

= Bronwyn Oliver =

Bronwyn Joy Oliver (née Gooda , 22 February 1959 ? 11 July 2006) was an Australian sculptor who worked primarily in metal . Raised in rural New South Wales , she trained at Sydney 's College of Fine Arts and London 's Chelsea School of Art . She had early successes , winning a New South Wales Travelling Art Scholarship in 1981 and the Moët & Chandon Australian Art Fellowship in 1984 . Oliver settled in Sydney , where she practised and taught until her death by suicide in 2006 .

Oliver 's sculptures are admired for their tactile nature , their aesthetics , and the technical skills demonstrated in their production . In her later career , most of her pieces were commissions , both public and private . Her major works include Vine , a 16 @. @ 5 @- @ metre @- @ high sculpture in the Sydney Hilton , Magnolia and Palm , in the Sydney Botanical Gardens , and Big Feathers in Brisbane 's Queen Street Mall . Recognition of her work included selection as a finalist in the inaugural Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award in 2000 , inclusion in the National Gallery of Australia 's 2002 National Sculpture Prize exhibition , and being shortlisted for the 2006 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award . Her works are held in major Australian collections , including the National Gallery of Australia , the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales .

= = Early life = =

Oliver was born Bronwyn Gooda on 22 February 1959 , in Gum Flat , west of Inverell in New South Wales . Her parents were Milton , a farmer turned greenkeeper , and Wendy , who worked in a pharmacy . Her creativity was nurtured from a young age . Aged just eight , Oliver attended weekend art classes in Inverell run by Ian Howard , who went on to become dean of the college in Sydney where she would later study . As she was dux of her school , her parents expected her to go on to university . However , Oliver wished to pursue a creative career . When she told her parents of her plans , her mother replied , " Darling , your father and I are very pleased you 're going to art school , but if you 'd been a son , I think we 'd be a little disappointed . " A rift subsequently developed between her and her family that resulted in her having no contact with them for 25 years .

After leaving school , Oliver studied and worked in Sydney . She had intended to enrol in painting classes , but a computer error placed her in the sculpture course : she later said " I knew straight away I was in the right place " .

She graduated from the Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education , now the University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts , in 1980 . Winning a New South Wales Travelling Art Scholarship in 1983 , she then completed a master 's degree at Chelsea School of Art in 1984 . Her work was influenced by Richard Deacon , Antony Gormley and Martin Puryear under whom she studied while in England . Upon returning from the United Kingdom , she immediately met with further success , when in 1984 she won a Moët & Chandon Australian Art Fellowship . In 1988 she was granted a period as artist @- @ in @- @ residence in the city of Brest on the coast of Brittany , where she studied Celtic metalworking techniques .

= = Personal life = =

In her early twenties , Bronwyn Gooda married Leslie Oliver , taking his surname and later retaining it " despite a distressing divorce " . The artist lived in the inner @- @ western Sydney suburb of Haberfield , where she also had her studio . For 19 years up until her death , she taught art to primary school @- @ age children at Sydney 's Cranbrook School in Bellevue Hill . She was a friend of Roslyn Oxley , at whose eponymous gallery Oliver exhibited her works . Her long @- @ term de facto partner was wine writer Huon Hooke .

= = Works and exhibitions = =

Biographer Hannah Fink estimated that Oliver produced 290 works over a career of 22 years . Of

these , public art works are Oliver 's best known sculptures . These include Eyrie , created for Adelaide 's Hyatt Hotel in 1993 , and Magnolia and Palm , commissioned in 1999 by the Sydney Botanical Gardens , as part of the Sydney Sculpture Walk . That same year , Big Feathers was commissioned for the Queen Street Mall in Brisbane . It comprises two large feather @-@ shaped forms suspended above the pedestrian precinct , representing " Queen Street 's history of parades as well as the mall 's connection between earth and sky " .

In 2000 , Oliver 's piece Entwine was a finalist in the inaugural Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award , while in the following year , Oliver won the University of New South Wales inaugural sculpture commission competition , with her three @-@ metre @-@ high Globe . Other success followed , when Trace was selected for the National Gallery of Australia 's 2002 National Sculpture Prize exhibition . In August 2002 she was one of five artists shortlisted by the Australian Government for a project to produce a public artwork celebrating the centenary of women 's suffrage in Australia .

By the 2000s most of Oliver 's output constituted commissioned pieces , whether public or private . The most substantial of these is Vine , a 16 @.@ 5 metre high sculpture installed as part of the \$ 400 million refurbishment of the Sydney Hilton . Taking twelve months to create and requiring a budget of up to half million dollars , the work was completed in 2005 . The sculpture was fabricated from 380 kilograms of aluminium , and assembled by a team of eight Croatian welders .

