



The Syndicate

ten life-size sculptures

by Simon Gilby

## syn-di-cate

[n. sin-di-kit; v. sin-di-keyt] noun, verb, -cat-ed, -cat-ing.

from the Latin word *syndicus* which in turn comes from the Greek word *σύνδικος* (*syndikos*) which means caretaker of an issue.

**noun:** a group of individuals or organizations combined or making a joint effort to undertake some specific duty or carry out specific transactions or negotiations.

**verb:** to sell shares in, or offer participation in the financial sharing of (a risk venture, loan, or the like).

## THE SYNDICATE

### Letter from the artist

*The Syndicate* exhibition is an installation of ten individual figures which hint at having interlocking relationships.

This exhibition was supported by a unique project of syndicated sponsorship. The works presented here were purchased before the works had begun, with payments made progressively during their creation. This allowed me to work pretty much exclusively on this body of work free of the demands of other income pursuits. Unlike public art, there was no real design brief. I claimed complete creative control, promising only that the works would be life-size figures and they would be the best work I could produce.

The project began with an invitation to speculate. While visiting Ron Wise at his Eagle Bay winery, where I had made a commissioned work ten years earlier, Ron asked, "What should we do next, Simon? If you could do anything right now, what would you want to do?"

I explained that I wanted to scale-up my sculptures for an installation of about ten life-size works and to see if I could get them to work at that scale. I was basically whingeing and blaming my failure to realise this on a lack of resources. This, of course, gave no quarter regarding my own artistic capabilities, but this kind of whingeing is normally a pretty safe bet.

Ron immediately suggested gathering a group of interested buyers of these ten works and

have them pay the artist direct, as each quarter was completed<sup>†</sup>. Having provided this crystal vision, the baton was promptly handed to Lloyd Horn, who meticulously project-managed the whole thing with his inherent and unfading good grace.

A meeting was held at Ron and Sandra's that had interested parties listen to me scope out the idea and show my previous work; talking of the ideas I have previously pursued and how they might relate to the anticipated work.

After this meeting, the ten 'shares' were taken up by the invited parties, agreements drafted and signed. Terms were reiterated and I came away with my usual excuses extinguished and a completely open brief for a concentrated, experimental, artistic endeavour.

Backed by an extraordinary bank of goodwill, trust and generosity from people – most of whom I had never met or hardly knew – I began what was to become 'The Syndicate Project'.

This project has blown-out by about a year and with the usual limitations banished, a vacillation between perfectionism and plain self doubt occupied way too much of that time. But what it did do was allow me to create work where



there was no fast-tracking, with all options and speculations to some extent explored.

My art practice holds the hand-making and craft central to its *raison d'être*, and this allowed ideas to be actually investigated in the making, including the luxury of casting off elaborate failures despite the time and materials expended. In short it was an extraordinary indulgence, the result of which is this exhibition.

This work, though made by me, owes the greater debt of its actual creation to the Syndicate members and chiefly Lloyd Horn.

From the beginning this project was intended to be ongoing, changing the artist and the syndicate members. The one thing I hope doesn't change is the completely open brief and the uncensored pursuit of the artist's vision.

For me the success of this project is simply summed up by Trust, Generosity and Art.

Simon Gilby  
Artist, sculptor



\* The word Syndicate in the exhibition title is intended to have the individual figures read as a reflection of the larger community, and that they have a shared investment in an unknown outcome. "The Syndicate Project" refers to this and to the Syndicated Sponsorship that supported it.

† The final allocation of works to members was the result of a combination of individual preferences and anonymous ballot.

Sarcophagi and anxious chrysalides:

New works by Simon Gilby

Professor Ted Snell



SIMON GILBY'S STUDIO is crowded; figures hover, crouch and huddle contemplatively, unaware of intruders. Eyes closed, locked into an internal world, they neither rebuff nor invite contact; they just are.

What is the nature of this presence that is so convincing and so demands our attention? At once so solid, heavy, resolute, made of steel and forged from industry, they are simultaneously fragile, introspective, vulnerable and flawed. So close to being human yet 'they only index life', a life in limbo, a life that was or might be still, perhaps. The paradox they present to us elicits a wince or smile of recognition.

