberg?

LL: Yes, yes, and when I went to England he was looked upon as being almost like a god.

DE: Still? In the mid 1970s? That's interesting. He came out to Sydney in 1968 and had as many enemies as acolytes when he spoke then, but he was very clever.

LL: I remember the power of his writing, but a lot of it was very precious too, I thought.

DE: On another subject, has your partner been a real support to you in your practice as a sculptor?

LL: I met Helene, my wife, in the early 1970s. She had been my sweetheart. She is a beautiful woman. We are yin and yang. We are a very strong combination, I suppose. Very different in our artistic makeups but we have enormous respect for our different outputs. She has been amazingly supportive of me. I sometimes think I have been spoiled. I've been dominant, not in my expectations but in my pursuit of sculpture. But I actually met her at Perth Technical College. I was a staff member and she was a student.

Phillip King wrote and invited me to come to work as an assistant in London in 1976. So I asked Helene if she would like to come and so we went for two years. The arrangement with King was very much like the Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore arrangement in the sense that you came and it was an honorary [not paid] position. And you know what they said about Barbara Hepworth – you had to be prepared to hop into bed with her.

DE: Yes [laughs].

LL: Like Ron [Robertson-]Swann working as an assistant to Henry Moore. It was on the same basis that I worked for King, in the sense that you worked really hard and were totally focused on the master's work. You were a lackey, a labourer in a sense.

DE: Did he have large commissions you were meant to assist him with?

LL: Not so much then. It was more towards the end of my stay that he was getting those commissions. But what I like about the early Phillip King ... well, I knew I really liked the way

he thought. He was a thinking person. He was a transcendental meditator and there lay a very important part of his psyche or whatever, and it permeated his daily work pattern. We used to work at Whipsnade. We used to drive out from London. He had an old converted cowshed on a big farm that he rented. Phillip liked to make the going tough, with the idea that it brought out the best in you. We used to work in the bitter cold.

DE: You lived in London? You found digs?

LL: I lived with my uncle and we used to drive out, on the M1. It was frightening as a rule, with sleet and big trucks in six lanes travelling north. Phillip's attitude was that if he made it tough, it brought out the best in you. So we had dismal lighting, and it was freezing cold. Invariably we would have to shovel away the compacted snow from the cowshed double doors to get access, but he had some interesting philosophies, very important for me, which I learnt a lot from. You know how he used to use a lot of disparate elements. He had an analogy that it was like a child going to the kitchen cupboards and pulling all the things out and playing and building with them and coming up with an idea – that mental process. In any given day, we would be working on one of his sculptures during the day, and then at 5pm he would go out and meditate, sit in his car in the freezing cold, snowing, and he would meditate for about an hour – half an hour of formal meditation and then ease himself out of that state – and he would come back inside, warm, glowing, full of energy, and we would invariably tear apart what we had done in the day. There was a parallel with what he encouraged me to do.

If you had an idea, these disparate elements you have brought together, then you think, 'I don't like this', well, what you do is you pull it apart, almost to the point of non-existence, and then bring it back together again. You couldn't be self-satisfied with a particular configuration or idea, it had to reveal itself as being the ultimate expression of that idea or that combination of elements. And it was frightening. I would leave London at 8am in the morning and we'd work till 7pm – long, long days.

DE: And only you with him?

LL: Yes, and the thousands of mice. It was tough, he was tough, he was tough on himself, his conditions were tough. It made for good art.

DE: I understand the idea of wanting to test your piece, because you can deceive yourself.

LL: I think in a way he carried that a little too far, but it was good for me because I actually do that now. It's very pedantic probably but I like to work in what I call a phase. I can look back over my work and see the phase. If I have a direction or an idea, I like to push it in as many permeations as I can. I like to start off with a fairly organised, clear workspace and I'll start on this idea, no maquettes, no drawings. By making a maquette, to my mind, you have travelled the journey and so making the large one you run the risk of going back over the same trail, the same experience, and it's hard to make a convincing translation from the small to the large.

Going back to Phillip. If you had a piece of board and two pieces of metal and you are wanting to bring them together somehow, you don't go and learn how to weld. You arrive at the need to fix these two together and then go to weld. If you learn to weld first, it pre-empts it. On the one hand, there was this idealistic ... there is a righteousness about it, and I used to think, 'Yes, I know where you are coming from', but I also thought there might be some baloney in it. On the other hand, the idea of not experiencing a process before you need it because it denies you that opportunity to discover is interesting. Then, on the other hand, having the idea and wringing its neck, pulling it apart until it's non-existent. He used to say

that if that had been the ultimate expression of the idea, it would reveal itself again – and I found that very difficult.

