

FIFTH DECADE

BEAVER GALLERIES



Ron and Betty Beaver

I cannot think of a more apt surname for Ron than Beaver. He is a dynamo of energy. To be honest I doubted if I would hear from him again when he and Betty walked out of the Chapter House of Wells Cathedral, but within a few days I received a letter saying that he had arranged an exhibition in Canberra's Civic Centre Gallery! The gallery was owned by the city and the exhibition would be opened by the wife of the Governor General of Australia! From that moment on nothing was ever to surprise me concerning Ron Beaver.

I packed up 40 maquettes and 12 tapestries and shipped them out to the Beaver Galleries. We had a date so I booked the flights and the next thing I knew we were in Canberra, setting up the exhibition and waiting for Lady Cowan to open the show. 1980 was quite a year!

Ron wanted to produce a catalogue for the exhibition and it was then that I decided to call the collection *The Universe Series*, a name that has stuck. The exhibition was so well received that Ron was able to persuade the city of Canberra to buy the whole collection, and it is now displayed throughout the National Parliament buildings on Capital Hill.

It was all a bit too much for me to believe. But Ron hadn't finished there because he then persuaded the Civic Centre to accept the gift of a heroic-sized *Eternity* to be placed in Petri Place. It would take a year for me to make and cast such a large sculpture, so the following months were going to be busy. The first thing to do was to warn Roy and the foundry in Italy.



Ron Beaver at the Canberra Exhibition



Roy constructing and 'Eternity'

The construction of the sculpture was fairly simple as all that was required was hundreds of equilateral triangles that would fit on a five-foot diameter circle. I rang Roy and of course he knew someone who could make a circle out of two-inch diameter pipe, so I set to work cutting out the triangles. Roy arrived with the pipe and we hung it from the studio ceiling and fed the triangles onto it.

Ron had contacts and was only just beginning! He knew Tony Powell, the Australian Capital Commissioner in charge of building Canberra. He took me to meet Tony who explained that he was looking for an exciting sculpture for the Canberra National Sports Centre that was then being built. Would I be interested in submitting some ideas?

On the flight out to Canberra we had stopped in Hawaii as guests of Chris Hemmeter who had asked us to his new hotel in Maui to see where he had put the *Acrobats*. The previous year Chris had flown us to Honolulu so he could take us to see the half-finished hotel and ask my advice on the best site for the sculpture. We had had a wonderful week staying on Waikiki beach at Chris's other hotel, swimming all day while waiting for him to call. He flew us to Maui in his helicopter via what the pilot called the 'tourist route', one of the most breathtaking flights we have ever made. We dived over cliffs and climbed vertical mountain valleys. This time we flew straight and sedately to the island in a small Island Hopper that wasn't nearly so much fun.



The 'Acrobats' at the Maui Regency

Chris had built one of the most beautiful seaside hotels you could wish to stay in. On arrival we were taken down to see the *Acrobats*, which turned out to be nowhere near where I had suggested. Instead, they were placed in the palm trees that filled the lawn between the beach and the three swimming pools. They looked very much at home so I think he had made the right choice which made me wonder why he had flown us all the way from England in the first place, but I certainly wasn't complaining.

On our first visit to the site the atrium of the hotel was still open to the sky and in the middle was a giant fig tree that reached all the way to the fifth floor. I asked, "Have you designed the hotel around the tree?" "Oh no," Chris replied, "we dropped that in by helicopter last week." I love the Americans! On our second trip the glass roof was on and the tree was in full leaf. It was the most exotic entrance to a hotel one could imagine, and of course there were macaw parrots flying around as well!

The staff said that the *Acrobats* had caused lots of comment. The swimming pool was made up of three adjoining ones, the central pool being a large cave so you could swim from sunlight through shade out into sunlight again, passing under two waterfalls on the way. The cave pool had a fruit-drink bar along one side where you could stop for refreshments on the way!

The hotel had a newsletter, which carried comments written by the guests and the staff showed me a piece that had been written about the *Acrobats*. The hotel had one failing; there was not enough space for everyone to have a sunbed beside the water. This meant that guests would leap out of bed to race down and leave a towel on a sunbed before breakfast to secure a place by the pool. The newsletter story told that one day someone overheard a father replying to his little son's query about what he thought the *Acrobats* were doing. The reply was, "They are waiting for a vacant sunbed!"

Back to Canberra. When Ron and I went to meet Tony I had a photograph of the Maui *Acrobats* in my pocket. He looked at it and said, "That's it. It would be perfect outside the stadium." I rang the foundry and ordered another cast of the *Acrobats*. I could not believe how quickly things were moving.



