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Horny Sticks and Whispering Lines - Ian Gentle's Sculptures

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Horny Sticks And Whispering Lines

Ian Gentle, *Untitled*, 2008, plant roots, dimensions variable. Commissioned by University of Wollongong Library.

Ian Gentle's sculptures have been described as drawings "growing off the wall." Constructed from sticks collected from the bush, Gentle's ability to distil form into a potent balance of wit, poetry, and abstraction is one that flutters at the edges of Eastern calligraphy and Australian bush mythology.

By Gina Fairley

Ian Gentle is one of those artists who has always been at the edges, at times living a less than conventional life, positioning himself outside the urban art centers and arguably denied the mainstream celebration his work deserves. The originality and integrity of his freestanding or wall-based sculptures is impressive and they beg the questions: Why is this visionary sculptor and masterly technician not more widely acclaimed in Australia despite his work being held in collections in places as widespread as Dallas, Taiwan, and Beijing? Have handcrafted found

objects dissipated in the wake of market-driven manufacturing and art fashion, or has sculpture been forced into a different position through the popularization of installation and new media? These are questions that little concern Ian Gentle (b.1945) but they nevertheless reverberate in the corridors of thought when one considers his work.

It was with a sense of rediscovery, like an itinerant traveler, that I recently returned to the sculptures of Ian Gentle spontaneously viewed in a Sydney gallery. Lofty anthropomorphic forms that could

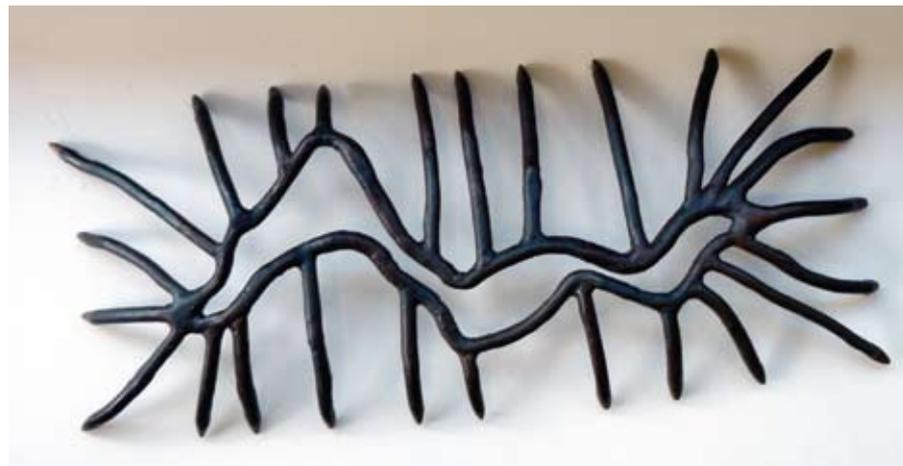
be described as appearing prehistoric or fossil-like bewitched with their amorous play between positive and negative space. They created a spatial tension as delightful and familiar as flirting; their ambiguous forms sliding between plant and animal life, abstracted yet discernable. But it is their materiality that truly captures our imagination. Constructed from eucalyptus branches, the sculptures are at odds with the speed of contemporary life and slow us to real time with their organic simplicity and subtlety. Such dynamism in a form is a sculptor's dream.

Growing up in the 1950s in Mount Isa, a remote outback post in Northwest Queensland and one of Australia's richest mining deposits, Gentle's was a childhood where the landscape was omnipresent. That kind of visual landscape permeates one's very foundation—its sun-baked earth home to peculiar insects, animals, and native plants; its intense light bleaching detail. These are the timeless elements that enter Gentle's art, pared away to pure studies in line, light, and form. One can easily make the leap to Asian calligraphy or the optical shimmer of Australian Aboriginal art with its totemic quality and inherent connections to the natural world. As curator Deborah Hart describes, "[Gentle's]... work is not a literal transcription of nature as much as an intuitive process of extraction, construction, and regeneration."¹

While much has been made of Gentle's empathy with nature as a bushman, it was an urban environment that unleashed his unique visual vocabulary. Gentle studied at the National Art School in Sydney during the 1970s; an era stepping out of a long-held figurative tradition and one seated within the mythology of the Australian landscape saluted by artists such as Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, and Arthur Boyd. Ian Gentle was among a new generation of artists that defined contemporary art in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s, deeply influenced by the shifts brought about by two pivotal exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria, *Two Decades of American Painting* (1966) and *The Field* (1968), the first survey of geometric-abstraction in Australia. Artists such as John Firth-Smith, Michael Johnson, Ralph Balson, Bert Flugelman, Colin Lanceley, Ron Robertson-Swann, and Clement Meadmore, among others, pushed their media into new spatial relationships, albeit in two or three dimensions. Whilst Gentle was not part of this group of hard-edge abstractionists and 'heavy



Ian Gentle, *Whispering Ant*, 1992, eucalyptus wood, approximately 400 x 250 x 15 cm. University of Wollongong Art Collection.