DE: It would be hard to have complete faith in such a [destructive] process.

LL: What I gleaned from that: if I have an idea or a direction, I like to exhaust the possibilities and I do that by having three, four, five permutations or translations or developments and I run them concurrently. You get stuck on one idea, you can go on to another one. The strength of that is that I know that not only is it an exciting journey, it's the way of getting the best out of yourself; it heightens the challenge, that intellectual thinking, interpreting the idea or experience, using material. In my case, I use a lot of references from landscape. I spend a lot of time in the Pilbara and the Kimberley. I like to think they are not prescriptive, I like to think of the references as clues.

DE: They are not literal in any way, are they? But there are associations. There is an organicism in your work, isn't there? Notwithstanding that you use geometric elements, mesh and sheets of metal, a different system you can put against your wood or stone.

LL: You are speaking very much of that 1980s and 90s period in my work, and I think I have moved away from that.

DE: OK, though what about *Currawong*?

LL: That may be an exception, that work, in that it does hark back to the early 1990s. I was aware of it but I wasn't sure whether I should be apologetic about that, but I have moved away from it. I think *Sculpture by the Sea* has had an impact on that. [Lambert has exhibited numerous times at this annual outdoor exhibition held in the beachside suburbs of Bondi in Sydney and Cottesloe in Perth.] A couple of works I had at Cottesloe and Bondi ... I had in the back of my mind that I had the desire to make a work striving for individuality. This is what Phillip King was very much on about. I think every artist likes to think that his work has an individuality about it, and *Sculpture by the Sea* has encouraged me to make works that look like they could have washed up on the beach, sculpture on the beach, without being too literal about it.

There is no way I could make an object and then just take it to Bondi and then say, 'This is my sculpture'. Its prescription is that it is part of me and my current thinking. Hopefully it has elements of life. The viewer could see it as something that has links with aspects of marine life perhaps or something to do with landscape or a fusion between the two; that it has presence; it has its own dynamics; that you can't just read it in a particular way; that it reflects my process of making the work. I often throw in a red herring. *Currawong* [exhibited at the 2014 *Sculpture by the Sea*] did have a bird on it. There is a controversy about it. You know the currawong, but it varies from state to state. Ours [in Western Australia] looks like a raven. There is something I like about the currawong. It's a thief, an opportunist, it's resourceful. And this sculpture I was making for Bondi didn't have a title and I like to have a title. Often I give works absolutely meaningless titles, not necessarily any link with the work. Anyway, one morning I got up very early and thought I would get a fig off the fig tree – I had been waiting to get this fig – and I went out and a currawong whizzed past and took it! So I thought, OK, I will name my work 'Currawong'. I made a currawong with the usual materials – paper, wire, plaster – and forged copper legs. It was a really beautiful bird; it looked terrific. People kept referring to it as a dead parrot! But the final decision was that I watched people looking at the work and I thought I don't want to lose that bird as people respond to it. But I took the bird off the *Sculpture by the Sea* work and I brought it home. I liked the idea of making a work that was appropriate to that [Bondi] environment. I've gone through phases with nests and birds with that ...

DE: Wouldn't you describe your work as anchored in wanting to speak about a natural environment?

LL: Yes, sure, and you can see how it has those links going right back, that common thread. I like also to think that I've managed to overlay something of myself, of my own experience – not a literal translation, but clues.

DE: I wanted to ask you about the notion of individuality and innovation. In relation to contemporary times, they are post-modern in the sense that there isn't the same interest, for example, in the modernist notion that art was progressive and individual, and that the artist aimed to 'make it new' each time in the work. Now with the interest in quoting, and of artists raking the past and also working in pseudo-modernist modes, I'm interested to know if you have changed the modernist precepts of your art in these post-modernist decades?

LL: I am still essentially a constructivist. I have to acknowledge that, and I've got to pay heed to the fact that I am still following the same prescription of resourcing nature, with a very organic outcome. I think the choice of material, the desire to bring together disparate elements, disparate materials into a oneness, which hopefully allows multiple translations or interpretations from the viewer, that the viewer can bounce off responses to material or the way it's used, or the combinations of materials, or the contradictions. Some of the influences of the early Phillip King days, where there was some kind of narrative. One strives to try and create an opportunity for ... There is a narrative but you can't spell it out. There is an abstraction of a narrative. Does that make sense?