By 2006 , Oliver had held 18 solo exhibitions of her work , half of them at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery , which represented her throughout her career as a sculptor . Only one of those solo exhibitions was held outside Australia : a 1992 exhibition at Auckland City Gallery . However , Oliver was represented in numerous international group shows , including five during the period 1983 to 1984 , around the time she completed her master 's degree in London . Four of the group shows at that time were in the United Kingdom ; the fifth was at the Museum of Traditional Industries in Kyoto . Subsequent international group shows included ' Five Australian Artists ' at Brest 's Centre Culturelle in 1988 , the year she undertook an artist 's residency in that city . Later group shows of which Oliver was part included ' Prospect ' 93 ' at the Frankfurter Kunstverein , ' Systems End : Contemporary Art in Australia ' , which exhibited in several east Asian galleries in 1996 , and the Beijing International Biennale in 2003 .

= = Technique = =

A sculptor for her entire artistic career , Oliver used paper , cane or fibreglass for her early works . However , she found " fibreglass hazardous and paper too impermanent " , and for most of her career she worked in metal . The metals used for her creations varied : the monumental Vine was fabricated in aluminium , as was the Brisbane sculpture Big Feathers ; however most , such as Palm and the 2002 sculpture Lock , were crafted in copper . All 25 works included in the 1995 publication , Bronwyn Oliver : mnemonic chords , were made in copper , though a handful also utilised other materials such as bronze , lead or , in one case , fibreglass .

Oliver was always preoccupied with " what materials will do " . Fink observed that " [f] rom the beginning , Oliver has been interested in things that are made from the inside out , and her works often give cryptic evidence of their manufacture " . That evidence of manufacture was not confined to the works themselves : friends and art critics observed the injuries and marks she carried as a result of working with such unforgiving material .

Ideas were often first sketched by Oliver , before she moved to construction in three dimensions . When preparing commissions , she would draw on the ideas of clients or the nature of the site . For large works she created maquettes (or models) , sometimes in plasticine , on other occasions using copper wire or , in the case of her 2002 sculpture Globe , wood and metal . Oliver would produce the more delicate works herself . Many were created by crafting and joining wire to create abstract forms . These were built around moulds , twisting the metal into place with pliers , before severing it with wirecutters . Joins were soldered or brazed (though in some pieces , the wire was woven) . In Web (2002) , copper pieces were sewn together using wire .

Major pieces were created at Crawfords Casting foundry in Enfield in Sydney 's inner western

suburbs . Although the foundry would fabricate the elements of the sculptures , Oliver would still undertake the initial stages , training foundry staff and supervising their activity . Some of the pieces assembled to create the sculptures were made using copper rod , while others were formed using the lost @-@ wax casting technique . Individual pieces would take up to two months to complete .

= = Themes and critical reception = =

Oliver was not one to intellectualise her creativity : she preferred to talk about the process of creating her artworks rather than their meanings . Asked about how she approached her art , she stated :

My work is about structure and order . It is a pursuit of a kind of logic : a formal , sculptural logic and poetic logic . It is a conceptual and physical process of building and taking away at the same time . I set out to strip the ideas and associations down to (physically and metaphorically) just the bones , exposing the life still held inside .

While Oliver was reluctant to discuss meaning in her works , critics have identified recurring themes . Hannah Fink , like art critic John McDonald , noted that there is a pattern to the shapes and structures in Oliver 's work . Fink described this as " a consistent vocabulary of elemental forms ? the spiral , meander , loop and sphere ? in a repertoire of signature archetypes " , while McDonald referred to them as organisms , or their remains . Despite their organic appearance , Oliver 's own view was that her work was not grounded in nature 's structures . Nevertheless , critics have identified the lifelike qualities of early pieces that resembled shells , claws or tails , or commented on the apparent similarities to biological forms . Both major reviews of Oliver 's work (Fenner 's 1995 essay and Fink 's 2002 journal article) draw attention to dualism and contradiction in the sculptures : Fenner describes them as " delicate and ephemeral , [yet] structurally robust and durable " ; Fink sees them as " ethereal but solid , fluid yet rigid , open but closed " .

Oliver 's sculptures are admired for their tactile nature , their aesthetics , and the technical skills demonstrated in their production . Particular works have been singled out for praise . A writer reviewing *Vine* in the Sydney Hilton admired how it " curls like a fairytale beanstalk up towards the ceiling as though empowered by the sunlight streaming in from a large open space adjacent " . Journalist Catherine Keenan 's 2005 description of how the towering sculpture demonstrated both aesthetic and production values are typical of comments about Oliver 's work :

It has the delicate , adamant beauty that characterises many of her pieces , but is also an engineering marvel : 380 kilograms of metal that was delivered on the back of an oversized truck and now hangs from a single specially manufactured rod fixed to the ceiling .