It is this moment of conjecture, this space of projection and imagination that brings each figure to life in a personal and prophetic way. Unlike the public memorial sculpture they reference these are not the bronze embodiment of heroic figures, but the shell and husk of mere mortals, people who struggle with the weight of living and cling onto their memories and hopes. Gilby describes his figures as portraits '... of real or imagined characters<sup>2</sup>' and in that strange amalgam we discover the core of their power. They are us, they reflect back our fears and doubts and in this exchange we become more human, more empathetic, more alive.

1 Simon Gilby *'The Syndicate: a statement from the artist'*, Artsource Newsletter, August-November 2009, p22

2 *IBID*, Artsource Newsletter, August-November 2009, p22





They present an equally complex artistic heritage. Gilby is aware of his predecessors and pays homage to their achievements while quietly turning the screw, cocking an eyebrow or smiling benignly. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Daphne*<sup>3</sup> is invoked in his extraordinary figure *Verona*, a woman whose body is constructed from an elegant metal skein of intertwining leaves and sprouts yet her humanity is resolutely present in her hands, feet and mouth. She is *Daphne* in reverse. According to Ovid the chaste young girl was transformed into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's lust. When he finally reached her he was able to feel her heart beating beneath the bark that covered her body, as her toes became tendrils and roots and her hands twigs and branches and his hopes were dashed. Gilby's woman is now ready for love; her body, once nothing more than a plant, has become with the same magical transformation, toes and fingers and an open mouth, shining and alive with expectation.

3 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne*, 1622-25, Carrara marble, height 243 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome









Other predecessors are the anonymous Soviet sculptors who created the massive public memorials to State Heroes, those men of dubious integrity who once lined the streets of East Berlin, Moscow and the Eastern Bloc. Setting aside any self-doubt they confidently looked out to a future they knew would exonerate them. But we know otherwise and Gilby's addition of a wheelchair embedded through the flesh of his Messiah points to that knowingness and the recognition that we are all frail, we all have our faults and disabilities, some more obviously than others. But as with all Gilby's works there are added complexities that enrich and enhance our reading. His hero is human sized, on his body is etched the text of *The Internationale*, that hymn to freedom, and also drawings by the German biologist, naturalist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel, who catalogued hundreds of new species and drew them in great detail from specimens he and his students gathered from around the world. His flaw was his desire to manipulate the evidence to support his theories; such as the infamous embryo drawings he apparently fabricated to prove his *Recapitulation Theory*<sup>4</sup>. Just as Communism was flawed and the dream of *The Internationale* distorted, just as the heroic Haeckel was lured into deceit, so we are presented with a mirror to capture a fleeting image of our own failings.

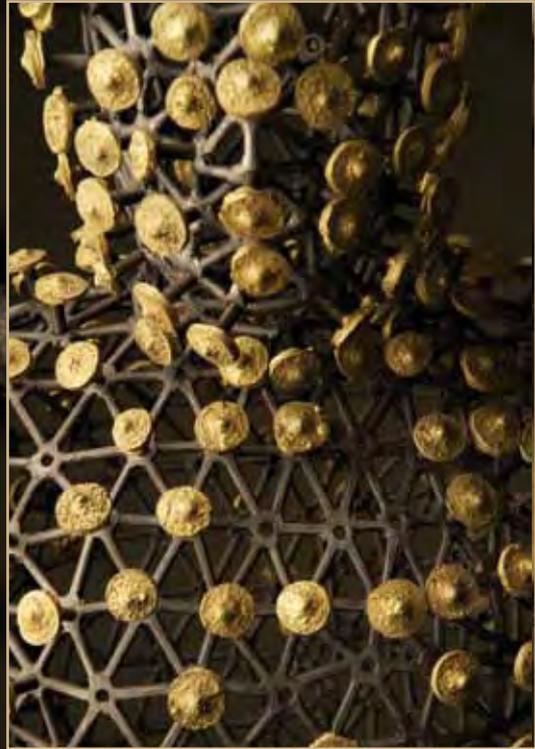
<sup>4</sup> Haeckel's *Recapitulation Theory* published in 1866 claims that the development of advanced species passes through stages represented by adult organisms of more primitive species.

