

Blooming lotus strides ahead

Stop your bitching:
anything goes in
sculpture today, argues
Benjamin Genocchio

National Sculpture Prize

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Ends March 10.

I'm always amused by those who think they know what is and isn't sculpture, as if the two might be separated as easily as apples from pears. Dismissing artworks that don't equate neatly with their opinion, these guardians of sculptural purity can thunder through exhibitions delivering proclamations of shapeliness without a sliver of self-doubt. Yes, this one over here is sculpture, but that thing loitering there in the corner most certainly isn't.

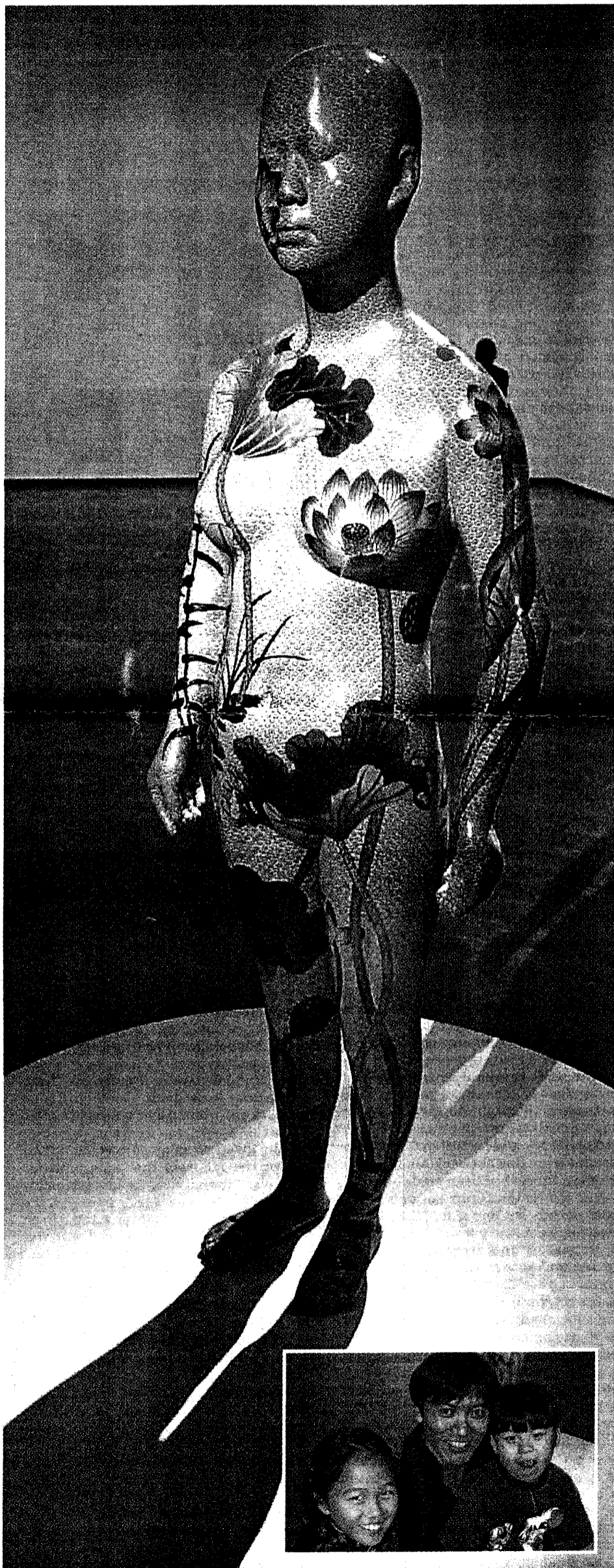
There is something to be envied in this certainty but it remains a fact that during the 20th century there were two significant shifts in the definition of sculpture: the move away from the tradition of figurative sculpture at the start of the century with the evolution of abstract sculpture; and the radical explosion of styles, media and materials beginning in the 1960s with conceptual and installation art. The latter shift meant sculpture rolled off plinths and out the gallery door. **Sculpture is, these days, whatever the artist makes.**

There is no better indication of the diversity of contemporary sculpture than the 40 or so weird and wacky works by about 30 artists included in the National Sculpture Prize and Exhibition at the National Gallery in Canberra. The first prize of any kind at the NGA, and the first significant national exhibition and prize for sculpture since the Sculpture Triennials petered out in 1995, this is a great initiative for which the NGA and the sponsors should be applauded. With a cool \$50,000 purse for the winning artist, it is also among the richest art prizes.

