



# Out of Asia

by Alison Carroll

*Heide*

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

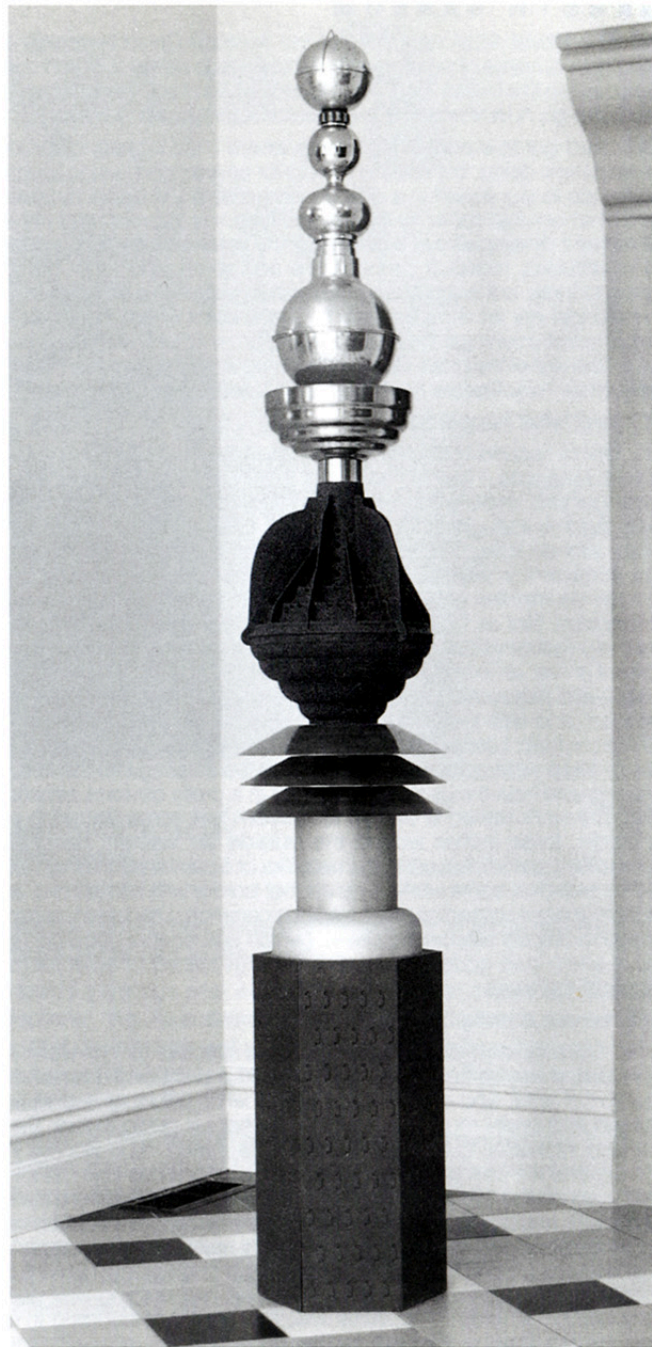
Robert Owen was born in Sydney in 1937 and studied at the National Art School, Sydney, from 1958-62. He lived in Greece from 1963-66 and in London from 1966-75.

He has exhibited his work in 44 group exhibitions from 1966 in Australia, Europe and Asia, including at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1970), the 38th Venice Biennale (1978), the Biennale of Sydney (1979 and 1986), Australian Perspecta, Sydney (1981 and 1985), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (1982), Art Gallery of Western Australia (1983), Continuum in Japan 1983, ARC, Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France (1983), the Biennale des Friedens, Kunsthaus Hamburg (1985), Air And Space Studio, London (1985), the Third Australian Sculpture Triennial, Melbourne (1987), the Olympiad of Art, Seoul (1988) and the International Exhibition of Steel Sculpture, Chiba, Japan (1989).

He has held 39 individual exhibitions in Australia, New Zealand, Europe and UK, including at Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne in 1971, 72, 74 and 77, Coventry Gallery Sydney, in 1975, 76, 78, 80, and 82, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney in 1984 and 85, United Artists Gallery, Melbourne in 1987, at Victorian College of the Art Gallery, Melbourne, The Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery and Artspace, Sydney in 1988, and at City Gallery, Melbourne in 1989.