Ian Gentle, *Low tide Low life*, 1988, silica bronze, approximately 60 x 40 x 15 cm. University of Wollongong Art Collection.

metal' exponents, they signaled a fever that changed the way artists worked and that sense of liberation, and reductionist principles was embraced by Gentle.

Starting as a painting student, it was not long before Gentle found objects—urban junk—that made their way to his canvases as linear elements. His ability finds an elegant line in a dirty exhaust pipe, for example, suspended and hovering over a painted surface with a lyricism and inherent tension, like the tea leaves in the bottom of the cup. It ushered in a vocabulary that would dominate Gentle's later career. Installation gave Gentle that vehicle for personal expression. In 1979, he won the prestigious Blake Prize for Religious Art with his *Roadside Altar Piece Comas* (1979), an installation that caused

some controversy for its irreverent use of everyday materials—rusty exhaust pipes, treadless tires—literally litter found at the edge of the road. Randomly arranged into an alter-like assemblage, its rough materials sat at odds with the marble opulence of the Commonwealth Bank foyer in which the exhibition was presented. Audiences of the day grappled with its definition as art and, more pointedly, were horrified by its elevated spiritualism as ‘religious art.’

Perhaps the most significant catalyst for Gentle’s sculptures, however, was a move to the South Coast in 1980, a picturesque strip of coastal rainforest within driving distance of Sydney. It was here that he started to use eucalyptus tree branches; first as a still-life set up to draw, but quickly becoming art materials in their own right. Gentle started tracing the sticks with charcoal on butcher’s paper; the paper was removed and the newly arrived at constructions lifted the drawings into three-dimensional space. The forms increasingly became more animated, anthropomorphic, and ambitious. Gentle’s found line of the city had moved to the Bush.

This marriage between drawing and sculpture has remained an important aspect of Gentle’s practice. Hart observed, “On one level Gentle’s use of found bush materials engenders a special correspondence and integration between the formal components of the works and the content that informs them.”² What Hart suggests is that Gentle’s sculptures were ‘lived;’ he breathed life into the everyday that surrounded him from a lowly ant to a noxious weed. For him there was no hierarchy of material or form. Gentle delighted during our recent conversation, “I like mongrel

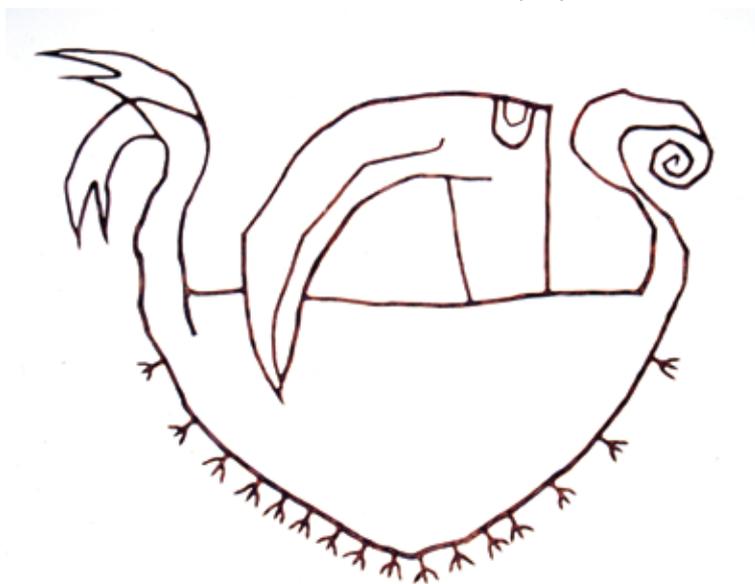


Ian Gentle, *Low Life*, 2008, eucalyptus timber, 136 x 38 x 10 cm. Image: Courtesy of Stella Downer Fine Art, Sydney.

