



*Fisherfolk*, 1965, Ria Bancroft, Plastic steel/iron,  
400mm x 300mm, Private collection.  
Photo: Aldren Simmons.

## Interview

### Peb Simmons

Author of *No Ordinary Woman*  
(Ria Bancroft – Sculptor, 1907-1993)



Peb Simmons

Peb Simmons is a published writer in her own right over many years. This includes poetry, children's books, devotional literature and other non-fiction material. The most well known of these in recent times is the biography of her mother, sculptor Ria Bancroft, *No Ordinary Woman*, which

was published to coincide with the retrospective exhibition of the sculptor at the McDougall gallery in 1998. One aspect of the book in its early section is the suggestion of the close relationship Peb enjoyed with her mother, in unusual circumstances. Ria Bancroft was a prolific and influential sculptor, active in Christchurch over three decades after her arrival in New Zealand in the early sixties and on into the

1980s. The most well known of her works is, arguably, her bronze relief for the Tabernacle Screen doors in the Catholic Cathedral in Barbadoes Street. Her work is positioned in a range of public spaces around Christchurch as well as being part of public gallery collections around the country.

#### **JS: Why did you decide to write your mother's biography?**

'Several times before her death, Mother said to me: "You write the story, only you know the truth". And I did know her private truth: the austere Edwardian childhood, the harsh elementary schooling, busking with her mother around country fairs, the Music Hall life, a brutal first marriage. At twelve years of age she scrabbled for clay in the local riverbank driven by an inner urgency to create "form" - a longing she never outgrew, rather it became a burning passion. When I was a toddler, to care for me, Mother left the stage. But, there were no siblings, or close family. Father travelled: he too was as an entertainer, even when he joined the Air Force. During the years, Ria spoke about dreadful events she had experienced, and the grief. I grew to feel deep sorrow for her tragic life, but also admired her courageously honest spirit. When she died, I understood I was left with this great commission.'

**What were some of your experiences writing *No Ordinary Woman*?**

'Ria was protective of her work, particularly in the early stages of a new sculpture, as if exposing burgeoning inspiration might destroy ideas in their infancy. Her studio was sacrosanct, I was never allowed to clean there. But after her death, I could at last carefully empty that room, undisturbed for thirty years. It revealed the woman I had known, intimately, and the artist, I only perceived. Sorting through and packing unfinished works, drawings, tools and materials, was like touching an inner life. As the biography developed, the distant and the recent past was translated into a living life. I could feel and hear her, conjure up that studio and imagine her quietly, resolutely, creating.

'In 1994 I travelled to Rome and Florence, staying in the houses where Ria had lived, meeting and talking

materials. And there was no foundry expert in *Cire perdue* (Lost Wax casting), which is why the relief sculpture *Dormitian of the Virgin* (1968) is only two dimensional, to allow for "cold casting". The bronze relief *Tabernacle Screen Doors* with almost three-dimensional under-cutting, were sent to England for the Lost Wax process; such delicate casting could not be achieved in New Zealand. The Tabernacle Doors, entitled *Christ has Died-Christ is Risen* (1975-77) have been compared to the Gothic artists Andrea Pisano and Lorenzo Ghiberti.

'Materials and casting problems caused Ria to invent other methods for working in her preferred medium – metal. For example, *Rocking Horse Ride* (1963) has a braised metal armature, moulded with plastic steel, then finely patinated; it is one of many sculptures made by this method. But she also worked in terracotta, wood, lead, slate, stone, mosaic, ceramic,



*Rocking Horse Ride*, 1963, Ria Bancroft, Resin/steel/iron, 4650 x 1550mm, The Suter Gallery collection, Nelson, Photo: The Suter Gallery.

with her Italian friends. Then on to Bath, where she was born, to discover her earliest environment, walking in the streets she knew as a child, and to Bristol where she lived as a young adult. I visited London and Toronto, confirming Ria's associations with those two cities.'

**What is your view about Ria's place in the story of New Zealand art and sculpture?**

'In a nutshell, her arrival in New Zealand was opportune. At the time, Russell Clark (1905-1966) was the only true New Zealand sculptor, and he died four years after Ria settled in Christchurch. Ria filled the hiatus caused by his death; it was as though people were hungry for sculpture.

