

Getting plastered with Llew Summers

An interview with the McCormack's Bay sculptor

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Llew Summers at home. Photo: John Stringer.

Llewelyn Summers provides alliterative relief among the sculptural fraternity dominated by the three D's: Drummond, Dibble and Dawson. His works are prominently public and a recent controversy about his Stations of the Cross series for the Catholic Cathedral in Barbadoes Street gained him national attention. Over several red wines, grace (a Summers' idiosyncrasy) and a wild venison dinner one recent evening, I dug a little deeper to find out what makes this artist sculpt Christ naked. I discovered a refreshingly candid, honest and spiritual baby-boomer, a shared Methodism, and a shared Linwood Street.

JS: What are you working on at the moment Llew?

'I'm working in plaster, which is new for me. My clay work now feels too compromised. The concrete work is all compromised; it was all modelled in clay. It contradicts what sculpture is about for me. Plaster has a hard surface so you get a better work from it. You can work it back or add to it. Talking to Sam Mahon, that's how he tends to work.'

So the integrity of material is what you're looking for, not hybrid amalgams?

'The problem is, you can't take a plaster mould off

a plaster sculpture. With clay you can easily take a plaster cast off. So with clay sculpture I often take the clay out of the plaster. It's important to start with a better material and plaster is a better material. It's also got texture in it, which you don't tend to get with clay. All my big works are too smooth and they were made too fast. They are made before I have time to step back and study them. You can't hit them; you can't rasp them, so there is never the tension in them that there should be. Clay is like trying to model toothpaste. It goes slop, slop, slop. Plaster is a much better base material.'

You're not going to abandon clay?

'No, it depends. Clay is so fast by comparison, but it's compromised. I've made nearly 800 sculptures and I've only been commissioned five times in my life. All the big works that you see have been made speculatively. If you put six months into a speculative work and it doesn't sell, you're finished. You've got to survive.'

Llew Summers was born in 1947 in Christchurch at the height of the baby boom. More children were born his year than ever before, or after. He did a four-year farm cadet apprenticeship. He'd lived in the same street (Tancred Street) and attended the same school





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(Linwood High School) as Tony Fomison and my father. Fomison did sculpture at Ilam and when he came back from Europe on an arts grant-funded trip in 1967, the same year Summers quit farming, he started carving Oamaru stone. Summers had done a small carving when he was working on the farm, for something to do. He took it across to Fomison who showed him what to do with it. At that time Fomison was exhibitions officer at the CSA and organised Summers' first exhibition under Rusty Laidlaw (1971). It was part of an important era: Summers was downstairs and Neil Dawson was upstairs, having his first exhibition out of Ilam School of Fine Arts.

In the mid-seventies, Summers was a solo father with two young babies. He went on the DPB, his wife having moved to Australia. That's when his work really began to take off. By 1977 he had decided to live off his work. Prior to that he had never considered that as an option. 'The DPB allowed me to make big work. Not much of it was very good, but it was into scale. I had always wanted to be a big carver. That was my dream. The trouble is it's very slow, it has to be commissioned. I could spend three to six months on a carving and it can just sit there. Well, there are still bills to be paid. It's a lot of time to have sitting there.

'I'm not interested in Oamaru stone. It's a good thing to learn on, but basically it's crap. The problem in New Zealand is you can't go anywhere and see someone carving marble. We don't have the history here. It's all new really. People do it with machines; I'm not that way inclined. I like the notion of finding the sculpture in there. Finding tools is hard too. I got a grant in the late eighties to buy some pneumatic tools. I've used those for all my small marble works, but not the big ones I've dreamed of.

'I've taught people who are much more skilled than I am. I look at Michelangelo and I'm completely blown away that he could achieve the level of detail he did, and how he was able to carve into those marble blocks.'

You're obviously a very spiritual man, and your latest work was for the Catholic Church, the Stations of the Cross. Did you have some kind of

epiphany regarding spirituality and faith?

'When I was young I went to church. The Methodist church was an incredibly boring place, I have to say – those bloody raspberry drinks up the front, weren't they shocking? I had always had these nightmares, for years, and I prayed to God that they would go away. And they did, for 40 years. That gave me a belief in God. I'm not really interested in debating religion; I just have a faith that there is more to life than this. There has to be a reason. It's simple like that.'

How did you resolve your spirituality, as an inner repository of ideas?

'It makes me want to do good. Without it I would be rather lost actually. All my work is life-affirming. I'm interested in the symbolists and visionaries: Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon - he is perhaps the best of all - Tony Fomison, Helm Ruifrock is a visionary; but I'm not sure it has a lot to do with my sculpture. I'm not interested in pretty pictures. I'm more interested in something beyond, like those artists.'

In the context of the recent controversy that you've been caught up with, should sculpture be didactic, is there a place for it to be provocative?

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I can see the headline now:

'Summers Into Nudity Big Time'.

'But that is a major issue for me. 99 percent of my work is about the nude, about creating and presenting the nude to Canterbury, the public, helping it become established in the local arts context.'

What do you mean it's a big issue for you?

'Well, there's a denial of the body in society. My work is about the beautification of the body. Simplification. It's about celebrating what we've been given by God. I don't think about it in the context of being provocative. All good art has to have some kind of issue in it, some sense of confrontation. It's got to challenge in some way. It must do one of those things. If you do nothing as an artist, you get no response. So, that's an essential thing. Balthus¹ was cornered once and asked why he painted old men with young women. To paraphrase his words, "in the thirties I was struggling to get a review, eventually I painted an old man with a young woman, maybe I took it too far". I love the simplicity of that. For him it's not deep and meaningful at all. Sex is a real force. If the sex is completely removed from something, what is it? It's nothing.

'You take someone like Freud or Stanley Spencer. They worked for forty years ignoring every kind of -ism. I hate all those -isms, they're all just fashion-driven rubbish. People like to think they're individuals all doing their own thing, but really, look at dribbling paint. How many people paint now using dribbling paint because it's the "in" thing?'

John Stringer

Above: *Play*, Llew Summers, 1978, Cast concrete, 2.5 x 1.2m. Located outside Linwood High School, Christchurch. Photo: Andrew Clarkson.

1 'Balthus', 1908-2001, Balthazar Klossowski de Rola.