

Inge King Memorial Service

NGV Great Hall, Monday 9 May 2016, 10:30 am

I'm deeply honoured to be speaking today about Inge's extraordinary career. I'm conscious of there being many others eminently qualified to speak, including Professors Judith Trimble and Sasha Grishin, each of whom have published eloquent monographs on Inge, and Professors Margaret Plant and Jenny Zimmer, who have both written informed, extended essays for two of Inge's earliest survey exhibitions. In addition the NGV's curator of Australian art, David Hurlston, and former NGV curator and recently retired director of the Geelong Gallery, Geoffrey Edwards, have both worked closely with Inge in the sensitive presentation of two retrospectives held here at the gallery, in 1992 and 2014. In the presence of such a wealth of knowledge and experience, I'm frankly humbled to have been asked to speak.

I'd like to briefly mention how I came to know Inge, if only to contextualise my appearance here. Inge was arguably the best-known member of the Centre Five group, which forms the subject of my PhD thesis. I began reading about her work in 2008, while still living in Ireland and planning a return to Australia after a nine-year absence. The reading prompted faint memories of seeing her work at the Queensland Art Gallery while still a student in Brisbane.

The following year, six months after embarking on doctoral studies at Melbourne University, I finally met my appointed supervisor, Professor Charles Green, who had until then been on sabbatical. One of the first things he said to me at that meeting was: 'Now, you do know I'm Inge King's godson, don't you?' Well, no, I didn't. But as I rapidly gathered, his father, the painter Doug Green, had been a friend of Grahame King's since art school days and was a witness at Grahame and Inge's wedding in London in 1950. Not long after this initial meeting, Charles visited Inge at Warrandyte and perceived her distress at sorting through Grahame's studio contents. He promised to help secure the assistance of someone to fully catalogue the collection. Thus it was that, towards the end of 2009, I began my weekly visits by bus out to Warrandyte to work with Inge in Grahame's studio.

At first I submitted to Inge's dictates regarding documentation, insisting only that the details be entered in a database rather than simply a typed list. Only some years later, after Inge had moved into a nursing home and I began house-sitting at Warrandyte twice a week, did I rebel slightly and go back to document the work more thoroughly, spending many late nights up a ladder photographing Grahame's work, cropping digital images and inserting them into the database.

In the interim I had the privilege of weekly stimulating conversations with Inge, both in hers and Grahame's studios – for she also asked me to update the lists of her works that Judy Trimble had patiently maintained up until then. On these visits we'd always pause for the civilised rituals of morning tea, which was usually taken on the sunny terrace amidst the rockery and soaring gums, and lunch, which Inge usually prepared herself – simply and delightfully (it was the first time I'd seen salad presented in a basket rather than a bowl) – though in later years we decamped to a local café before I drove Inge back to the nursing home. During these breaks we talked at length on many topics, particularly Inge's life and worldview. Her mood during these conversations was often reflective, sometimes self-critical. On other days she was more mischievous, recounting anecdotes that deflated pomposity and overblown egos. It was a bracing mix of brutal honesty, feistiness and retrospective balancing of accounts. Slowly I gained an understanding of this remarkable woman's views and experiences, while at the same time enjoying the company of someone I was fortunate to call friend.

Inge's origins in Berlin are well known. She was the youngest of four daughters, born into a progressively minded family and imbued with that particularly Germanic sense of *Bildung*, or self-cultivation through education and culture. As a school child she began admiring the work of the German Expressionists – in particular, those great humanist sculptors Ernst Barlach and Käthe Kollwitz, the latter whose advice she sought, in her late teens, later describing the meeting as 'one of the great encounters of my life'. Determining upon a similar path, she undertook an apprenticeship in the studio of the wood carver Hermann Nonnenmacher, who shared her admiration of Barlach. Having gained a level of proficiency in modelling and carving, she enrolled at the renowned Berlin Academy in 1937. One of her close friends there was the posthumously acclaimed painter Charlotte Salomon. Both women persisted in

seeking out progressive work in the increasingly suffocating atmosphere of the Third Reich, visiting the so-called 'Degenerate Art' exhibition when it toured to Berlin – not to mock but to secretly admire. Inge was fortunate to escape Germany in the summer of 1939, sponsored by a sympathetic family in Britain. Salomon perished at Auschwitz in 1943.

In London Inge studied for a term at the Royal Academy Schools, where she found the teaching as academic and uninspiring as it had been at the Berlin Academy. When the schools closed for the war, Inge made her way north first to Northampton and then to Glasgow, where she spent the remainder of the war, initially as a student at the Glasgow School of Art. Inge always recalled her years in Glasgow with great fondness. She was welcomed into the homes of fellow students including Margaret McKenzie, who would later immigrate to West Australia and, under her married name Margaret Priest, become renowned as a modernist sculptor. Under the benign influence and benevolent eye of their teacher, Benno Schotz, Inge felt free to work unimpeded. Through Schotz she also met senior visiting émigré artists such as Jankel Adler and Josef Herman, as well as Glaswegian innovators such as sculptor George Innes, who encouraged her to abandon the classical figurative tradition in which she was trained. After completing her post-diploma in sculpture, in June 1943, Inge worked in nurseries, teaching art to the very young, while in her spare time began seeking new means of expression through a cubist analysis of form and volume. However, opportunities for such work were – perhaps inevitably – limited in Glasgow, so in 1947 she moved south, settling just outside London at the Abbey Art Centre.