DE: Yes, entirely. Was it important to you as you were maturing that you were creating sculptures of your own time? Perhaps once you attached yourself to the natural world, you lost that sense of a time-specific art, but for a lot of artists in the 60s it was about making art which was entirely appropriate to the times. Artists start to deal with electronics, for example.

LL: No, never on my mind. I make work for myself, of myself, no rules.

DE: One writer suggested that the relationships that are fairly constant in your work between open and solid, transparent and heavy forms might also have related to the time you were with Phillip King. I'm not sure about that.

LL: That sounds very formalist. Perhaps my work of the 1980s could have some of those attitudes attributed to them. It sounds as though one is almost working to a formula – positive/negative, heavy/light. That's not the way I have worked.

DE: When you were there with King, how many days did you work?

LL: Four days, and one day at St Martins. I must tell you, we talked about St Martins and Anthony Caro, going back to the mid-late 70s when we were in London. I went there in 1976, was there in 1977, and most of 1978. When I came back, they headhunted me for a job at Curtin University which was great, so I then became a contracted half-time lecturer and I could pursue my own sculpture-making. I had this fantastic opportunity where I could work, teach, enjoy the challenge of working with young people, springboarding off young ideas, playing my ideas to them, and supporting our family. Helene and I had two boys.

Back in London, we would rock up on a Thursday morning [at St Martins] and go in different directions – 14 to 18 max students, from all around the world, wildly competitive, they already all had their own formal experience in their own country. I mentioned Michael and Ron [Robertson-Swann] being students when I was there. Caro was the guru. He really structured St Martins. It had that link between David Smith in the States, Clement Greenberg. But there was a lot of envy – horrible. It was almost gladiatorial [laughs]. I think I

mentioned a crit [criticism] session. The pattern was that you would work and the staff and guest lecturers would just move around and help, chat to the students, observe and make suggestions, totally informal. But Phillip's wife Lilian [Odelle] used to say the crit session was deadly. People would be tearful, desperate.

I talked yesterday about Phillip and I was likening part of my experience with my father being an artisan, in a way. He was a coach builder for Rolls Royce. He used to do all of the master drawings, with a team, then go into the woodshop where they would make a beech wooden skeleton, then into the metal shop where they would hand-roll zinc sheet using amazing skills, and that was then the end of his role. But as a kid I was exposed to many of his attitudes concerning excellence and the hands-on of making things, that one had to get it right.

DE: Where are you placed in the family?

LL: I'm third out of six. Going back to Phillip. His view was if you couldn't do it yourself, then it can't be done. That was very loud and clear.

DE: But wasn't he getting things fabricated?

LL: That was more after I left. You know *Rosebud*. He made *Rosebud* using linoleum, pulling it around. I thought that a terrific abstraction. And then he got it fabricated in steel and so on. That was the start of farming out work, that was acceptable in his terms. Lots of sculptors these days are ideas-based. They just prescribe the work and get it made.

DE: Yes, but has there also been a swing back?

LL: With the advent of the laser and cutting processes, there has been a spate of work which is a form of decorative skin. I actually find a lot of that nauseating. It might be OK on a building, but Phillip King has gone a full circle now and is farming all work out. It is a complete change. When I was in London it was very common to have a guest lecturer at St Martins which people came from miles away to hear. Some of them were terrific. Peter Fuller came out.

DE: Peter Fuller, the critic, who died in a car-crash?

LL: Yes, very smart and very arrogant. I went to that talk in London and he made some assertions which were totally erroneous and I couldn't help myself; there were crowds of people, but I got up. He made reference to Phillip King – that Phillip King had stacks of matchboxes with drawings on them – and I thought, 'Come on mate, that's bullshit'. He was very important.

DE: He was very smart and very divisive, I think.

LL: I had a sense that there was conflict of opinion between him and Clement Greenberg.

DE: Did you know about Michael Fried? British. He was an acolyte of Clement Greenberg's and then changed camps. He wrote a book called *Art and objecthood*.

LL: No, perhaps I should get that to read.

DE: But you were getting around with a group of important British sculptors at the time.

LL: Yes, and I don't mind admitting I was lost. I went to London looking for excitement and opportunity and I didn't know what I was doing in that sense. I knew I wanted to make

sculpture, and I knew I wanted to think, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had been following fairly formal constructivist idioms.

DE: Had you exhibited by the time you went to London?

LL: There was a West Australian Sculptors Association. There was a group of us.