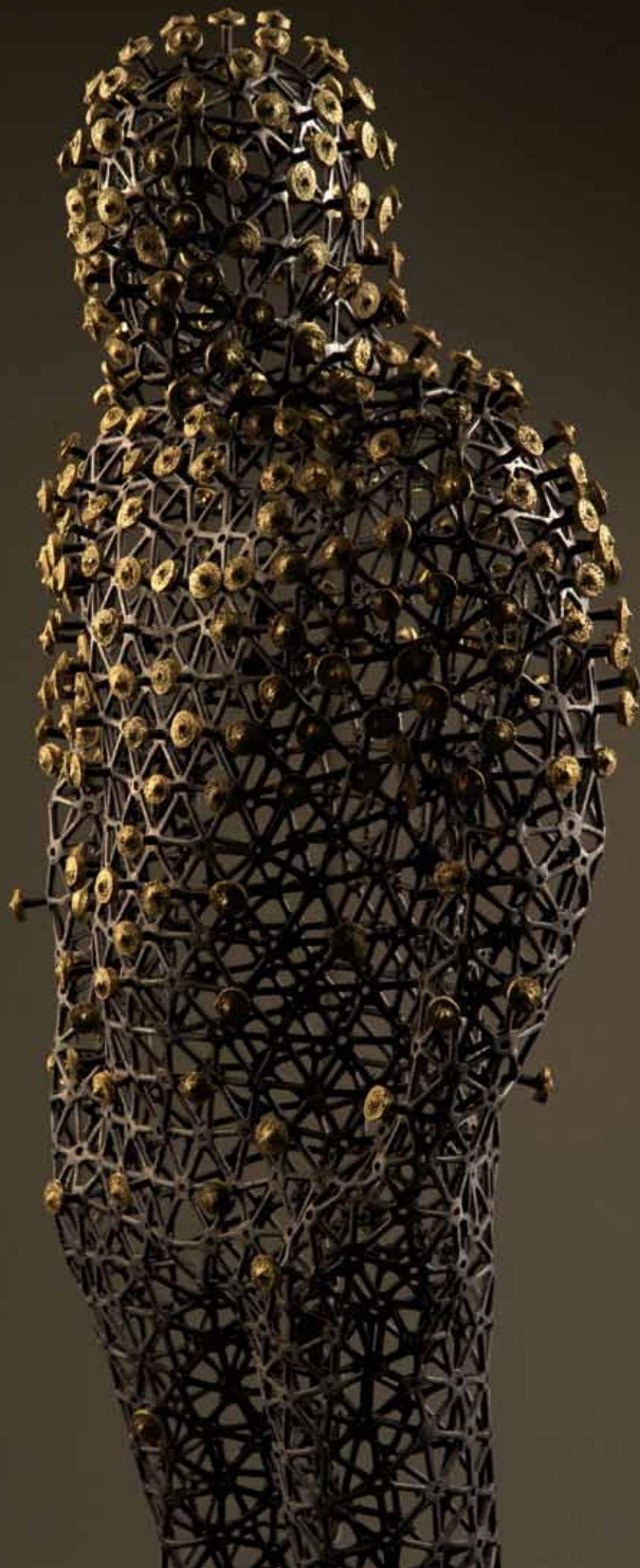




The sense that these sculptures are sarcophagi or reliquaries, holding only a memory of thoughts, ideas and interests or a slowly decaying element of the human being that once occupied this body, is explored in his *Corpus*. The cage of his body holds bones on which the artist has inscribed texts from The Bible, from Star Wars and his own stream of consciousness ramblings. That is what is left. The problem of physicality is that something remains after its purpose and function ceases. What do you do with a body once it is no longer alive, it is an embarrassment, a problem, something to deal with, and quickly? Unseemly contorted and twisted, splayed out across the floor, he occupies a lot of space, this martyr to the cause of life.

