

# Terry Stringer

## Living in my head

sculpture of the artist and model

4 may – 5 august 2001





*Mothers and sons*, 2000. 310 mm high

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sculpture of the artist and model

The formal complexities of the sculpture of Terry Stringer always appear to be the product of vigorous intellectual energy. Visible proof of this is evident in 'Living in my head', the first exhibition in the new sculpture court at te tuhi. The ten pieces selected for 'Living in my head' illustrate, through form and narrative, the titular concept of the exhibition. They reveal a constant sensitivity to the dynamics of relationships and to matters of perception surrounding such interactions. These may be presented on a generic level or through an autobiographical approach that references either the personal or the professional life of the artist. By extension, the exhibition debates the relationship of the viewer to the viewed and, ultimately, of life to art.

Such issues inform the keystone work in this exhibition, *Living in my head*. This is an example of Terry Stringer's most recent work and indicates the current direction of his thinking. The piece is a maquette for a monumental sculpture, and the intention is that such pieces be completed on a scale that allows the viewer to actually walk into the sculpture – and in this way get inside the sculptor's head. Such plans continue Stringer's development into the area of architectural sculpture presaged by the building he designed with architect Pip Cheshire as his residence/gallery/café at *Zealandia*.



Characteristically, in *Living in my head* Terry Stringer is working figuratively from the model. The work takes the form of a compact, volumetric head which calls up a compositional device favoured also by Brancusi, the head resting on a hand. But here the fingers under the chin multi-task as stairs which physically allow access to the head. Moreover, living inside the head of the artist there may actually be another piece of sculpture. And knocking on the door wanting to access it one finds an indubitable collector. Thus Terry Stringer introduces the principal players in the theatre of his mind.

While many works in the exhibition have the artist in an integral role, others such as *Living in my head* and another small piece, *Gather ye rosebuds*, operate on a more conceptual level. *Gather ye rosebuds* addresses the interrelationship of the viewer and the object. We, as viewers, are looking at an art object within which there is an art object, a rose, and a viewer who is viewing that art object/rose. In terms of form, *Gather ye rosebuds* is a wrap around narrative. Each image is integrated with the next – one gives way to another. A parallel can be made in the international arena with Markus Raetz whose work, like that of Terry Stringer, announces itself differently from different approaches. In Stringer's piece, if one starts with the face – the face transforms into a rose. The rose is built into the cheek of the face but from another angle it appears to be embedded in a rosebush with a background of leaves. This rosebush evolves into a hand reaching for the rose. In turn that hand and the rosebush become the hair framing the face that is looking at the rose. As usual the work operates on more than one level. Perhaps it says that one need look no further than oneself for that which one is seeking – and acknowledges the difficulties of such self awareness. On a more philosophical level the work suggests that everything contains within itself the seed of its own destruction. In this, the narrative is matched by form.



*Gather ye rosebuds*, 2001. 160 mm high

*Gather ye rosebuds* is a continuous narrative but it still has a principal point of entry for the viewer. Other works such as *Remembering Alice*, have a more privileged viewing point. *Remembering Alice* comprises two separate units which in combination make up the complete piece of sculpture. But there is more to it than that. To maximise the reading of this piece the viewer is required to stand in one particular spot in order to line up the two individual units. When correctly aligned they form the profile of a face. Moreover the work is particularly accessible from both sides. In fact it is such a successful example of sculpture in the round that it rouses debate over which is the front and the back of the piece. On one side *Remembering Alice* requires a specific viewing point. On the other side, the two columnar forms read as a woman looking at a term.

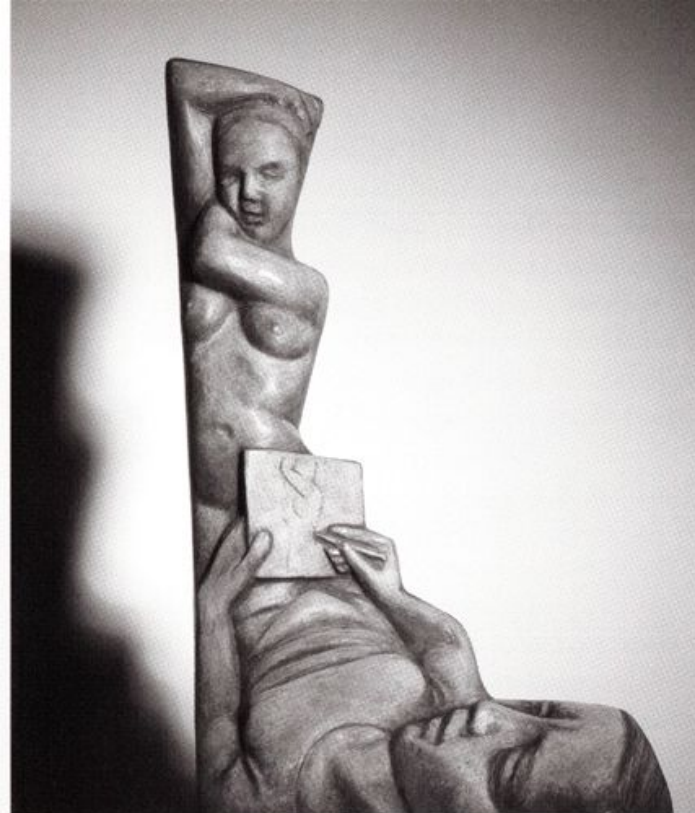
Overall the female figure in *Remembering Alice* can be seen in three different stages of maturity. The features of the head on the term are more youthful than those of the more womanly viewer