DE: And you joined when?

LL: Late 60s, early 70s, and we had several shows at Forrest Place [a public square in Perth]. We used to do things like get permission from the railways to get some railway sleepers dumped, say, near Grass Valley, north, and we would all descend there for a weekend and have a good time, just making and playing. We did the same with a big project up at Yanchep for a resort and we all carved forms out of limestone; it was terrific. And then down to the Donnybrook sandstone quarry. They gave us access to some stone and we went down weekend after weekend, carving.

In London I was looking for new horizons. I don't mean that I was lost, in that I didn't have any confidence. What I was getting at was what I experienced with Phillip King was a little bewildering. I had to stand back and process so many challenges in a way, so many processes, and these guys from St Martins. I was going to mention one of the other sculptors who went to Tokyo, Barry Flanagan, the sculptor of hares, but he withdrew for some reason.

DE: Did you know about Eduardo Paolozzi?

LL: I liked Gonzalez. Last year [2012] I was the recipient of a Helen Lempriere scholarship. I used it to go to Europe, to Barcelona and the south of France, just following a history trail.

[Break in interview]

In London I wanted to find out what I really wanted to do. I was aware in London that I was following a tradition, certain ideas about how to make sculpture that I didn't necessarily want to follow or do.

DE: I remember Mike Kitching saying to me that he felt he wanted to up-end tradition in his work until he went to Europe and then he was overwhelmed by the traditions of art and thought it ridiculous to attempt to break from that.

LL: I look upon Mike Kitching as a bit of a pioneer, in the sense of him being able to marry art and science in a way. I love some of that early work where you have Perspex, light, metal, whatever, and the practicality of the idea and the impracticality of the materials together.

DE: Why did you decide to come back from London after two years?

LL: Well, I think I thought that two years with Phillip King was long enough.

DE: You parted on good terms?

LL: Yes, though he was a tyrant [laughs]. He was 56 when I was about 30. But also Helene was very homesick and wanted to come back. Two years was a good frame.

DE: And so had you resolved where you wanted to go by the time you left?

LL: No, no, I hadn't.

DE: Had you made works that those various sculptors had given you criticisms of?

LL: Yes! The arrangement with Phillip was that I would work for him for four days and he would give me a corner of the studio or workspace to do my thing whenever there was a chance, though there was rarely any chance, so I used to go up there on the weekends, when he wasn't there. The other good thing working with Phillip was that he was getting some commissions. We travelled around the countryside installing work. We went to Liverpool; there was a big commission there. Interesting, in lots of ways, I was a real boon to Phillip because I could weld. He tried to weld but he was a very poor welder. But I knew how to weld. I used to upset him. I would cut forms with an oxy-torch which were perfect, which intrigued him as he couldn't do it.

DE: I think you come from a long line of Australian sculptors who were very much valued by British sculptors as assistants for their practical skills.

LL: So I did a lot of installations for him. We went up to Wales. I made a few trips up to Wales, to the slate quarries. It had some adventure to it. But, as I say, I came back to Australia determined to shed that formalist skin I had around me, that cloak of prescriptive, modernist, constructivist element – although as I have said to you I am still a constructivist, although perhaps more disguised now – and to be able to have the luxury of having an idea and being able to move it, to thrash it, to get the best out of myself.

I think you would probably be aware that over the years it creeps into my work. There was a phase in the 1990s where my work was derived from time I spent in the Pilbara, where I took lots of casts from rock faces during the wet [season]. The deluge used to grind paths down these granite slopes, beautifully organic water paths, and I made some positives out of those. I also like using forms, objects that I come across that are strong in themselves and become a challenge. I have a form at home now that I've had for 30-odd years and I am just about to take some moulds of it, which is a roundabout way of using it but I like to use [it] often, though I don't see myself as a found-object sculptor.

DE: But you do scavenge around?

LL: No, but I used to. I'm looking forward to showing you some images of my favourite works, where I have used carved material, elements I have made myself as part of the concept, married with or fused or worked in with the found form, which I refer to as 're-appropriated' – something that had a life as a functional thing, I've now taken it and given it a new context. I went through a stage of liking to do that. That big work at Bondi, that was a big conveyor cable that I bought from a scrap dealer, and I thought how linear, how visually strong it was, and I wondered what would happen if I unraveled those. With *Currawong* you can read it as having some very organic elements or some sort of sexual activity. A lot of people have said that: that there is a sense of inner penetration. There are also references to water paths, and there is a lot of that in my work, and you can see obvious parallels with life, or it could be a source of energy, or membranes.