animals and plants—I have a bonsai lantana...[I like] a kind of bush picnic in suburbia.”³

Living and working in a turn-of-the-century School of Arts hall from the late 1980s through the 1990s, Gentle stored his materials in the exposed rafters of this cluttered studio. He observed their shadows dancing on the ceiling in the moonlight, caught between a dreamscape and the next work. They offered an enchanted theater of lines and moved the work into a more layered space where the shadows became an active element of the completed sculptures, illuminating them from within. Take, for example, his seminal work, *Whispering Ant* (1992) featured in Gentle’s solo exhibition *The Found Line* at the Wollongong City Gallery in 1992 and now a focal work of the University of Wollongong Art Collection, where Gentle taught sculpture for many years.

Almost four-meters tall, it vibrates with the energy of ants in their industrious to-and-fro, yet the negative internal space of the sculpture has the slow meandering of a thought—a whisper. It is appropriately hung in the foyer of the University’s library, which is a hub of quiet energy and thought. The form is held together by the foundation of a rectangle, akin to the efficiency of 20th-century geometric abstraction but enlivened by a rigorous stacking of linear elements that walk their way around the form with spiky intensity. They at once repel with their spear-like encrustation and yet collectively they are softened into an elegant, organic ovoid. It is this constant ricochet of emotion, sensuality, and ambiguity that gives Gentle’s sculptures their unique charge and spatial animation.



Ian Gentle, *Dagg in Duckboat*, 1997, eucalyptus wood, 207 x 237 x 3 cm. Collection of Wollongong City Gallery. Gift of the Artist, 1997.



Ian Gentle, *Bird in Boat*, 1990, eucalyptus wood, 134 x 138 cm. University of Wollongong Library Collection

This device of a negative drawn element follows Gentle's career and can be traced from the earlier bronze sculpture, *Low tide low life* (1988), which is clearly a precursor to *Whispering Ant* and connects implicitly with a likewise-titled version in 2008 constructed from eucalyptus wood. Gentle's forms translate easily to bronze and it is a medium, like printmaking, to which he has repeatedly returned. Similar to this stylized movement, it is an easy conversation for audiences to follow between *Low tide low life* and *Low Life* (2008) where the central meandering line—a negative form—is replaced with a positive one—a single line. Its serpentine sensibility is thwarted by the addition of bird-like feet, intervening 'prongs' that fuse and confuse a known symbology from the natural world.

These 'feet' or prongs are another drawn element revisited across the breadth of Gentle's career. In the sculptural installation *Hoary Harry and Giggly Gert* (1988) they take on a more functional role as the sculpture is lifted off the wall and stands soaring oversized in the gallery space. We move in and around the objects in a kind of dance with two figures, charmed by them as they seemingly flirt with raw emotion. The bold sexuality of *Harry* is unmistakable, turned towards the more delicate *Gert*, who seems to delight with an internal energy, welling up and bubbling over. We witness this same internal energy in the wall-based sculpture *Salivating Croc* (2007), commissioned for the University of Wollongong Library. It is animated with the skeletal mythology of a natural history museum and offers a subtle link to institutional systems of classification favored by libraries and museums. But unlike the nomenclature of such classifications, Gentle doesn't isolate viewers through his titles. They offer a humorous entry point to the work.

A good example is *Bird in Boat* (1990); it is exactly what it states. An abstracted bird morphs into a vessel, sharp ends turning inwards to wrap the subject loosely within a circular form. It sits flat in space—a drawn line on the white