gazing at her from the companion column. This woman in turn is not as weathered as the heavier featured, composite face on the other side of the sculpture. One can read this as an older person revisiting herself – a grown up Alice looking at herself as immortalised in the book. Here she is also the generic/universal child that is created in *Alice in Wonderland* – not just the figure that we meet in the book, but what that figure represents. With the sculpture trapped in rebus or dream mode, it is full of possibilities. Probing further one realises that the woman looking at the term is in fact in the same relationship to her sculpted object as we, the viewers, are to the complete sculpture. Is it a case of art imitating life – or life imitating art? Living in the head of Terry Stringer means living constantly with such ambiguity – of narrative and of form.

With the possibility of change imminent within each work, one can't depend upon what one is seeing. Form soon contradicts itself. This heightens the viewer's awareness of the plasticity and the creative potential of the medium. Thus Terry Stringer's work comments on itself – on the creative process. It is also a statement about contemporary society, in which 'reality' is subject to many and varied readings in order to fill a multiplicity of needs.

In this context, if *Remembering Alice* is tinged with nostalgia for some viewers, *Mothers and sons* can be read as part of the same continuum. Here is a boy holding up a mirror – a big mirror filling the space between his head and his hand – in which is reflected his mother's face. This work operates on a myriad of levels. On the most public of levels it presents as the mirror of Venus. Traditionally Venus has a mirror held up for her by Cupid. In a more intimate reading the mother says to the son 'how do I look?' Is this a mother needing affirmation from her son? And from her successful son at that – he is in full light, she is in shadow with her back to the light source behind her. He is convex; she is concave. They are intimately involved with each other. But he is



*The collector*, 1998. 240mm high

struggling to separate out the realities of the two. Is this an autobiographical piece? Is it another instance of art imitating life? If so the son and the sculptor are synonymous. But so too are the mother and the sculptor – both are progenitive. In another take, so are the son and mother – he is made in her image.

The multiplicity of interpretation invited by Terry Stringer's sculpture is more pointed in *The collector*. This work tells of the collector in relation to the artist and a work of art. Such is the artist's awareness of the collector that his/her existence is felt even in the early stages of making a work of art. In fact it affects the artist all the way through the creative process. As shown in this work, the viewpoint of the collector – the line of the right side of the sculpture is that of a face in profile – literally pushes in

and imposes on the artist's impression of the model. Physically in this case there is no way that the artist's interpretation of the model can avoid being formed by the viewpoint of the collector. Despite this omnipotence, the collector's place – in the space outside the work, and apart from the physical unity of artist and model – also carries the artist's statement. No matter what pressure a collector puts on the artist in the creative stages of the work, s/he (the patron) remains the third party in the relationship. S/he may get a work of art but that is not really the whole picture.

The inability of the collector to really know and understand the creative process and the complex relationship between artist, model and created work of art, is commented on here. The collector is the ultimate recipient of the work of art – which is shown on the reverse of this sculpture. Here is the artwork, represented by a picture in a frame, that the collector gets out of the artist/model interaction taking place on the obverse of the sculpture. The collector may get inside the artist's head but here at least the artist gets the last word – the collector gets only half a picture. Is Stringer making a statement about commercialism in art? Fashionable taste may exert pressure on an artist, but through such demands, the collector may in fact short change himself.