DE: Just a couple of practical questions. I have seen that you got an Australia Council grant in 1973. How did that come about?

LL: 1973? No, the time is wrong for that. It was before I went to London. It was an artist assistance grant. That was in the days of Rie Heymans. Rie Heymans was on the board of the Australia Council. She was the curator of the Lawrence Wilson Gallery before. There was an opportunity for assistance and you applied. She came up to visit me, and I

remember her commenting that I was the only person working when she came. I bought that property in 1972.

DE: How far away?

LL: About 22 kilometres due east of Perth.

[Break in interview]

LL: I went to the Western Australia Institute of Technology in 1979.

DE: And who did you teach there?

LL: Second year, third year and post-graduates. That was a great experience. There were five of us, five very different sculptors but we used to get together and work out a broad structure to satisfy the administration.

DE: Who headed up the department?

LL: Terry New, who had trained at the Royal College [of Art in London], and another Englishman from London, Chris Heyring.

DE: Did it become the pre-eminent centre of sculpture teaching in Western Australia?

LL: Yes, it was. It was terrific. Terry New only stayed for two to three years. His wife was hopelessly homesick so he went back to London. But what was good about it was that it identified the richness of different inputs. We were all active artists. We hadn't come up through the system of seniority or institutional support, and that laid a foundation to a very strong sculpture school. Also parallel with that was a very good painting department. John Beard was there as head of painting.

[Break in interview]

LL: In the early 1980s, say 1981–82, Tony Bond was in Perth, or maybe it was 1979–80. John Beard came over in 1982, early 83. He used to show with Eileen Chanin at Macquarie Galleries and used to send works over with the painting still wet. I liked that guy, he was a breath of fresh air in the painting department.

DE: And you were attracting good students?

LL: Yes, and it was a very rich teaching and learning experience, well-structured, broad, an open experience for students. It wasn't too prescriptive.

DE: How long did you do that for?

LL: I guess I did that for three years under Terry New and then after he left David Jones came in. He was a West Australian who had been at the Royal College as a post-graduate student. He came back and headed up the school, and with his leadership, he fragmented that structure we had established and it became a very conceptual course. There have been some high-achieving graduates from that era but ...

DE: So did you stay on?

LL: Yes, but not for very long.

DE: There are a lot of colleges now that are promoting traditional skills.

LL: Also paralleling that was performance art, site-specific work. I didn't believe in a lot of that.

DE: When did it change from the Western Australian Institute to the School of Fine Arts, Curtin University?

LL: I think around 1978–79.

DE: So when you left did you become a sculptor full-time?

LL: I was actively showing my work in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne.

DE: When did you have your first solo [exhibition]?

LL: That was with Kym Bonython. I also showed with Ann Lewis, Gallery A in Sydney, and also with Macquarie Galleries. And in Melbourne I showed with Gore Street, and at Stuart Gerstman Galleries, and with the first two or three of the [Australian] Sculpture Triennials. [Lambert was in the second triennial at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1984–85 and the fourth at Preston Institute of Technology in 1990.] And I will admit to searching for those opportunities. There was a focus and a challenge with those, to find a home for some of my work which would then make it possible to keep on going. It wasn't long after returning from England that I was away, rocketing ahead. I knew what I wanted to do. And then in 1992 I left Curtin University.

DE: So you were teaching under David Jones until 1992? And you were selling well?

LL: Yes, but I have never been a prolific producer. I could knock out a lot of work if I wanted to but I haven't. There are some guys who are producing very formulaic works. I know I am categorising and labelling. There is a pattern of farming out work; you are still a sculptor.

DE: You have never had assistants then with your work.

LL: No, no assistants. Having left Curtin University, the same year I got that commission in Tokyo, and that stretched through 1993.

DE: Was that the first time you had been to Japan?

LL: Yes. I had had work in Saitama, at the large gallery there [the Museum of Modern Art].

DE: How did that come about?

LL: One of the curators at Queensland Art Gallery got a show together of painters and sculptors [*Painters and sculptors: diversity in contemporary Australian art*] – Michel Sourgnès. He liked my work, marked a particular piece that he wanted exhibited and it went over. It was apparently a very successful exhibition, and that was partially contributory to it being selected for the Tokyo commission. It was an amazing opportunity that I was selected as the Australian participant. It was a large commission. It was so well timed, and it really cemented the animosity at the school.