A small contingent of Australian artists had, by then, settled at the Abbey, likewise attracted by the affordable rent, studio space, communal meals and proximity to London's galleries. Mary Webb, Robert Klippel and James Gleeson were already in residence, while Grahame King arrived shortly afterwards. At the Abbey, after some initial cubist experiments, Inge began working in a more organic abstract mode – inspired particularly by Henry Moore. In March 1949 she held her first solo exhibition at E.L.T. Mesens' London Gallery. While the show attracted almost no notice or sales, it marked the advent of Inge's professional career.

Shortly afterwards, she spent six months in Paris, where she was inspired by exhibitions of Kandinsky and Duchamp-Villon. In southern France she also made pen studies of medieval statuary. This combined interest in the Romanesque, the archaic, in early modernist abstraction and contemporary non-objective art, was something she would share back at the Abbey with the fellow residents, particularly – later in 1950 – with Grahame King and ‘the enfant terrible’ of post-war British art, Alan Davie.

In September 1949 Inge sailed for New York with six carvings from the Abbey and a letter of introduction to the abstract expressionist sculptor Herbert Ferber. Through Ferber she met the likes of Rothko and Newman and revelled in the stimulation of the New York School. She also met sculptors Alexander Calder, Louise Nevelson and Jacques Lipchitz – encounters she later rarely mentioned, finding instead the painters’ energy and innovation more invigorating. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, she had a memorable interview with former Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius, who presented her with a copy of his friend László Moholy-Nagy’s book, *Vision in Motion* – a text that proved seminal to Inge’s thinking about sculpture as something to move through and around. The repercussions of this shift in thinking would be evident in her first major public commissions in the 1970s.

Upon returning to the Abbey in May 1950, things ‘clicked’ – as she put it – with Grahame. Both were keen to settle down and start a family, and put the war years behind them. They married in a London registry office and, in January 1951, sailed for Melbourne. ‘The Kings’, as they rapidly became known, were a formidable pair in 1950s Melbourne. Their joint exhibitions showcased non-objective form in two- and three-dimensions and attracted the attention of other committed abstractionists including Roger Kemp, who, with his wife Merle, would become good friends. The market for non-objective work was extremely limited, but the Kings subsidised their efforts through practical means: Grahame as a commercial artist and Inge through the production of hand-beaten silver and copper jewellery.

Inge was one of a very small band of sculptors in Melbourne who were then interested in non-representational abstract work. Along with Julius Kane, Clifford Last and Norma Redpath she formed the Group of Four, holding two exhibitions with them at

Melbourne University's Architecture School in an attempt to highlight the sympathetic relation between abstract modern sculpture and architecture. Later, in 1961, the Group of Four joined with Lenton Parr, Vincas Jomantas and Teisutis Zikaras in forming Centre Five, the seminal group that agitated throughout the sixties for greater public and institutional appreciation of modern sculpture and, in particular, for the more wide-spread use of sculpture in modern architecture.

One architect particularly receptive to Inge's work was Robin Boyd, who, in 1952, designed the King's home at Warrandyte. Towards the end of the decade Boyd requested the Kings' practical assistance in realising a large steel fountain the firm of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd had designed for Fitzroy Gardens. Inge made some necessary alterations to the design and, together with Grahame and their neighbour, engineer Herb Henke, built the fountain in the garden at Warrandyte. The friendship with Boyd endured. In latter years it evolved into a special relationship with the Robin Boyd Foundation, particularly with Tony Lee who became a much-valued friend.

Inge took some years to adjust to Australia, particularly to the untidiness of the Australian bush, which she regularly described as 'difficult to conquer'. By 1960, she had begun to respond to this environment: her renowned *Bush Family*, in the Mildura collection, marking an attempt to contrast with the bush while also obliquely referencing it. As the decade progressed, she began working solely in welded steel and with this medium found the means to produce work that could stand up to the Australian environment. Inge's work of the sixties drew on a vocabulary of archaic forms – totemic observers, oracles and ancestral figures, ancient standing stones and agglomerations of boulders populated her repertoire during these years. Many were painted all-over black, lending further visual weight when positioned in the sun-dappled bush landscape that increasingly gripped her imagination.