Even alive there may be a real sense of purposelessness. *Ash* is a framework of nuts awaiting their bolts to give some reason to existence or some creditable purpose to life. Shaped on the body of a man recently separated from his wife and child the few bolts that are screwed into the shell of his body are gilded male nipples, a Darwinian anomaly, a useless appendage that has no function. This simple and elegant work conjures up a series of propositions about masculinity and maleness, about male redundancy and the search, often through violence and aggression, for affirmation or relevance.









Gilby's interrogation of the human condition is more critical and unrelenting in its search for answers about the male of the species. His *Architect* is crouched down in a wretched, cowering ball, contemplating his hands, hands that have done so much, but he seems to wonder, to what purpose. His head is caged in the structures that have shaped his life and are now so imbedded in his thinking that he cannot escape. Along his spine is etched his nervous system, so feint and fragile that it seems incapable of servicing his massive frame. Lost, insensitive, no longer trusting his mind or his hands he is the most abject of human beings.



Hands are a constant surprise and point of conjecture in Gilby's work. For a sculptor whose extraordinarily skilful hands have manipulated the materials that gave form to these ten figures, their hands are shocking in their detached and dysfunctional representation. His *Finalist* is a modern Jonah, not going against god's will but a man having finally embraced entirely the fundamental truths his god has revealed. He has literally and physically swallowed the whole whale, which now protrudes and inhibits rational engagement with the world. Hanging limply, only recently re-applied, we wonder whose hands they are, truly his or are they controlled by another? Is this the terrorist who will do god's will, who will allow his hands to be the vehicle for others' work?





FINALIST | welded steel brazed steel filigree, cast pewter, cast resin, winterstone, cement, finishes | figure 165cm tall by 80cm, whale skeleton 190cm long | Collection of Graham and Vicki Teede



The same limp, re-attached, dysfunctional hands give an eerie poignancy to **Tarboy**, the sculpture of a young boy who seems to float upward, free from the constraints of this earth. He is truly the anxious chrysalis, with all his life before him, the lightness and beauty of youth on his side. How will he cope with the pressures and anxieties, the fears and rebuffs, the problems and obstacles? Without hands will he survive or will he find a way to engage them for the benefit of others and the planet, unlike so many that have preceded him?









Nuytsia also floats as she morphs into a tree, the significant creation spirit of local Noongar people, known to Europeans as the Christmas Tree, our own version of a creation myth. Unlike her sister in this exhibition, transforming from a plant into a human, she is like Daphne completing a cycle of life and returning to the earth to the energy source that formed her. Her lithe body rises in an apotheosis. Moving closer to god, her head and brain are replaced by sprouting Nuytsia twigs, in condemnation of humanity's conceit in imagining it can control and modify, intervene and destroy.





The feminine is mostly airborne in Gilby's visual lexicon. **Cadoux's** insubstantial wings seem unlikely to be able to move her large frame but they do keep her suspended above the ground and the pregnant woman in **Confinement's** Orbit levitates before our eyes. More sympathetic to woman than men in this collective essay on humanity, Gilby's matriarch is an earthbound angel rooted to the ground she has helped to destroy through her engagement with farming in the Wheatbelt. The dead branches and now defunct water gauges that support her are evidence of her destructive power but we cannot help but empathise with her predicament, which is, after all, also our own.







This body of work was made possible by the generosity of the syndicate members who gave the artist the opportunity to extend himself, to work unfettered and on a scale that enabled his ambitions full reign<sup>5</sup>. The result is a treatise on humanity that weaves together a complex and sophisticated analysis of the human condition, that explores our compulsion to represent ourselves in life-size or larger surrogates that embody our success and achievements, that reveals an introspective search for purpose and understanding, that is compassionate and critical and above all else that demands our attention and provides the space within which we can confront our own humanity, flaws and all.

5 See Gail Robinson *'The Syndicate'* Artsource Newsletter, August-November 2009, pp20-22



Ted Snell is Director of the University of Western Australia's Cultural Precinct. He is currently Western Australian art reviewer for The Australian and Chair of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council.

