Cogwheel and Bud

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ROBERT KLIPPEL
Art Gallery of NSW, $80hb, 268pp, 0 7347 6311 5
$50pb, 0 7347 6332 8

HISTORIES OF AUSTRALIAN ART have usually been histories only of painting. So Robert Klippel’s sculptures and drawings are too little known outside the world of ardent collectors and art museums. Yet they might be aesthetically better than our most famous paintings by, say, Boyd, Tucker or Nolan. Klippel, Sydney-based but artistically formed by Paris and New York, died in 2001, on his eighty-first birthday. Last year the Art Gallery of New South Wales produced a full retrospective exhibition by its in-house Curator of Australian Art, Deborah Edwards, and published her accompanying book. After a few early figure carvings, the exhibition presented room after room of entirely abstract sculptures assembled from industrial cast-offs of metal or wood, and abstract drawings, yet those who saw it came out exhilarated. Whereas most abstract shows are read as interesting puzzles or as spiritual mysteries, Klippel’s produced surprised, glowing delight.

First things first for an art-exhibition book, a distinct category that cannot, unlike some disappointing books of art history or cultural studies, illustrate a theory from a few black-and-white smudges. Here, instead, is a great body of evidence from which to start on our own interpretations: 380 crisp pictures, a majority in colour, with intimate, close-up details that parallel the exhibition experience — which is a matter of scrutinising material objects, from shifting viewpoints, within a neutral space. (The hardback edition contains a CD-ROM with an illustrated catalogue of Klippel’s 1231 sculptures.) The steel assemblages, or bronzes cast from assemblages, have subtle colour and texture variation that is lost in black-and-white reproduction. We empathise with Klippel’s hand at work, brazing the joints, polishing or roughening the surfaces, and with his dancing eye and mind, making fine decisions about size, scale, direction, relationships, stability, weight and tension.

Exhibition books, as here, give the detailed biography and artist’s dicta, and studio and family-history shots that would have clogged the flow of an art gallery visit. Background history, which reaches us at a different level, is for books; it can kill the direct aesthetic thrills that are the underpinnings of things that could be trees or radio towers. We begin to have an explanation for the exhibition-goers’ delight. Klippel, before he turned to larger wooden constructions in the mid-1980s, insisted he was an ‘intimist’. I think that means more than the small size of most of his junk-metal works, a size for a domestic table or benchtop, cohabiting with flowers, photographs and other personalia. Although they don’t invite a caressing touch, they are evidently handmade, and invite identification with the process of their making. They always have inner, private parts for the gaze to explore as if in the course of erotic intimacies. And their engineering always has perfect dance-like poise and springy elegance, if not Fred Astaire’s then that of smaller birds or animals, though the parallel with organisms is almost always with plant forms.

Everybody loves flowers and grasses and trees, but there is also the machinery. Was Vulcan the blacksmith next in importance only to Zeus? Admiration for those who are skilled — sharing digs with Sydney painter James Gleeson, who titled several of Klippel’s works (otherwise usually untitled), and whose book Robert Klippel (1983) remains indispensable — and then in Paris, where he met André Breton and future American abstract expressionists, Klippel became a surrealist. Madame Sophie Sesosteris is a small wooden statuette of a woman as if cocooned and metamorphosing inside a cylindrical, spiky husk.

The human figure was thenceforth rejected, along with carving and modelling. We aren’t offered a clear reason for the shift to abstract constructions, but it seems to have been a conscious rejection of anthropocentrism. Klippel perhaps sensed that to reference humankind directly in his art was to invite sentimentality and self-indulgence. In London he had spent most of his time studying microscopic forms in natural science museums, and X-ray imagery. He was concerned not with the visual surfaces of things but with their insides. From the age of six, Klippel had been an obsessive constructor of model ships. During World War II, he served in the Australian Navy. All his Sydney homes looked onto water and shipping. His formative place has no literal presence in his art, but Sydney Harbour must have had something to do with his insistent concern with nature (Edwards sometimes ascends to ‘Nature’) in an industrial age. His key statement is: ‘I seek the interrelationship between the cogwheel and the bud.’

Edwards positions Klippel as a Vitalist, from the poetic Bergsonian philosophy of a soul-like élan vital (vital force, life force) that creates the world rather than evolution through purely chemical or physical forces. George Bernard Shaw had popularised the idea in England and, in Australia in the 1920s, Norman Lindsay invoked it. Klippel accepted the parallel when it was offered by Edwards, but his favourite philosophy was Herrigal’s Zen in the Art of Archery. He liked ‘endless flow’, for example from below the earth or water to upper air. I remember him speaking of a vast floating-sculpture fantasy for Sydney Harbour, as much of it under-water as above. Many of his sculptures and drawings have heaving, quasi-landscape bases that reveal the roots or underpinnings of things that could be trees or radio towers.

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and inventive at making machinery, love of machines and their energy and artificial ‘life’, an interest in taking machines apart to see how they work or whether they can be reused, are universal aspects of the human condition. Klippel’s machinery materials, reused for intimate human contemplation as super-refined art, express these feelings. Though he claimed his materials were purely abstract forms, we note that the junk-metal sculptures were made from typewriter parts, cash registers and early computers. Now, as we enter a computer-haunted, post-industrial age, his self-positioning as an artist of an industrial age is ironic.

The later, larger wooden pieces at last approach human scale, and often look back at the viewer from a seated Buddha’s floor level. In any case, made in his seventies, with the aid of assistants, they are slower works, dancing to less nervy rhythms, less playful; maybe, instead, they live in the slowed-down geological time of rocks and mountains. Edwards provides an electrifying new fact. We knew the wooden materials were obsolete patterns from which cast-iron machinery parts were made, but not that they came from Morts Ship Building firm at Balmain, or that ‘Parts for iron arbors and axles, cams and poppets, spindle guides, rings, bushing, rotors, pinions, sprockets and cogs … looked like a lexicon of all forms in the world. The pieces were especially charged for Klippel, who recognised all their maritime functions’, and the meaning of their coded colours. Easy then to make them flow and surge in their new life as works of art.

Equally surprising is Klippel’s 1954 moment as a furniture designer, and his visit to Charles and Ray Eames en route to New York three years later. Klippel lived and worked from 1968 in a large harbourside house at Birchgrove, every room eventually filled with junk materials and works in progress — except for a tiny island of luxury, a single Eames lounge chair.

This is not a biography, but some day I can imagine a woman writer ruminating on Klippel’s women: a final non-live-in partner, Rosemary Madigan, herself a major sculptor, and two wives who remained fond of him even though the sculptor must have been impossible to live with. After only two years at Birchgrove, the junk materials pushed Cynthia Klippel, and a baby son, out of the house.