Only half the picture is accessed by the viewer in another of these works, *Theatre piece*. In *Theatre piece* the artist explores the model's relationship with the viewer, and, by extension, the relationship of (a work of) art with the viewer. In the narrative here, art takes the form of a theatrical presentation by a female performer which is being viewed by a theatre patron. It is a classic case of the viewer and the viewed. Once again both sides of the work are required in order to complete the narrative. Whichever viewing point one takes, each side is framed by a stage curtain. On one side the theatre patron, the viewer, is



watching from behind the curtain – rather like a person in a theatre box – but with an overtone of voyeurism. The female performer is, like the viewer, framed by a curtain on one side. However the curtain on her side forms a profile in space that is the mirror image of the viewer's profile. This work develops the theme of *Beyond the studio screen* (1999) in which a curtain screens a nude, vulnerable young female from the viewer to whom she presents only her composed public persona. Moreover, in *Theatre piece* the model's head is cropped which serves to stress the voyeuristic nature of the interaction. Her gaze is cut off – she cannot meet the gaze of the viewer – she cannot return it – in fact she cannot see it. That she cannot see his presence implies a predatory element.

Stringer further explores the voyeuristic nature of the viewer/viewed interchange in *The muse of Ingres*. In this work, the muse of Ingres takes the form of a reclining nude in a display pose. Ingres had a preoccupation with images of nude, decidedly non-classical female forms despite the fact that he was an icon of Neoclassicism and lived in Italy, bastion of classicism, for more than eighteen years. Although his paintings include a large number of odalisques, he never actually set eyes on one – they were all his personal vision. They were all in his head. And it is just such a nude that literally occupies the mind and eye of Ingres in Terry Stringer's *The muse of Ingres*. In a work once again strong in art historical reference, Stringer directly quotes from Ingres' *Turkish bath* and then curves this odalisque Arcimboldo-like into the head of Ingres. Moreover she virtually takes over his head. She shares the same profile as him, her head becomes his eye, her doubled up legs cause part of his smile.

As so often in Stringer's work, the form of this sculpture (a mask) extends the narrative. Generically it references the separation between the public and the private. In the art world, a gallery display presents only half the truth – the finished, not

formative, half. On another level this mask addresses the fact that sensuality is often only thinly veiled by the veneer of social mores. But in this work one is allowed behind the facade and, specifically, into the head and mind of Ingres. And there one also finds Ingres' own interest in the artist/model relationship – witness his five versions of Raphael in the embrace of his model/mistress, la Fornarina. Here Stringer references the intimacy of the artist/model relationship that has long fascinated the public.

However Stringer more frequently explores the respective roles of artist and model in the context of the creative process. And *Living in my head* constantly involves analysis of the co-dependence of sculptor and model. In fact in *Artist and model* they become one. She is literally created by his vision of her – his face (in space) forms her profile. But in the presence of such assimilation of form, attention must focus on the hand/breast dialogue. Is this the hand of the sculptor creating the image of the breast? Or is it a vain attempt to push one of the female's bare breasts away from the gaze of the viewer? If so, is it the artist doing this? Or the model? In its ambiguity of form this could be the second hand of the model. In such a reading another notion of second hand must be considered. Not only is it the second hand of the sculptured figure (and hence of the model) but, as the artist's hand re-presenting the model, it is also a second hand image. Stringer acknowledges this further in that she is but a partial figure.

There is a thematic parallel in *Life*. At first reading, this work suggests the artist engaged in the practice of life drawing. However the artist's hand, shaped by the intervening space, indicates the space between artist and model as well as indicating the vehicle via which he creates a work of art, brings it to life. Until this intervention, all that exists is the idea of the work – and the model's role in it – inside the artist's head. As with all

Stringer's works however there is not simply a single reading. On the back of this work is the text 'Time for Life'. This can be read literally in all its nuance of intonation and interpretation. Or, as Stringer self-deprecatingly explains to visitors to *Zealandia* – sculpture is for him his life's work, a life sentence; he's doing time – for life. Interpreting this tripartite form in another way, one can read the face as that of a viewer/collector – who gazes on the artist (represented by his hand) and the model. Alternatively, reading this face as that of a child, offers, either autobiographically or generically, the child viewing his future. It also invokes T.S. Eliot's 'in my end is my beginning'.

This too is a constant theme in Stringer's work. It is manifest physically in *Gather ye rosebuds*, literally in *Mothers and sons*, and implicitly in each work that addresses the interrelationship of artist/model/collector and the creative process. Presented via the sophisticated formal constructs of his sculpture it gives us a glimpse of what is living in the head of Terry Stringer, sculptor.

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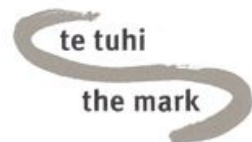
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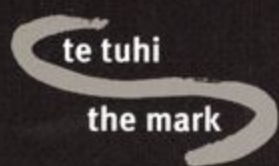
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