

Synthesis of Diverse Influences

In art, first impressions are not always lasting ones, yet the initial impact of Shona Nunan's sculptures, on display at Wallace Bros. Gallery until October 22, leaves the viewer in no doubt as to the quality of the work. It comes as no surprise to learn that the artist has travelled, lived and worked in a variety of cultural milieux, ranging from the tribal Aborigines of Northern Australia, across Asia to the marble quarries of Carrara in Northern Italy.

What is remarkable is not the diversity of the influences themselves, but the masterly synthesis that Shona Nunan has achieved. The artist is equally at home, whether working in wood or bronze and there is little trace of the eclectic exploration of separate elements present in many exhibitions that one sees.

Two features characterise the overall impact of the exhibition. One is the use of highly elongated and attenuated forms, which are predominantly human and totally figurative. The other is the powerful sense of meditative stillness that the sculptures create, both individually and collectively.

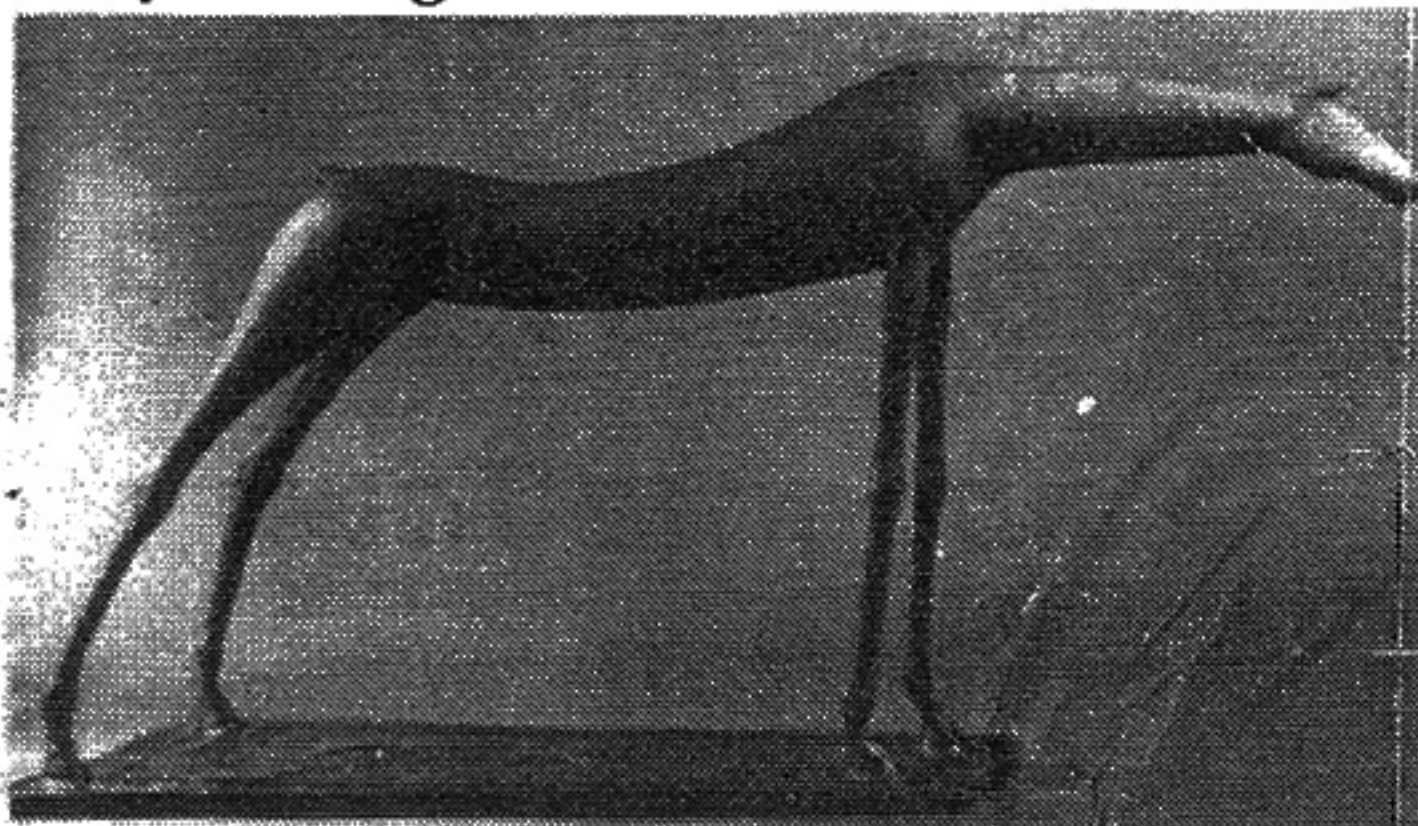
Elongation is not a new development; it can be found in the art of many different periods and cultures, both primitive and modern. There are stick-figure drawings of spirits by the aborigines of Arnhem Land that have similar proportions to many of Nunan's sculptures, while the strong influence of Modigliani can be seen in the treatment of the heads and necks.

So exaggerated is the elongation that the result could easily be mere eccentricity. It is a measure of the artist's skill that this is not the case. The viewer

by Chris van Rompaey

soon accepts these exaggerations as quite normal, and becomes lost in a world where the human figure is a starting point for a journey through form and space.

It is hard to pinpoint in visual terms the source of the meditative quality. The exquisite treatment of form and space is a key factor, but mention must also be made of the severely frontal treatment of many of the figures.



The conventional wisdom is that historically sculpture progressed when artists moved away from frontality to a concept of their subjects as fully rounded, three dimensional entities. Shona Nunan's work shows that it is not really quite that simple.

Pre-classical Greek Kouroi were rigidly frontal and symmetrical except for one feature: the left leg was always placed further forward than the right. Nunan uses this technique so minimally that it is almost imperceptible. Three dimensional space is frequently suggested by the oblique positioning of the head, and in pieces such as Young Girl (No. 4) full advantage is taken of the elongated forms of the bent elbows to create interesting spatial effects.