

Chalice

A sculpture with history

Anna Frey Taylor

Geoffrey Bartlett (b. 1952) is one of Melbourne's finest contemporary sculptors. His work is held by major Australian collections and is distinctive for its juxtaposition of various media and for its contrasting organic and inorganic forms.¹ In 2007, Bartlett gifted a large bronze sculpture to the University of Melbourne. His relationship with the University began, however, in 1976 when he presented his first solo exhibition of sculpture and drawing at the University of Melbourne's Ewing Gallery.

The 1976 exhibition marked the beginning of Bartlett's career.² The show enabled him to learn first-hand the skills—apart from making the artwork itself—that are required of a professional artist: 'I learnt an enormous amount ... hanging the show, doing the invitation, having an opening; all those things were new experiences.'³ For Bartlett, the exhibition was also an opportunity to put his work together as a whole, and see, for the first time, how the various pieces sat with one another.

The exhibition was made up of approximately seven sculptures and ten drawings.⁴ The sculptural works, made primarily of steel and wood, integrated elements of drawing into three-dimensional forms.⁵ This integration is apparent in Bartlett's

work *Steel piece* (1975) which was featured on the promotional poster for the exhibition (illustrated on page 36). Bartlett made the exhibition poster by hand and vividly recalls the finicky application of the Letraset transfers, the evidence of which can be found in the varied typefaces and uneven spacing of the text.⁶

The three-week exhibition attracted 1,000 attendees and received varied reviews.⁷ 'Bartlett's considerable talents oscillate in interest between the massive and the frivolous but he fails to integrate these extremes', wrote Alan McCulloch in his review for *The Herald*—an assessment which highlights both Bartlett's inexperience and early aptitude.⁸

Since 1976 Bartlett's work has undergone enormous development. In 1983 he was awarded a Harkness Fellowship which enabled him to undertake a two-year Master of Fine Arts at Columbia University, New York. His time in America marked an artistic turning point in his career; influenced by Henry Moore and Nancy Graves, his work, which had previously been characterised by frontality, began to concern itself with volume, surface texture and three-dimensionality.⁹

Since that time, Bartlett has won numerous awards and commissions.

He has participated in over 40 group exhibitions, been awarded an Australia Council residency in Tuscany, and held 18 solo shows, including a major mid-career survey of his work at the National Gallery of Victoria.¹⁰

In 2007 Bartlett gifted his bronze sculpture *Chalice* to the University of Melbourne. Given the artist's beginnings, this was an acquisition of unusual significance for the University. The 1993 work was produced at the end of a long series of bronze sculptures which the artist undertook whilst studying in New York.¹¹ After completing *Chalice* Bartlett never returned to the medium of bronze; the decision was made, in large part, by the gruelling production process the medium demands.

Curator John Buckley has commented that one of the most striking aspects of Bartlett's work is the juxtaposition of disparate materials within the one sculpture.¹² His work generally displays a varied array of media, including steel, wood, aluminium, copper, brass, lead and resin. In this regard, *Chalice* is atypical of Bartlett's oeuvre; the sculpture contains elements of stainless steel but it is primarily a work of bronze and it is through this material continuity that the work achieves its sense of wholeness.

Geoffrey Bartlett, *Chalice*, 1993,
bronze and stainless steel, approx. 200 x 250 x 40 cm.
Reg. no. 2007.0009, gift of Geoffrey Bartlett, 2007,
University of Melbourne Art Collection.
Photograph by John Gollings, 2011.

The sculpture displays a dynamic sense of energy. Bartlett had been experimenting with a shield and bow motif during the period in which *Chalice* was produced.¹³ The idea behind the bow-like form was, as Bartlett states, 'that the body of the sculpture applies force to this form and may at any moment be flung, as if a projectile, away from its centre of gravity'.¹⁴ In *Chalice*, this sense of projection is communicated through the central bows which connect the globular form on the left to the open shield on the right. Like bungee cords the bows work to contain the sense of oppositional force, investing the sculpture with its potential for movement.

The work is characteristic of Bartlett in the way it takes its structural form directly from nature. His work has been described as 'organic' by the curator Caroline Field and a plant-like trace is evident in *Chalice*.¹⁵ The fluid tapering forms that rise up out of the trunk-like base arouse biomorphic associations in their viewer. Ken Wach has argued that it is this biological suggestion in Bartlett's sculpture that enables the work to sit so well within a landscape.¹⁶

Chalice was installed at the University of Melbourne in 2010.



Geoffrey Bartlett, *Geoffrey Bartlett. Sculpture and drawing*, 1976, exhibition advertising poster, commercial ink on paper, 63.8 x 46.4 cm. State Library of Victoria Collection. Used with permission, copyright George Paton Gallery, Melbourne University Student Union Ltd.



It resides in the newly renovated gardens of the Frank Tate Learning Centre, situated directly behind the Sidney Myer Asia Centre. The site was selected by Bartlett in collaboration with the University of Melbourne; it is notable for its prominence, the contrasting architecture which surrounds it, and the long pathway which runs alongside it, enabling the sculpture to be seen from varying angles. Describing the University as 'one of the great institutions in the city of Melbourne', the artist could not think of a better location for the sculpture to be displayed.¹⁷

Bartlett's 1993 work *Chalice* is not only an extraordinary example of contemporary Australian sculpture, it is also an object which reflects the University of Melbourne's own history—a history of supporting, and providing critical opportunities to, emerging artists. For this reason, the work is a particularly significant acquisition for the University of Melbourne Art Collection.

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- 1 For further information on Geoffrey Bartlett's work, see www.geoffreybartlett.com.
- 2 Geoffrey Bartlett in conversation with Anna Frey Taylor, March 2011.
- 3 Bartlett in conversation with Taylor.
- 4 'Insurance prices Geoffrey Bartlett', Geoff Bartlett, Ewing Gallery, 3–20 August 1976. Acc. no. 1990.0144, box: '1976 exhibitions A–B, B–H, almanac no. 304 Jul–Sep 76. 35', George Paton Gallery Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
- 5 'Report 1976, Ewing and George Paton Galleries, Melbourne University Union: A report to the Visual Arts Board, Australia Council on the Ewing and George Paton Galleries' exhibition programme and related activities, March–November 1976', p. 7. Rowden White Library archives.
- 6 Bartlett in conversation with Taylor.
- 7 'Report 1976, Ewing and George Paton Galleries', p. 7.
- 8 Alan McCulloch, 'It's on the wall', *The Herald*, 5 August 1976, p. 37.
- 9 Caroline Field, 'Geoffrey Bartlett: The art of refinement', in *Geoffrey Bartlett: Silver cloud* (exhibition catalogue, Stonington Stables Museum of Art, Malvern), Geelong: Deakin University, 2001, p. 7.
- 10 The exhibition *Geoffrey Bartlett* was held at the National Gallery of Victoria from July to October 2007.
- 11 Bartlett in conversation with Taylor.
- 12 John Buckley, 'Geoffrey Bartlett: Interview with John Buckley', www.geoffreybartlett.com/Writings/Interview-with-John-Buckley.html, accessed 3 April 2011.
- 13 Ken Wach, 'The recent sculptures of Geoffrey Bartlett', in *Geoffrey Bartlett* (exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria), Melbourne: Council of Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria, 2007, p. 17.
- 14 Geoffrey Bartlett as cited in Ken Wach, 'Silver cloud', in *Geoffrey Bartlett: Silver cloud*, p. 29.
- 15 Field, 'Geoffrey Bartlett: The art of refinement', p. 7.
- 16 Wach, 'Silver cloud', p. 23.
- 17 Bartlett in conversation with Taylor.