'In 1963 Ria exhibited the two Italian bronzes *Woman by the Sea* (1961) and *Eclipse* (1962) at *The Group Show*, 1964, Durham Street Art Gallery, CSA. Later, she was invited to join and remained an active member until it was disbanded in 1977.

'It was almost impossible to obtain specialist art

in fact any medium that inspired her.

'Ria shared generously the knowledge attained through years as a working artist in England and Canada, and her training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence. Through this experience, she brought to New Zealand a Renaissance spirit, evident in her sculpture, and as art teacher (1970-74) at Xavier College (now Cathedral College) also in lectures and photographic slide-shows given in response to many group requests. She gave advice to any aspiring artist. Because of her own passion and struggle, she understood people who had dreams. In her capacity as Assessor for the Fine Arts Department at Ilam, University of Canterbury (mid-1960s) her artistic skill and maturity were available to young students.

'During that time the Ministry of Works commissioned artists to enhance new buildings. When Ilam University was under construction Ria, in collaboration with wood carver Pat Mulcahy, was commissioned to create the 9m mural *Forms* (1964-65) for the foyer of the Science Lecture Hall. This work was so successful

the sculptors were soon commissioned to create the panels *Mudpools-Trout-Radiata Pine* (1966) for the New Zealand Broadcasting Studios in Rotorua. Also in 1965, in response to a commission for the Christchurch Airport, Ria made - in silver resin - one of her best loved sculptures, *Horizon*. Manning Intermediate School is still graced by Ria's *City in Space No 1* (1969), a work generations of children have enjoyed.

'In tandem with Government work, Ria received both private and public commissions for religious sculpture, among others, *Angel of St Matthew* (1967) for the new St Matthew's Church, Bryndwr. Due to building expenses, this fine work remains as a maquette; it is exhibited in the church. Cathedral College commissioned *Xavier Madonna* (1968) and *Dormitian of the Virgin* (1968). Four copies of *Dormitian* are privately owned. Sacred Heart College, Auckland, commissioned the unique *Cosmo Genesis* (1970).

consider creating the Kate Sheppard Memorial but she declined due to worsening ill health.

'Thus, in countless ways during three work-filled creative decades, Ria contributed to the New Zealand art scene. In 1976 the New Zealand National Film Unit produced a 15 minute film clip for worldwide distribution. *Three Women* is a visual tribute to the work of three New Zealand artists: Alison Duff, Yvonne Rust and Ria Bancroft. In 1977 the *Tabernacle Screen Doors* were installed in the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament. Ria had become a recognised New Zealand artist.

'In 1998 the Robert McDougall Art Gallery mounted the retrospective exhibition *Three Decades of Sculpture*, a sensitive and fine display of Ria's three decades plus of sculpture.

'At this present time the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, holds many of her sculptures, most notably the bronze *Eclipse* (1962), *The Crowd* (1967) [originally purchased by the New Zealand Government for their embassy in Geneva] and three of her fine portrait heads. The small, exquisite bronze nude *Woman by the Sea* (1961, also entitled *Seated Nude*) is on permanent exhibition.

'Ria's extraordinary life experiences enabled her to produce work of broad conception and humanity. An artist creates from the inner spirit. Ria's sculptures reach out to touch the viewer, engaging the heart as well as the mind. This gift is evident in almost every work, whether realist or abstract.'

### **You have an obvious passion and love for public sculpture.**

'Yes, this was something I did not appreciate until after Ria's death. Now when I see a sculpture I must discover it physically. I remember her hand as she lovingly explored a work, with intense observation. But then, too, I owe her knowledge. Frequently