The best aspect of the inaugural exhibition is its inclusiveness, with artists of all ages, from all states and working in all media represented. With no preordained definition of sculpture in mind, the judges appear to have selected works solely on their merits. Consequently, the show is a ripper, packed with beautiful and thought provoking objects and installations. Seldom have I seen so many stimulating and accomplished contemporary sculptural objects in a single exhibition.

It is hard to think of a more deserving winner of the inaugural prize than the Chinese-born painter and sculptor Ah Xian. I say that not just because his life-sized female figure done in cloisonne is utterly divine and easily the outstanding inclusion in the exhibition, but because of the difficulties he has faced since moving to Australia from China after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Struggling with the language, a lack of money and a local museum and gallery sector indifferent to his talents, Xian spent years working as a house painter while making art on weekends in his backyard.

The breakthrough came in 1997 when he began to cast porcelain busts, painting them with traditional Chinese designs. The first few were simple and imperfect, but the idea of combining bust portraiture, a traditional form of Western art, with Chinese decorative designs was a winning formula. A timely grant from the



Masterpiece: Ah Xian's winning sculpture, *Human Human — Lotus*, left; the artist with his family, inset

Australia Council allowed him to return to China in 2000 to visit the famous kiln sites in Jingdezhen, where he learned a great deal about glazing and firing porcelain and began to perfect his technique.

Xian always wanted to do full-body casts using glazed porcelain but he couldn't get them to hold together. The casts kept breaking in the kiln, while glazes melted and ran. This may have led him to experiment with cloisonne, the decoration on metal of enamel glazes of different colours. Cloisonne is made in China and other Asian countries, chiefly for export or as tourist trinkets, although it flourished in the main European art centres throughout the 19th century. Of the same artisanal class as stained glass, the technique implies strong, definite outlines and luminous planar colour.

The most notable stylistic feature of Xian's work is a blooming lotus sprouting from the leg and loin of the figure. Looking at the object, the impression is one of fertility and fecundity, along with an overwhelming sense of stillness. The symbolism of plants in Chinese folklore is exceedingly complex, although the lotus is of unique importance because of its significance in Buddhism — the Buddha's foreskin is said to have been like a lotus flower — and is often used to symbolise purity. A blooming lotus indicates a perfect union, which is an apt description of this multicultural masterpiece.

Also curious in Xian's cloisonne sculpture is the use of a naked figure as a base. Just as there is no real tradition of bust portraiture in Chinese art, there is no genre of the nude either. Figures are

Sculpture is whatever the artist makes

always painted or sculptured clothed. The exception are those saucy erotic prints and paintings, especially popular during the Qing dynasty, although even these depict figures semi-clad and it is the sexual act or the foreplay on show rather than the naked body that is the subject of the work. Modelled directly from life, Xian's life-sized, fully naked female figure is intensely vulnerable and real.

There are many other artists in this exhibition whose works are equally beautiful and thought provoking, such as Donna Marcus's swivelling vertebrae made from hundreds of teapots, Bronwyn Oliver's elegant signature swirl, Timothy Horn's jewel-encrusted shoe, Mathieu Gallois's tableaux based on a famous colonial print and Lionel Bawden's intriguing sculptures made from coloured pencils. While there are one or two duds and a few embarrassing gaffes in the catalogue (including director Brian Kennedy misspelling the name of a gallery employee thanked in his foreword), this is an event of substance.

Showing serious sculpture is a resource-intensive activity requiring specialised staff and expensive equipment such as forklifts and cranes, all of which can scare away sponsors. That Macquarie Bank has committed to supporting this prize — initially for three years, although with the expectation that if it is successful it will continue on an annual basis — is one of the most generous and daring acts of corporate sponsorship in the visual arts for years, and a testament to what can be achieved when museums work in partnership with industry.