His work has been written about in the journals: *Art in America* (September 1970; 169/1, 1981), *Art in Australia* (16, 1979; 24, 2, Summer 1986), *Art International* (Summer 1979; XXV 5/6, 1982), *Flash Art* (no.90-91, 1979), *D'ars Periodico d'arte Contemporanea* (XXI, 92, 1980), *Aspect* (5/2, 1980), *ZX* (6, Winter 1980), *Art Monthly* (57, 1982), *Art & Text* (1984), *Tension* (9, 1986) and *Arforum* (November 1986) as well as in exhibition catalogues to the Venice Biennale and the Biennale of Sydney, *Frame of Reference*, George Paton Gallery 1980, *Anzart* 1982, *Ormond College Welcomes New Art*, 1987, *What is this thing called Science?* 1987 and books including Ken Scarlett *Australian Sculpture*, 1980, Paul Taylor (ed) *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980* and Paul Guerin *Trace of a Silent Bell*, City Gallery, 1989. A major reference is George Alexander *Robert Owen Transits*, Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery, 1988.

Robert Owen currently lives and works in Melbourne.



**A New Body** 1986-87 (Cat. No. 15)  
Courtesy City Gallery, Melbourne



## ROBERT OWEN

AC: How long have you been interested in ideas to do with Asia, and why?

RO: In the late 1950s I was given a book of Walt Whitman's poetry, which was an extraordinary revelation that helped explain experiences I had had a number of years earlier. I had spent a lot of time on my own in the bush, in what Bachelard has called states of poetic reverie; experiences which, at the time, were both amazing and terrifying.

The late 1950s was also a time of Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, a cult book students were beginning to read, and *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, another gift from a friend, which unveiled further understanding of my earlier experiences. Through this, and a little book of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, I began my 'search for identity' and interest in eastern philosophy.

Later, in Greece, I arrived at a point with my work where everything I was doing came from somewhere else. I was a vehicle for history. I stopped working for about 18 months, made a lateral shift in my position and began again to make art from what seemed then a very different point of view. I began to see art as research and to use those sources (philosophy, physics, myths, etc.), rather than Picasso . . . and the history of art. I wanted to work from inner experiences; to understand polarities, the nature of transformation, and to make works about interconnectedness.

AC: Can you elaborate a little on the connection with Asia?

RO: The Asian part of my work is not intentionally overt: it doesn't look like something from India or Bali. I'm not using those translatable forms. It's more in the relationship to the way I feel and think about my work. It's like a harmonic relationship between things; an awareness; a reflection of associations; being in the centre of your being. In Zen it says 'there is simply all of this'. I slip into this a lot when working, letting go of the structuring aspects of the ego (that want to dominate and control materials) and respond to things as a matter of inevitability.

One of the great challenges is the pleasure of installations: to examine and charge a space; to use a space as an active component of a work. It's like language: putting together a syntax of forms to cohere in perception, and unfolding a poetic field through the process.

AC: And the work in *Out of Asia*?

RO: The sculptures for this exhibition could be 'read' symbolically as including Asian ideas, such as yin and yang, although I would be reluctant to 'ground' any one reading into them.

They are built in layers of harmony and balance. Each element, each form is employed in a way that is similar to music. A force gathers, reaches intensities, and expires. The tall one, *Neti-Neti*, meaning 'not this, not that' in Hindi, has a sense of a transformer or transmitter. The other, *A New Body*, rounder and more sensuous, could be suggestive of the stereometrical architecture of Buddhist stupas. For me though, they are the outcome of play. Through uncertainty, search and ambiguity a force gathers as though from a void and takes concrete form. They are a very different way of working to that of installations.

AC: At the beginning you highlighted the 'sixties' experience of most young people in Australia, which is often overlooked.

RO: Yes. Time and distance became very clear after I left for Europe in 1963. Travelling by boat for six weeks, one was assailed by all these experiences of the East before arriving finally at that place called England. Travelling through the Indonesian islands to Singapore, across to India, Bombay, Aden, the Suez Canal to Greece, was an extraordinarily exotic experience that implanted Australia's remoteness in my mind.

When I was in Europe I always saw the place that I was coming from as east. It was a long, long way away and not England.

AC: And the east in your everyday life?

RO: I studied Kriya Yoga in India: an everyday practice of a physical and centring process.