

In conversation with

STEPHEN RALPH

KAY ABUDE Many of your sculptures forge an unlikely union of oppositional materials. You have combined cast concrete, turned wood, terracotta and gold leaf to create highly textured and detailed surfaces. How did the merging of these materials come about in your practice?

STEPHEN RALPH The merging of these materials came about in a similar way they might if you were building a house. In some ways I see these sculptures as architectural projects with their concrete foundations, timber floor, golden walls and terracotta roof.

KA How are your sculptures made?

SR When I made this group of sculptures, I started by modelling a section in clay. I might come across something that interests me, like a pinecone, a decorative detail on a building. Or it might be a particular section of a sculpture, like a log that has been carved in marble. I like those crossovers of materials; it reminds me of a game of Chinese Whispers and how the original message gets changed. I then make a mould and cast it in concrete or other times I pour the concrete directly into a clay object to get an impression of its internal space. Usually I build the next sections directly on top or below this first piece but there are also times when I might use an object I've made previously. The first time I took a box full of terracotta objects to the local pottery club to be fired in their kiln they were concerned that my objects might explode but at the same time cheerfully congratulated me on having such enthusiastic children.

KA The six works on display for *Assembly* have a unique trophy-esque aesthetic while also mimicking the proportions of the classical bust. They are, however, portraits of a different kind. They resemble mutated plant forms, awkwardly organic, yet solid and permanent in materiality. They also evoke a strong resonance with architecture. Greek mythology is also referenced in the titles of *Lotus Eater*, *Eileithya* and *Ambrosia*. Can you elaborate on your influences and the themes represented in your work?

SR About ten years ago I picked up a book on Gaudi that a friend found at the op shop. I couldn't read the Spanish text but was amazed by the images of Gaudi's work and the way he took iconography, styles, technique, materials and technology from everywhere, from the far east to ancient Greece and created these beautiful buildings that resonate with life yet also have a timeless quality. I try to work in a similarly intuitive way.

A friend who is an archaeologist at the Athens Institute at Sydney University saw these sculptures, and recognised in the motifs that I had used, symbols that represented personifications of ancient Greek gods. I worked out the titles for these works with her in conversation over a bottle of red wine.





LEFT

Stephen Ralph
Sicilian Venus

2011

concrete,
wood, gold leaf
100 x 47 x 42cm

Private Collection, Sydney
Courtesy the artist and
The Commercial, Sydney
Photo: Jessica Maurer

RIGHT

Stephen Ralph
Eileithya

2013

concrete, terracotta,
24 carat gold leaf,
hardwood

97 x 29.8 x 30 cm
Courtesy the artist and
The Commercial, Sydney
Photo: Jessica Maurer