

Interview

Paul Deans

LoTR artist and sculpture mentor,
Deans Art Investments, Heathcote

Paul Deans is an established Canterbury sculptor who shares a well-appointed studio with up-and-coming sculptor Anna Korver. It's something of an informal mentor/apprentice duality. Deans has always worked in teams; he's in business with his artist father, the landscape painter Austen Deans. We rambled across mentoring, the church, *Lord of the Rings*, spirituality and art, and the state of public sculpture in Canterbury.

Peel Forest, South Canterbury. A natural affinity for trees and wood led him to sculpture. He completed his first work at 16. His father had a few old blunt chisels and he got stuck in following shapes, understanding grain and exploring the medium. His father, Austen Deans, 90, is still a full-time painter of landscapes. Austen had done some sculpture at art school in Christchurch, but opted for *plein-air* easel painting because he didn't want to be confined to a studio.

Paul Deans didn't follow his father, finding art school too theory-focussed. He just wanted to paint and sculpt - 'do the hands-on stuff'.

'My girlfriend got pregnant, which changed things. We got married and had two more children, settled in Christchurch and joined the New Life Church, in



Paul Deans at work.
All photography: Joanna Osborne.

JS: What are you working on at the moment?

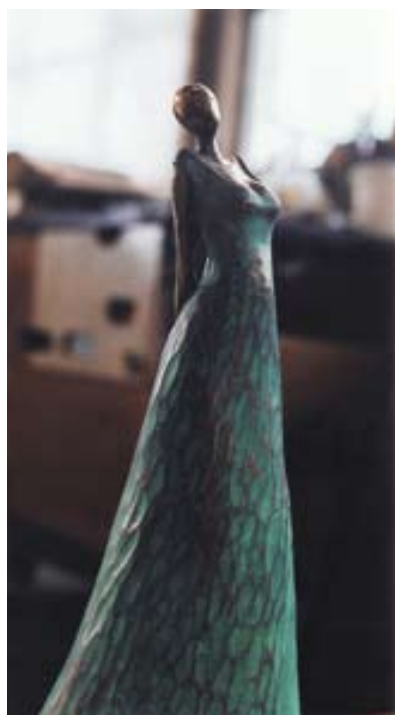
'I've got some outside exhibitions coming up later in the year (2005) and some commissions. I entered a lime wood piece in the 2005 CoCA Art Awards. It's a large mask, called *Mask of the Peacemaker: Exposing the Great Lie*; the great lie that says we're all different or separate, which allows us to create war, when really we're the same. We're all one. How can we work that out?' (*Mask* has recently sold – March 2006.)

Deans was born in 1953 and grew up in the bush at

Manchester Street. I had some spiritual experiences there. But part of it was that I felt I was compromising between God and art, and so gave up art altogether.

'I struggled with the notion of change in the Church. When I asked for clarification, God showed me a picture of a foundation upon which was built an ornate building - the church. And he just knocked it all down and said "this is all you need, the foundation". The rest is all man-made. On leaving the church my understanding of God got so much bigger.

'When I first joined the church, it was great, people



Moonlight Sonata, Paul Deans, 2004 (original wood), 2006 (bronze: 1 of 9), 370mm tall.



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enjoyed life, enjoyed God; it was alive. But I've watched so many people come in with that burst of life and freedom and then religion seeks to box it somehow. Jesus came to free us; one of the key things was to free us from religion, a great dichotomy.'

Was art conflicting with your perception of your spirituality?

'Yes. At that stage (the early eighties) I was working as a wood carver for the Hampton Studios. I felt that if doing my art was a problem, well God had to find me another job. I found a great job that suited me very well, in the wholesale cut-flower business; it was a huge weight off my shoulders, and I let all the art stuff go. But after a few years I felt trapped, and the creative side wasn't being expressed. I also



felt unqualified for any other job. I eventually started doing portraits in The Arts Centre.'

What was the transition for you; did you feel you'd reconciled your faith and your art somehow?

'It was like a release, a gradual starting back in again. I loved it, and wanted to make a living out of it. I did a small business course, realised "I can't do this; it's not realistic". My father came in and we made a partnership [Deans Art Investments]. He was painting professionally, landscapes, commission work and works to sell, and still is, based in Peel Forest. He was thinking about retiring. This enabled him to keep his oar in; I did all the business stuff, the GST etc, it gave him more motivation, a tax break; him offering a partnership made the difference and we pooled incomes. I panicked a bit at first, felt I shouldn't be leaning on him, but I learned to deal with that, just relaxed. It's worked well.'

Deans met Geoff and Mary Korver through the Guild of Woodworkers. Anna Korver was still at school, she came along and did some carving and a mentor/apprentice type relationship was born. Anna had to battle through art school wanting to do figurative

work, which wasn't the trend. She had to fight to hold her vision. It was a natural partnership. Korver did the business courses, got on a government scheme (the PACE programme) so she knew she had the income, and moved in to share Deans' well-appointed Heathcote studio.

How do you find working with other artists, first with your father, now Anna Korver?

'I find it very motivating. I don't know about Anna, also because I've been away so much, but I'm sure she finds it a good duality.'

Do you think it's important for emerging talent to be actively mentored? Or is it better just to leave them to their own devices; if they're talented, they'll come through?

'It's hard to know. When starting out I was very much on my own. I look at the government schemes now and think I would have benefited from some of that. For a long time I felt condemned because I hadn't been through art school. I really had to nut things out myself, with no one to bounce things off. It's great doing things like sculpture symposiums with other nutters who, like me, just like bashing away at stone.

'All the theory and conceptual stuff loses me very quickly. I find that, working with wood, either the log itself gives me a sense of what's inside, or an idea will pop into my head, I'll draw it up and then find the right piece of wood to make it work. I'm very visual, the image comes first and then the feelings follow. Afterward, I catch up with what was going on and learn the story of the work.'

So, is that a spiritual thing for you?

'As much as anything is spiritual. I'll sit with a piece of wood, meditate, hold it; feelings and images will come, and it works its message out.'

So you see the work inside the material and you have to go in there and discover it, or do you manipulate the material into what you want?

'A bit of both. Starting with an idea, finding the right piece of wood, I've still got to work with the wood, to make it work. For example, *Fire Dance*, working with it, as I got into the middle it was rotten, which created the negative space inside the heads. It was a natural response to what was there.'

What's your view about public sculpture in Canterbury?

'It's getting better and better. When I started, people knew what to do with paintings – "hang 'em on the wall!" but sculpture was a bit weird. Galleries tended to be the same; they didn't know what to do with us. Sculpture needs its own space and good lighting. The Arthouse was the one that really encouraged sculptors.'

John Stringer