

Back to the bronze age

In the heart of industrial Richmond, some of the country's leading artists make bronze sculptures using age-old techniques, writes Louise Bellamy.

The Fundere Fine Art Foundry is massive, with a concrete floor and a sky-high ceiling. In winter it is ice cold and floods; in summer you can bake bread in there, it's so hot.

At the front are the studios where artists such as Geoffrey Ricardo, John Kelly, Yvonne Kendall, Dean Bowen and Geoffrey Bartlett take creative flight in spaces divided only by wooden partitions or cloth sheets.

But down the long corridor and around a couple of corners the peaceful vignette changes. Here, amid acres of dust and myriad tools, the foundry's furnace roars and workers in boiler suits wearing protective face masks get on with the business of drilling, sawing, heating, pouring and welding materials that will transform into bronze sculptures. Some will be exhibited in galleries; others are destined for public spaces.

Prominent Australian sculptor Louis Laumen is working on one of the largest sculpture projects commissioned in Australia, Tattersall's \$1 million *Parade of Champions*, which will take more than three years to complete.

Laumen studied fine art at the Victorian College of the Arts in the early 1980s and has been a full-time artist since 1995. He is one of a handful of classical figurative sculptors in Australia and has several Melbourne landmarks to his credit, including cricketer Victor Trumper at the MCG, *Widow and Children* at the Shrine of Remembrance, and St Francis of Assisi and St Catherine of Sienna outside St Patrick's Cathedral.

The other artists at Fundere concentrate on contemporary works.

Laumen's brief, to coincide with the completion of the \$425 million redevelopment of the MCG in time for the 2006 Commonwealth Games, is to make 10 bronze sculptures of Australian sports people associated with the famous ground. They are footballers Ron Barassi, Dick Reynolds, Haydn Bunton and Leigh Matthews; cricketers Sir Donald Bradman, Bill Ponsford, Keith Miller and Dennis Lillee; and athletes Betty Cuthbert and Shirley Strickland.

Standing in his studio at the Fundere Foundry, Laumen, who is a broad, tall man in his mid-40s, is dwarfed by the imposing clay mould he is working on of Barassi.

Each statue, he explains, is one-and-a-half times the life size of its subject and involves around 500 hours of work, a combination of his creativity and the skills of precious-metals experts and foundry hands.

Laumen hopes to complete three of the commissioned sculptures a year. Bradman is already finished, Cuthbert is in pieces and Barassi still on the drawing board.

The long process begins with a series of charcoal drawings to determine the subject's facial expression, based on old photographs and film footage. Then more studies are undertaken, this time drawings based on a live nude model who conforms to each subject's physical proportions. Later the model is dressed in clothes, which Laumen makes, based on old photographs and footage, because, as he explains "there's no way you can buy a pair of shorts or a guernsey Barassi wore in the '50s off the rack".

After about eight weeks Laumen is ready to begin the sculpting process, which involves "packing and splashing" clay onto the armature — a skeletal image of the subject in action, made of steel rods and tubing, a process that takes up to two more months.

"For a classical figure you need to have a rational approach," Laumen says. "You don't go crazy and hope something emerges. I work the clay for six to eight weeks, for hours a day, every day, feeling and searching for the person through movement and balance.

"The exciting part is when you get to a certain level of detail, say, the facial likeness. If all is going well, there's a point where the likeness, the amalgam of many images, fits into place."

Unlike many visual artists who beaver away in their studios alone and unaided, sculptors who work in bronze cannot work alone.

Fundere director Cameron McIndoe, who has run the Richmond foundry with partner Sean Elliot for eight years, has about 20 Australian artists on his books and eight employees. Over the past two years, Kelly, Bowen and Laumen, along with students from the Centre of Adult Education and local secondary schools, have dominated business. There are two other such foundries in Melbourne — Meridian Sculptures and Coates & Wood — which also work with artists.

Although gas furnaces now melt the wax and electric welding machines join the bronze pieces together, Laumen's technique is much the same as that practised by the masters hundreds of years ago.

It is called the lost wax technique, a process that starts when the clay model is finished. The model is painted with



Left, Naz DiMaio pours bronze heated to 750 degrees at the Fundere Foundry in Richmond. Below, sculptor Louis Laumen with his statue of St Francis of Assisi, outside St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne.

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liquid rubber, which supplies texture, and fibreglass resin, which strengthens the mould. When these are dry, the shell is pulled away from the original clay in sections — two pieces each for the arms, legs, torso, head, hands and so on — and painted with petrochemical wax. This captures the fine detail the artist has created.

The mould is then reassembled with nuts and bolts, and molten wax is poured into it and swirled around inside the mould until it reaches an even thickness of around six millimetres, which will end up being the thickness of the bronze.

The wax impressions are then covered in ceramic and put in the kiln at 750 degrees until all the wax melts and runs out, creating another hollow for the bronze liquid to be poured into.

When the bronze has cooled, the ceramic is chiselled off and the bronze surfaces reworked with grinders, hammers and chisels before the separate pieces are welded back together.

"It's known as chasing the bronze cast," McIndoe explains. Some 500 hours later, the

patina — potassium polysulphide for a brown effect, cupric nitrate for green or ferric nitrate for rust — is applied.

Despite the obvious commitment to the task, Laumen says the *Parade of Champions* is daunting. "With 10 subjects I'm endeavouring to go from images of extreme action to repose as the project begs variety and relief. In any sport there are triumphal moments and anticipatory ones."

The Bradman sculpture has been installed temporarily outside Gate 7 of the MCG. In a profession where commissions are hard to get and a good year might mean one, maybe two sculptures, at best, Laumen is, by his own admission, "over the moon". But success has come at a price. The contemporary art world, he volunteers, "loathes my sort of work; it has a visceral hatred of it."

"It took me a decade to make my mark and I realised that if I wanted to do this, I'd have to give something up, and I gave up the gallery circuit a long time ago."

He adds that making his saints outside St Patrick's Cathedral was easier than his present job. "The saints are such way-out creatures; they lend themselves to the imagination. But Lethal Leigh has to look like Lethal Leigh or I'm in trouble."