## SELECTED CV

### Education

1990 Diploma of Fine Art, Claremont School of Art, WA.

### Solo Exhibitions

1992 Simon Gilby, Gomboc Gallery, Middle Swan, WA.  
2004 Orbit, Gallery East, Fremantle, WA.  
2007 The Syndicate, Central Tafe Gallery, Northbridge, WA.

### Group Exhibitions

1997-1999 Bunbury Biennale, Bunbury Regional Gallery, Bunbury, WA.  
1998 Sculptures by the Sea, Albany, WA.  
2001 Mine Own Executioner, Mundaring Arts Centre, WA.  
Territory, Mandurah Art Gallery, and Central Metropolitan TAFE, WA.  
2002 Cardboard, Fremantle Arts Centre, Fremantle, WA.  
2003 15 - Old Customs House Artists Exhibition, Moores Building, Fremantle, WA.  
2005 City of Melville Sculpture Trail, WA (work acquired by City of Melville).  
2006 Sculptures by the Sea, Cottesloe, WA.

### Awards

1991 Gomboc Sculpture Prize  
1992 Darlington Arts Sculpture Prize

### Grants

2008 Art on the Move Grant  
1992 Emerging Artist Grant, ArtsWA

### Bibliography

1995 *Western Australian Artists in Residence*. Richard Woldendorp, John Stringer  
2004 *Australian Art Collector* - April/June 2004. Judith McGrath.  
*The West Australian* - 22 May 2004. Simon Blond.  
*Gallery Watch*, SBS TV - *The Orbit* exhibition.  
2005 *Gallery Watch*, SBS TV - *City of Melville Sculpture Trail*, WA.  
2006 *Lonely Planet, Six Degrees of Separation* - Perth, SBS TV.  
2008 *Insite Magazine* - Summer Edition 07/08. Gail Robinson.  
2009 *Artsource Magazine*, August to November. Gail Robinson.

### Commissions

1991 Large-scale sculpture, Town of Northam, WA.  
1992 'Nun', Parkerville Sculpture Trail, WA.  
1993 Private memorial, Ngia Cruden, WA.  
1995 Large-scale sculpture commission for BHP executive apartments, Port Hedland, WA.  
1996 'Breathe', Large-scale public sculpture, Wise Winery, Eagle Bay, WA.  
1997 Public sculpture, Cooke Point Primary School, Port Hedland, WA.  
1998 'Life Boat' sculpture, Peel Health Campus, Mandurah, WA.  
1999 Public artwork, Year of the Older Person, Melville Council, WA.  
2001 Public art commission (entry statement), Melville Aquatic Centre, WA.  
2003 Sculpture for AQWEST building, Bunbury, WA.  
2006 City of Wanneroo Sculpture Commission for Quinns Beach, WA.  
City of Melville Sculpture Commission for Leeming Recreation Centre, WA.  
'Manta' sculpture, Novatel Nigaloo Resort, Exmouth, WA.  
2007 Syndicate Project of 10 Life-size Figures.  
2009 Alluvian Building Foyer Artwork.

### Professional Appointments

1999 Coordinator (with Kate Campbell-Pope), Guilderton Residency Art Trail.  
2000 Coordinator, Regional AWESOME Children's Festival, Guilderton, WA.  
2003-2004 Lecturer (sessional), Central Metropolitan TAFE, Northbridge, WA.  
2003-2004 Lecturer (sessional), Edith Cowan University, Mount Lawley, WA.  
2004-2008 Sculpture Lecturer (sessional), University of Western Australia, Nedlands, WA.

### Collections

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Lawrence Wilson Gallery, Parliament of Western Australia, Curtin University Art Collection, Edith Cowan University Art Collection, Murdoch University Art Collection, Gomboc Gallery, Bunbury Regional Gallery, Horn Collection





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ART ON THE MOVE

PO Box 1835 Osborne Park Delivery Centre  
Osborne Park 6916

T (08) 9242 7887 F (08) 9242 7878

E [artmoves@artonthemove.com.au](mailto:artmoves@artonthemove.com.au)

W [www.artonthemove.com.au](http://www.artonthemove.com.au)