DE: What did you call it? It was sited on an old foundry, wasn't it?

LL: Yes, I was in a residential area which was within an industrial complex, typical of Japan, in Adachi. The idea was to give a sense of fresh air to this hopelessly intense domestic area;

it was very crowded. So the foundry was purchased and the factory demolished. It was a large area of land, like a very large football oval.

DE: Did you make the maquette before or after you had been chosen? And can you describe the work?

LL: No, I was selected first. I had sent via the agent – a gallery director in Cottesloe [Marlene Stafford] – a set of images and was chosen from them. Then I made a maquette. I was very unsure. It was an open-ended brief, but no wood. It was an amazing budget – 20 million yen, which translated into AUD\$200,000. We had been spending a lot of time in the Pilbara and I decided I would like to make a grandiose work, indulgent in terms of scale and material, but to use experiences and ideas from wanderings in the landscape. So I used outlines of particular mountain forms which I really liked, ideas of walking inland from the coast and looking back and seeing sections of the ocean, that sense of poise and float, of a completely different quality, the organic nature of the mountain forms, water associating life and the flow of ideas – which appealed to the Japanese. I had to put the work into a context for them, and I used some of the water paths, the gouged sections of the granite I mentioned earlier that were created in the rains. The debris gouged out these amazingly organic paths and I actually cast some negatives from that and used them in the work. I made the sculpture partly in Melbourne, partly in Fremantle, utilising technology of heating copper tube and pulling it in different directions to get very organic curves, reminiscent of some of the mountain forms. And then transporting those back to Fremantle, filling them with inert material for rolling. We transformed them from a predictable symmetrical circular profile to a tapering ovoid, a lucid element which ultimately touched the ground at one point but largely floated, and was subjected to the wind. It was big enough for the wind to make it subtly move. There was an implied water path going through this backbone of steel, and then a floating offset triangular slab of stainless steel that was linked to that ocean block that I mentioned earlier, and then a circular trough, about five to six metres in diameter, and running through a cast bronze trough, which was a translation from one of these rock paths. I used a submersible pump to pump water up from that and it overflowed at one end into this circular trough so it had this perpetual life and motion. But the water was very, very beautiful; the sound of the water falling into the trough was quite beautiful. Two vertical slabs of quartz rock formed a pair of markers.

DE: Have you made any works with water since this time?

LL: Yes, I have made a big work for the [Western Australian] government in East Perth at the Advanced [Manufacturing Technologies] Centre [at the TAFE in the early 1990s]. While I tend to transpose the landscape, it looks like elements of landscape, materials you would associate with the Pilbara, but I brought it into a very manicured grass area. And using the idea that I had in Japan, of twin slabs of stone, layered – not a laterite, but very quartz-like – I managed to site the pair of these so that when you are approaching the sculpture from one direction, it lights up with the flow of water, so it has a very spiritual feel to it.

DE: Was the path opened up for you after Japan for commissions? Is there a work on James Street, Perth?

LL: No, there was a work entitled *James Street*, but it was made of wood, and probably doesn't exist anymore. Like I mentioned to you yesterday, I find commissions very difficult in the sense that I can get on a shortlist ... For example, there was a big centennial work for Mundaring Shire, which would have been a great opportunity to use a Fibonacci spiral of lateritic stone, encouraging the viewer to walk up, and three very beautiful granite slabs, nearly five metres high. I managed to drill holes up through the centre. The idea was to cascade water down the faces of these slabs. I got on the shortlist, then I got the commission and then the shire executive couldn't come to terms with money being spent on

art. I retracted from that. It was very hurtful. And since then there has been a succession of percent for art schemes through government.

DE: We seemed to have that in New South Wales for a number of years. I think it was a designated two percent of the building costs but that scheme seems to have evaporated.

LL: It's one percent over here. I made a comment yesterday that I don't think that commissions like this bring out the best in the artist, that a sculptor doesn't necessarily do his best work under those conditions. I was very disheartened when I'd get on the shortlist, then be confronted by the selection panel, quizzed, and then someone invariably would suggest that there could be a maintenance issue with the water etc. So I don't go in for them anymore. I'd rather go hungry [laughs].

DE: It is one of the critical problems that sculptors have had to face and, for contemporary artists, I don't think there is the same kind of commission field in any event. I agree that sculptors don't always produce their best work under such commissions, but on the other hand it is commissions which often provide the sculptor with the capacity to produce their most ambitious work. You could not have created the Japanese sculpture, for example.

LL: Sure.

[End]