

A monumental career

Art house: Ron Gomboc's answer to the lack of exposure and expertise for WA's artists was simple: build a gallery and a foundry and just do it



BY VICTORIA LAURIE

RON GOMBOC HAS BEEN UP SINCE dawn in the bitter cold of his cavernous foundry, sketching the huge form of a rearing horse. He will convert this into a four-metre bronze monument to horseflesh for a client who plans to erect a pair of them at the entrance to his stable complex.

Gomboc is Western Australia's most skilled caster in bronze, uniquely qualified in the lost wax technique that he teaches periodically to overseas artists.

—specialises in contemporary sculpture.

Set on 12 acres in the Swan Valley, an hour from Perth, Gomboc Gallery is in its 15th year. It is an expansive, two-storey exhibition space surrounded by lawns dotted with sculptures, with an inviting leafy terrace on which Gomboc and his artist friends can often be found tasting the produce from nearby wineries.

Hooked: The Gombocs' house, a few metres from the gallery, is crammed with artworks, acquired out of friendship and encouragement from colleagues. "I guess you could say we're hooked," sighs

ing power," she adds. "This is not a man with lots of money but someone who's worked hard all his life."

They have done almost everything themselves, from building the gallery to running it, maintaining the grounds, selecting exhibitions and hanging them. "It's got to the stage where we might have two or three shows opening in a month," Ron says proudly. "People who come here come back because of the quality of the work." (In 1993, Ron was named WA Citizen of the Year for his contributions to arts, culture and entertainment.)

in the state. I like Ron's enthusiasm and the way he operates." Juniper says higher-profile eastern states galleries don't show the same initiative as Gomboc in promoting his work; "they're even surprised when I turn up for an exhibition".

Juniper also works with Gomboc on monumental sculptures of his own design, "ones beyond my skills and physical strength, for which Ron has got the machinery and expertise". Their most recent collaboration adorns the exterior of Perth's new Family Law Courts, a huge coat of arms comprising a complicated skeletal structure in steel and copper. Gomboc's own sculptures are also finding their way into public and private collections and last year he was the winner of the national Mandorla Religious Art Prize for a bronze, wood and copper piece on the theme of the prodigal son.

The son of a carpenter, Gomboc is prodigious rather than prodigal. "The creativity is something my father had although [for him] it was necessary to make things you could get paid for, like woodworking." He says he also inherited his work ethic from his father, who brought his family to Perth in 1961 from a part of former Yugoslavia now called Slovenia. Gomboc started working at 13, helping in his father's cabinetmaking business and doing night school to gain basic English literacy.

In 1969, a week after marrying Terrie, Gomboc was drafted into the army but "by sheer luck" didn't get sent to Vietnam. "I disagree with countries getting involved somewhere else," he says. "You should look after your own backyard." Once out of the army, the 22-year-old bought his father's business and ran it, still studying periodically at night school — art this time. He spent long periods up north fitting out whole streets of new houses in mining towns. He did the plumbing, painting and joinery; "when you're in the middle of nowhere, you have to do anything. But that all came in handy when it came to building my own gallery."

That task began in 1980, an *annus horribilis* for both Ron and Terrie's families, with the deaths of several family members. "I decided it was time to start doing what I really wanted to do in life, to sell the business and a bit of property we had and to buy some land."