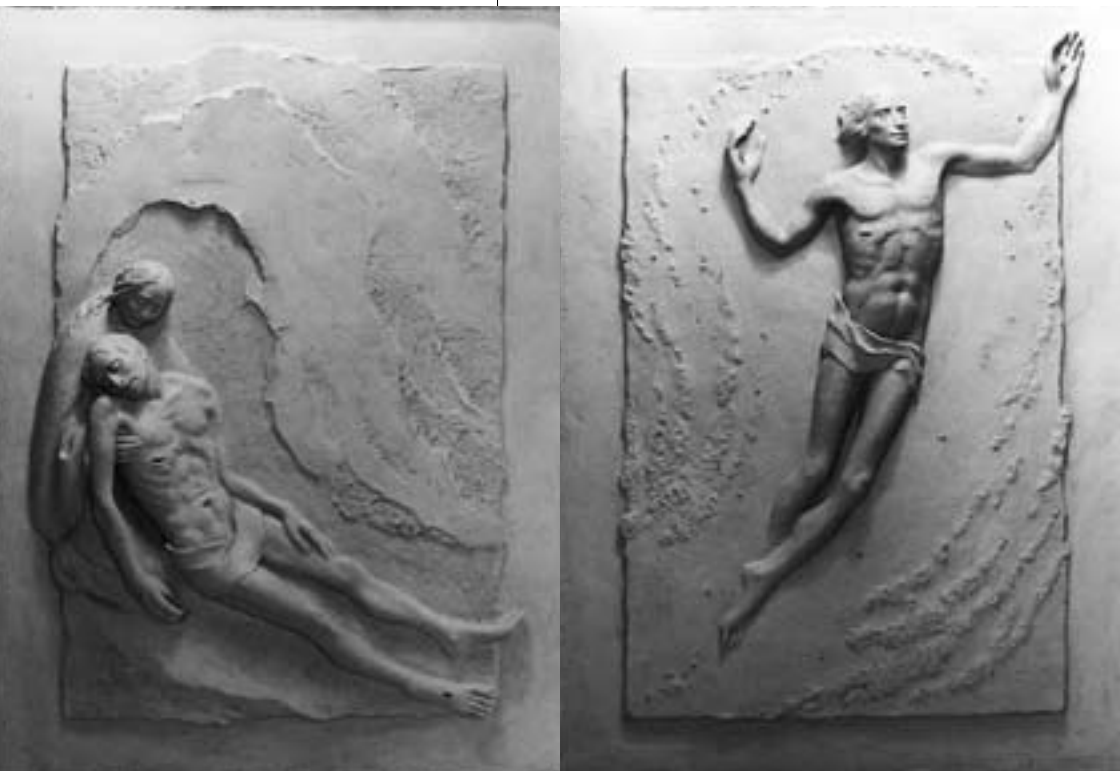
she placed me, a four-year-old, before large art books (to keep me quiet by looking at "pretty pictures"). That was the genesis for all my future interest and knowledge. Sometimes life teaches us unawares, and writing the biography, then lecturing on Ria's work, caused me to open a treasure chest I did not know I possessed.

'Ria taught her students that art is not simply paintings hanging in a gallery, or large statues in public places; but the buildings we live and work in, each cup we use, every chair on which we sit, everything made has some relationship with a creative mind. She inspired people to really *look* at the world, to be excited about it, to relish the beauty; all this, and so much more, is her legacy to New Zealand.

'To be Ria's daughter was a privilege, for which I remain profoundly grateful.'

Peb Simmons moved to New Zealand in 1962. She is married to Aldren and has lived in Christchurch most of her life, which she considers to be her true spiritual home.

**John Stringer**



*Christ had Died-Christ is Risen*, 1975-77, Ria Bancroft, Tabernacle Screen Doors (left and right), Original clay masters for lost wax casting, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu collection, Photo: Aldren Simmons.

The World Council of Churches invited Ria to contribute to the 1979 Melbourne Conference. The resulting sculpture *Thy Kingdom Come*, a combined basalt rock, stone and brass work, was eventually donated to the new Holy Cross Chapel in Chancery Lane, Christchurch. Ria refused any payment for the deeply spiritual work.

'In 1982 Ria and the sculptor Bing Dawe were commissioned to undertake the complete re-ordering of the interior of St Mary's Catholic Church in New Brighton. Inspired by the medieval 7<sup>th</sup> century old English runic poem *Dream of the Rood*, she designed the Altar, Lectern and Baptismal Font. Bing Dawe brought Ria's designs to sculptural life. But she wanted to gift a sculpture to the new interior. The life-sized *Mary, Mother of Jesus* (1983-84) in Oamaru stone became a work of love.

'A commission from All Saints Anglican Church in Dunedin for a metre high *Christus Rex* (1989-90) was to be her last public work.

'Toward the end of her life Ria was approached to