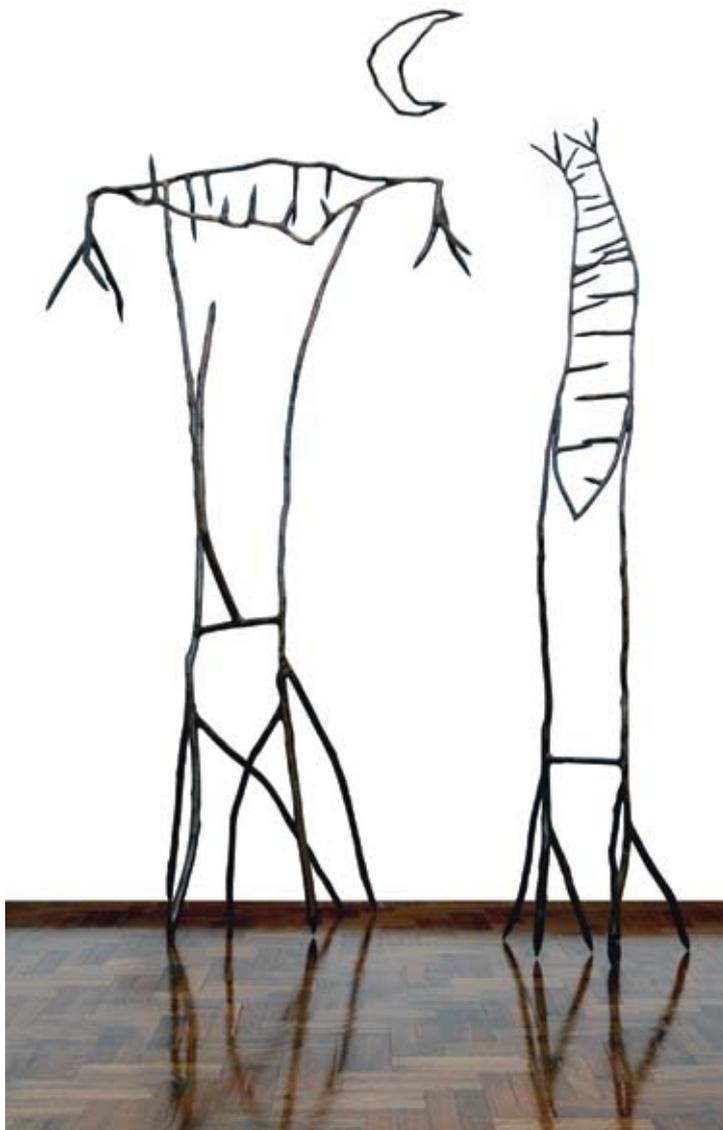
page of a wall—corralling the available light. This unpretentious clarity and truth underlines the very essence of the man himself.

Over time the forms arguably have become more abstracted. Take the recent works *Bull Cocky* (2001) and *Two-up Cockatoo* (2008), for example, again using the foundation of a circular form. The title, while a trigger for association, is less necessary as a vehicle to navigate the work. *Bull Cocky* could equally be titled moon shark, for example. It is the unleashing of imagination that is important. As the pair of sticks curve, giving a sense of physical weight, they meet confronting each other with sharpened points, repelling as a magnet and allowing a charged passage of entry to an internal island. The viewer navigates their way across these works, jumping between an aerial or topographic reading to the ingrained lyricism of childhood narratives. The result

is a sophisticated recipe of humor, poetry, and a refined abstraction.

What these examples illustrate is a remarkable coherency across the breadth of Gentle's 25-year career. His iconic elements—what could be described as a type of personal hieroglyphics—are animated and fused from a dictionary of linear memories that stretch time, the memory of the smell of gum leaves, of childhood play with insects or an aunt's camphor-ridden treasures, of Gentle's hopscotch from the bush to suburbia and a distinctive Australian abstraction. Today, Ian Gentle is 'farming' his own timber, grown in suburbia. The first piece was a suite of five upturned roots that stand precariously on honed points. The roots have the energy of tumbleweed, their action halted in a moment of stasis. It is in keeping with Gentle's words, "It is like the Japanese haiku which is very essence-bound. Even when my work goes over the top, I'd still like to have that quality."⁴

It is not the cataloguing of roots or a green grow-your-own philosophy that Gentle is interested in nurturing through his contemporary sculpture. As always, it is a continued study in drawing and weight and the constant desire to find new expression. Gentle plays an important role in Australian art history, stitching together varied influences, vocabularies, and narratives with a technician's precision, and a unique voice. Δ



Ian Gentle, *Hoary Harry and Giggling Gert*, 1988, eucalyptus wood, 287 x 158 x 70 cm. Collection of Wollongong City Gallery. Gift of the Wollongong Gallery Society, 1989.

Notes:

1. Deborah Hart, *Identities: Art From Australia – Contemporary Australian art to Taiwan*, published by University of Wollongong and Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1994, p.77.
2. Deborah Hart, "The Found Line," catalogue essay published by Wollongong City Gallery, 1992.
3. Writer in conversation with the artist, March 2009.
4. Gentle quoted in conversation with Deborah Hart, catalogue essay "The Found Line", 1992.

Gina Fairley is the Asia contributing editor for *World Sculpture News and Asian Art News*.