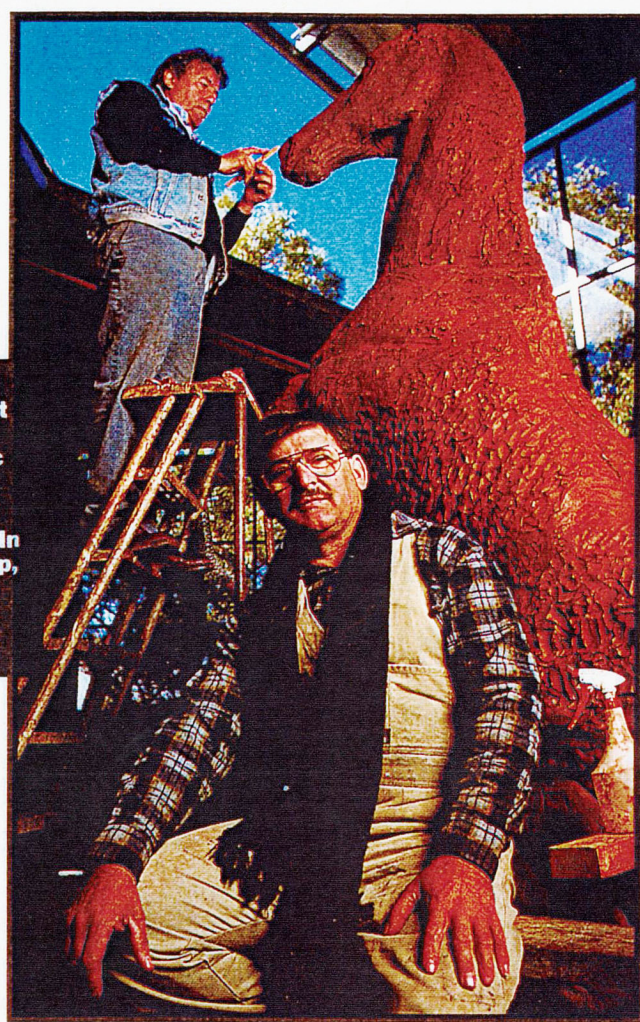
He chose the Swan Valley area, where his grandfather (who had made several visits to Australia in the 1920s) had lived. The original plan was for a workshop with a small exhibition space "just for my work and friends", but that snowballed.

Artist Bill Rees, who specialises in equestrian watercolours and sculptures, relies on Gomboc for the bronzecasting of his sculptures. "Ron's foundry is of international standard and I don't think many people here realise that," says Rees. International artists, however, are quite aware of Gomboc's expertise; two of Singapore's pre-eminent sculptors,

In 1993, Gomboc was invited by WA Arts Minister Peter Foss to join the board of the Art Gallery of WA. He argues passionately for more support for WA artists through greater commitment to them in the gallery's exhibiting and purchasing policy: "There's room for giving this more importance; if we don't support our own artists, nobody else is

going to." Established artists like Juniper, Mac Betts and George Haynes, says Gomboc, "deserve much more respect for their work. I feel a bit responsible to try and do that, but you can see some people having doubts about living in this state."

For 11 years, Ron and Terrie Gomboc have run Australia's only Open Sculpture exhibition, offering a \$1000 prize from their own purse; this year they converted the competition into a "survey" format — an open exhibition — in order to attract both established and new sculptors. Art students from three colleges placed 3-D installations around the grounds, Melbourne sculptor Bruce Armstrong was artist-in-residence and four WA sculptors were invited to contribute. It was highly successful, yet, says co-ordinator and sculptor Stuart Elliott, "I found it



FRIENDS: Artist Robert Juniper and Ron Gomboc (left)

FOUNDRY: In the workshop, the bronzes slowly take shape (right)

Chong Fah Cheong and Ng Eng Teng, have made prolonged stays to learn lost wax casting, an ancient technique being revived in Asian countries in which a wax model is encased in a mould. In an oven, the wax is "lost" and bronze is poured into the space left by the wax.

Hospitality: The Gombocs' hospitality and initiative has paid dividends for local artists; in 1992, 12 of WA's top sculptors were invited (at Gomboc's suggestion) by the Singapore National Museum to exhibit 21 works. The show was organised by Gomboc after failed attempts to find an Australian gallery. "The east coast galleries told us they were booked up several years ahead," recalls Gomboc, "and we knew that was a polite way of saying, 'We're not interested'."

incomprehensible that mainstream critics didn't offer any cogent criticism of the survey in the local media." Undaunted, Gomboc (working with Elliott and sculptors John Tarry and Michele Elliott) has now got funding to take some of the work around the state; local TAFE students have compiled a photographic essay of the show and even produced a video.

Gomboc is optimistic about the future of sculpture in Perth and the trend in public art to involve artists in building design in its CBD; "Perth's riverside environment is just perfect for that sort of three-dimensional work." Juniper says Gomboc "has an enormous enthusiasm and energy that he never seems to have lost. I just hope it doesn't kill him, because he works himself very hard." ■