The Sydney Morning Herald 's art writer , John McDonald , said of her work " It often seems to me she 's only got one tune , but it 's a pretty good tune " . He later elaborated :

It is a cliché that every artist keeps making the same work , but in Oliver 's case , while some forms resemble sea creatures and others the buds of plants , the family ties between even the most diverse pieces are very strong ... nothing was dashed off or thrown together . Every piece feels as if it has been minutely considered , with each strand of copper wire being brazed into exactly the right spot ... All the things that have recently been said about Oliver ? that she was beautiful , intelligent , charming ? could also be said about the work .

Despite this consistency in her output and the coherent themes of her oeuvre , variety was also present . Critic Bruce James considered her 2002 exhibition , and in particular one small work titled *Crackled* , to demonstrate a broader artistic range : " Crackled is ... formally surprising , evidence that Oliver is not content to rely on a winning recipe of convolution for her concepts . Whole new areas of physical and artistic exploration lay open before her " . Hannah Fink , reflecting on Oliver 's last sculptures , wrote :

The mastery of her last works seems to defy imagining ? one can only marvel at the ingenuity of their construction and the perfection of their realisation . The utter variety of her posthumous exhibition ... put paid to any suggestion she had reached a natural end to her work : almost every work was different , and full of innovation .

In 2000 , Oliver was included by Australian Art Collector in its list of Australia 's 50 " most

collectable artists " . In 2005 , her work was identified by auction dealers as amongst those of greatest interest in the secondary art market .

= = Death and legacy = =

Oliver was sometimes characterised as reclusive in both the artistic and social worlds . Her teacher and long @-@ time associate Professor Ian Howard described her as having " an underlying and at times painful distrust of the relationships that are part of our everyday lives " . Close friend and gallerist , Roslyn Oxley , observed that she was " very private . She stopped people entering her world a lot of the time . " Oliver 's sister , Helen , had described her as a " powerful and fragile person " while biographer Fink observed " [a] deeply asocial person , [who] nonetheless maintained longstanding friendships with a small coterie of people whom she trusted " . The final period of Oliver 's personal life was the subject of contradictory accounts . Oxley said that Oliver in 2006 experienced the end of a 20 @-@ year @-@ long relationship , and obituarist Joyce Morgan , who spoke to Huon Hooke after Oliver 's death , described Hooke as Oliver 's " former " partner. though others writing shortly after her death did not indicate that the relationship with Hooke had ended , including an obituary by Howard , one written by art critic John McDonald , and tributes by her two biographers , Felicity Fenner and Hannah Fink . Some years later , author Katrina Strickland interviewed people close to Oliver , and reported they had noticed a gradual deterioration in her personality over a period of years ; she became " reclusive , obsessive , anxious " as well as " difficult and impatient , and completely obsessed with her diet . " Under the circumstances , Hooke had felt he " just wanted to be somewhere else " and left the relationship in late May 2006 . At that point , Strickland recounted , " Oliver fell to pieces " .

Her friend Roslyn Oxley subsequently concluded that , at some point , Oliver made plans to take her own life . Journalist Sunanda Creagh interviewed Oxley , as the gallerist prepared the last exhibition of her friend 's work :

Oliver made meticulous arrangements for her final show , says Oxley . " She named everything and she wrote a note saying she wanted the show to go ahead . It was very clear . She finished all the work she said she would finish . She never let anyone down , ever . To be under that tension and obviously to have suicide on your mind , but to complete all the obligations before you did it ... " Oxley 's sentence trails off .

Oliver committed suicide on 11 July 2006 . McDonald recounts that , some weeks after her death , Hooke indicated in an interview that Oliver was " a very troubled person " , but none of the sources offered anything definitive about why she took her own life ; McDonald himself concluded " we will never know " . In 2013 , it was reported that analysis of a sample of Oxley 's hair contained a very high level of copper , nearly 8 times normal . The debilitating effects of high copper levels , which are associated with some mental illnesses , may have been exacerbated by an imbalance created by low zinc levels in her diet , which was devoid of red meat .

Just before her death , Oliver had been shortlisted for the 2006 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award . In the year following , Oliver was amongst 60 artists profiled in Sonia Payes ' book Untitled : Portraits of Australian Artists , while in 2008 her final works were included in the Adelaide Biennale of Australian Art . The secondary art market , meanwhile , was returning six @-@ figure sums for her works at auction ; in 2007 a record for Oliver 's work was set when Skein (2004) went under the hammer for \$ 192 @,@ 000 . By 2010 , Sydney Biennale chairman Luca Belgiorno @-@ Netti was reported to have paid \$ 300 @,@ 000 for one of Oliver 's sculptures , titled Tracery . In 2011 , Sydney 's College of Fine Arts announced that its new sculpture studio would be named after Oliver .

Works by Oliver are held in most major Australian art collections , including the National Gallery of Australia , the Art Gallery of New South Wales , the National Gallery of Victoria , Queensland Art Gallery , the Art Gallery of South Australia , the Auckland Art Gallery , the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery , Wollongong City Gallery , Orange Regional Gallery , and the Australian government 's collection Artbank .