At the same time, as these first series of welded steel works developed, Inge returned to the field of education. Between 1961 and 1975 she worked part-time for the Institute of Early Childhood Development, known as the Kindergarten Teachers' College. Working under the inspirational leadership of Heather Lyon and alongside such innovative educators as Hirschfeld-Mack, she helped a generation of

kindergarten teachers develop a sense of form and awareness of materiality that would benefit their young charges. From 1976 to 1987 Inge joined Grahame at RMIT, where, as a part-time instructor in the sculpture department, she took pleasure in getting to know the students and following their progress over the years. Indeed she continued to regularly visit museums and galleries well into her late nineties, taking an informed and sensitive interest in the work of contemporary artists such as Bruce Armstrong and Emily Floyd.

The decade of the seventies saw Inge emerge as a public sculptor of international standing. Her first two major public commissions, the RAAF Memorial for Anzac Parade, Canberra, and the Schonell Fountain at the University of Queensland, gave her the experience of working with structural engineers and architects and, in particular, the firm of J. K. Fasham's, who would go on to fabricate all her major outdoor works. Indeed Keith Fasham and, later, his son John, would become integral to Inge's career, helping her realise an impressive roll-call of public works, not least of which was *Forward Surge*. Architect Roy Grounds commissioned *Forward Surge* in 1973 for the Arts Centre lawn, envisaging it as a visual link between Hamer Hall and the Theatres Building. Enlarged to this scale, the work perfectly fitted Inge's desire to encourage people to physically interact with her work. It ranks as a monument of the highest order. Like Richard Serra's contemporaneous but ill-fated *Tilted Arc*, for New York's Federal Plaza, *Forward Surge* has animated its site to such an extent that it irrevocably changes the lawn from merely a place to pause in the city's bustle to a place in which to congregate, socialise and orient ourselves to the surrounding buildings. These deceptively simple, gestalt forms of Inge's from the seventies are certainly in dialogue with overseas developments in minimalism, yet they retain at their core a humanist concern for us, the viewers, and a desire to inspire us with their gravity-defying lightness and subtle shifts in perspective.

Throughout the 1980s Inge consolidated her reputation with outstanding exhibitions at Marianne Baillieu's Realities Gallery in Toorak, and, from 1988 onwards, with the Purves family-owned Australian Galleries in Collingwood. The works shown ranged from a very personal series of table-top sculptures, arranged like so many Brechtian stage-sets, to the tall totemic primitive forms such as *Jabaroo*, in the grounds of the McClelland Gallery. In between these were the elegantly monumental works that

toyed with different configurations of discs, arches, torsion and tension, including the impishly titled *Two is a Crowd*, at Carrick Hill, and *Crimson Mandala*, which flexes and folds in on itself like a butterfly in the gallery at Bendigo.

In 1989, however, this series of elegant abstractions came to an abrupt halt. An invitation from architects Bates Smart McCutcheon to submit a proposal for the remodeled foyer of ICI House (now Orica House) prompted Inge to embark on a new direction. Faced with a difficult design remit, she began experimenting with cut-out shapes, reminiscent of Matisse's late cut-outs, collaged into a low-relief mural. The dancing forms that resulted sparked a series of monumental dancing figures cast in bronze that encapsulated her mature *joie de vivre*. The subsequent series of bronze angels and birds were a natural progression from this development. Inspired by earlier modernists such as Klee, Matisse and her original idol Barlach, and liberated by a sense of hard-won freedom to work however she chose, these bronze works of the 1990s speak of Inge's emotional life: one that ranged from capriciousness to curiosity, pensiveness to euphoria.

Never one to remain still, in 2004 Inge took yet another unanticipated yet electrifying turn. Inspired by televised images of outer space transmitted from the Hubble Telescope, she embarked on what is known as the celestial rings series. Each work was conceived in humble balsa wood, which she hand-cut and pinned together, before entrusting to Ewen Coates to cast in bronze. She then oversaw the patination of each one and allowed it to mature in the studio, allowing her to study it from different angles, until she had decided upon whether or not to enlarge it in stainless steel. For this next step she relied upon sculptor Robert Hook to faithfully translate the work to the desired scale. The best known of this final, magnificent series are surely *Rings of Jupiter*, here in the NGV collection, and *Rings of Saturn*, which perches and pivots atop its hill at the entrance to Heide in Bulleen. Both works engender a sense of marvel and wonder that reflects Inge's own engagement with the universe around her.

Over the past four decades Inge garnered a wealth of honours. She was granted survey shows at Mildura in 1975, the University of Melbourne in 1982, Deakin University in 1990, Bendigo Gallery in 1995, Drill Hall Gallery at ANU in 2002, the McClelland Gallery in 2004, and of course two retrospectives here at the NGV in

1992 and 2014. Inge was awarded Officer of the Order of Australia for services to Australian art, two honorary doctorates from Deakin and RMIT, a Visual Arts Emeritus Award from the Australia Council in 2009 and – fittingly – the inaugural Dame Elisabeth Murdoch Lifetime Achievement award in 2015. Earlier this year she was also inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women.

It's a deep privilege to have known, worked with and been entrusted with the friendship of such an artist. I will always be grateful for the time we shared and the insights she enabled. Rest in peace Inge.

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