

# CULTURE

Edited by  
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Inside sculptor Carol Crawford's studio  
sanctuary; interior designer Lee Broom's  
bright future; and Aldous Harding  
gets serious about joy

LET THERE  
BE LIGHT

Carol Crawford in her Sydney studio.

# SHAPING THE NARRATIVE

*Sculptor CAROL  
CRAWFORD's creations  
are a labour of love —  
and storytelling, as ELLE  
McCLURE discovers*



I'm sitting in Carol Crawford's whitewashed Sydney studio, where light gushes in through large, low windows, dappled by the trees that line the street outside. It shines fondly on the sculptures — both finished and nearly-there — she has displayed carefully around the room. As we walk through the space, she considers each piece, reverently talking about its meaning and the origins of the stone. "I do what the stone tells me," she says humbly. "I'm very good at interpreting what it wants to do. I'm sort of a stone psychologist. That can be your headline!"

A shelf to one side is lined with stones in various stages of shaping, sanding blocks, and pots and bottles filled with unidentified mixtures. In the corner, a picture of Georgia O'Keeffe is tacked to the wall above prints of some of the late artist's landscape paintings. Crawford later tells me she counts O'Keeffe among her inspirations (along with Barbara Hepworth, Isamu Noguchi and Michelangelo), for her "bold, feminine creations". Much like O'Keeffe, Crawford's personal style is notably singular: a rotation of mostly black Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto, Acne Studios and bassike, with trademark round spectacles and platform sneakers ("the chunkier, the better").

Crawford came to sculpting late in life, she tells me in her soft and assured voice. Though she studied art history at The University of Sydney and had dabbled in life drawing, she was busy raising

her children and working in the family rag-trade business. When her youngest son was five, she enrolled in a workshop led by Tom Bass AM, one of Australia's foremost sculptors. He was then in his eighties, and Crawford was keen to seize the opportunity to work with him "before it was too late". She studied under him from 2002 until his death in 2010 at the age of 93, and she considers him a mentor. "He was a really special man," she says, "quite a philosopher. I would just listen to him talk — I was quiet a lot." She makes no secret of Bass's exacting nature. "He was a very firm taskmaster — he had very high standards," she recalls. "Sometimes I would have tears streaming ... But it focused me," she

says, adding: "I definitely learnt from the best."

At first, Crawford would buy stones from a sculpture supply store in Manhattan while visiting her daughter — now a food photographer based in Berlin — and bring them home to Sydney in her suitcase. As her appetite for sculpture grew, so did the size of the stones she was drawn to. When they became too heavy to pack in her luggage, she began to ship them back.

Though she's previously carved works from soapstone and marble, Crawford is often drawn to alabaster — a soft, smooth, fine-grained mineral — in no small part for its "affinity" with light. "When it comes in the windows, the sculptures light up and change appearance," she says. Crawford sources her off-white, orange, red and, occasionally, blue alabaster from Italy, the US and Spain. "I remember where each stone has come from," she says. "Those connections are very important to me."

Her process involves first cutting away the segments of stone she doesn't need, then filing and polishing, completely by hand, in a process that can take anywhere from a few days to a few months. "It's very gentle, slow and physical. I move my tool in a very rounded way — it's almost like choreography," she explains. Crawford tends to steer away from working with marble, as it requires a hammer and chisel, which she considers more "aggressive" than the hand-shaping she enjoys with alabaster. "It's me imposing force — it's a bit more masculine."

Carol Crawford in her Sydney studio among various finished sculptures and works in progress.



When finished, she has to “feel satisfied with [the work] in a visceral way. It’s very hard to describe, but I know when a sculpture is complete. I can breathe easy.” She often collects bases to mount her pieces on while out walking the dog. “I got some beautiful red gum from someone cutting down their tree,” she recalls.

In times of emotional distress, Crawford gravitates to sculpting, hence many pieces are tied up with acutely personal moments and have deep metaphorical meaning. One of her first works, *Genesis I*, was created just after her father had passed in 2010. It consists of three interlocking pieces. She explains, “They create a beautiful whole when interlocked, but when separate, they fall to the ground. It’s a metaphor: with the support and love of family, we are whole.” She points across the room to another of her works, which appears to be milky white alabaster, with brown markings on one side and black markings on the other. “I did that when my sister was very sick. I discovered it had different-coloured veins on each side, but it’s one piece of stone, so the metaphor is that from one set of DNA you can have two different people. It’s special to me.”

Characteristically bulbous, her pieces can be ambiguous, but the curves hint at humanness and, further, femininity. She acknowledges this, noting how two mounds on one piece “look like hips”. She tells me: “My pieces are feminine because they are an extension of my inner being ... I don’t know if a man could do these.

“I love dealing with the imperfections of the stone,” Crawford adds. “I see it as a metaphor for life. We are not all perfect. From ugliness can come something beautiful and appealing, feminine and soft.”

In an ironic upshot, she notes that their shapely nature can leave her pieces open to more, let’s say, manly readings. “They always have this phallic overtone,” she muses, “so I have to think about the angles in photos. I often send them to the family WhatsApp group before I post them on Instagram.”

Crawford frequently sells pieces to people she knows, and will always try to meet with a potential buyer, largely due to the sentimental value the works hold. “They’re like children — they’ve all got names. They’re almost part of the family. I had one piece that sold through a curator and the person who bought it actually took

“I love dealing with the imperfections of the stone. I see it as a metaphor for life. We are not all perfect. From ugliness can come beauty.”



me into their home and showed me where it was going to go. That made me very happy.”

She’s now working on a portrait commission — a clay model sculpture that will eventually be cast in bronze, which will take most of the year. Previously, she’s sculpted portraits of two Australian cricket captains, Barry Jarman and Monty Noble, as well as her father. She says it’s less about creating an “exact copy of their face” as it is “capturing the essence” of a person. “Tom taught us not to make things up — you have to really think

about their personality. And you never do a portrait with an open mouth! All the great, beautiful portraits are with a closed mouth.”

She runs weekend annual workshops, usually 14–16 people. But she finds exhibiting to be daunting: “It’s like singing in public. Opening up your inner being and showing everyone what you are really like.” She also chairs the Tom Bass Sculpture Studio School in Sydney’s inner west, which was founded by Bass in 1947 and offers workshops for various skill levels. “I feel privileged to help spread the love of sculpture,” Crawford says. “It may surprise people, but Tom believed everyone had the ability to sculpt. It’s learning to ‘see’ things and not just ‘look’ which is the most difficult. That and patience!” ■

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