Gymnast

I was still being commissioned to sculpt children and had just done one of a little American girl who was a keen gymnast. I love to add action to a sculpture as I believe it makes them come alive, so I had decided to put her on a bar to lift the sculpture off the ground. I sent a photograph to Ron and within days he came back to me and said that Tony thought it would be just the sculpture to go outside the new Indoor Sports Hall. I ordered a cast from Lloyd le Blanc's foundry and shipped it out when it was finished.

The Civic Centre *Eternity* was due to be unveiled in 1981 and we were asked to attend the ceremony. By then the *Acrobats* had been delivered, erected and unveiled by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser.



'Acrobats', Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser

Ron took me to see Tony as he had shown him my little maquette of the *Footballers* thinking he might be interested in a heroic edition. I had done the maquette when our boys were football-mad Manchester United fans, so the two figures were christened after their heroes Bobby Moore and George Best. I had done the maquette in clay and left the surface with a rough texture as the main purpose of making the sculpture had been to try and get one of the figures off the ground as much as possible.



Footballers

To cut a long story short, Tony liked the maquette and placed an order for a one and a half times life-size edition. It is one thing to get an eight-inch figure to stand up while kicking a one-inch round football and quite another to do the same with a nine-foot high figure. I didn't point this out at the time as I wanted the job, but I had my doubts about it being possible.

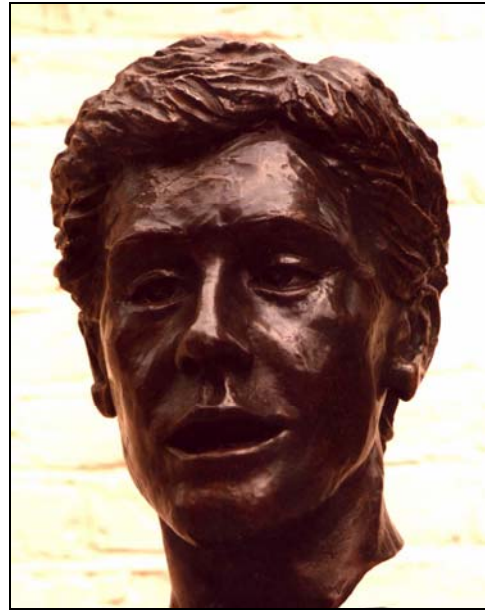
When I got home I hired an old wedding marquee as the figures would be much too big to fit in my studio. Inside the tent I built a frame from scaffolding pipes and hung the armatures from it, stuffed the rabbit-netting figures with newspaper and covered them with clay. I attached small winches to various parts of the armature so I was able to change the positions of figures as their centre of gravity altered when I added more clay which caused them to swing around on their own accord. By the time I was finished I had wires going all over the place pulling the sculptures this way and that. Talk about a Heath Robinson invention, it looked utterly bizarre.



A 'Heath Robinson' contraption of winches

The flying figure was my real concern. How was I going to keep it in the air? I decided that the only thing to do was to make sure there was room for a three-inch diameter pipe to pass down the leg, through the ball and into the six-inch thick bronze plinth. There was no way I could predict the exact shape of this pipe, but I hoped that when Roy took the plaster mould we would be able to lay a jointed plastic drain pipe into the mould and then somehow have a steel shaft copy made.

Tim and Peter modelled for the two players' heads and to match their faces I gave the figures a detailed finish. Working in the tent had been a nightmare as it was a really hot summer. The week Roy came to take the waste moulds it was even hotter so the poor man spent hours in a puddle of sweat. Keeping him supplied with water and plaster was also hard work so by the time we had finished the job we were both utterly exhausted.



Footballers models, Tim in clay and Peter in bronze

We laid sections of drain pipe along the inside of the leg mould and glued them together into what looked like a corkscrew! *However would we get a three-inch diameter steel bar bent into that shape?* The gods smiled on me because when I told my brother, Pat, about the problem he suggested that I take it to his friends in the Midlands who forged giant crank-shafts for engines!

I rang Pat's friend and he told me to bring the plastic pipe up to Birmingham and they would see what they could do. When I showed the bizarre shape to the works manager he calmly said it would be no problem as they did that sort of thing all the time! I was so impressed I thought I had better have two done just in case I sold a second edition! Unfortunately I never did, so I still have a long convoluted shaft of steel lying behind the garage!

With that problem solved I couldn't wait to see Roy's finished plaster. I sent off several photographs of the clay to Ron for him to show Tony. Days later the telephone went and it was Ron. "Tony doesn't like the finish." "What!" I replied, "well it's too late to do anything about it as we've taken the mould." "You'll have to or he will cancel the order!" came the answer.

I rang Roy and explained the dilemma. "That's no problem," he said, "we can just give the figures a rough finish by trowelling on extra plaster." And that is just what we did!

A colleague of Tony's was in London and I took him to Roy's garage to have a look at the finished result, which he passed, thank goodness! Before anyone could change their minds I sent the plasters off to the foundry for casting. When I went to inspect the casts a few weeks later I asked two heavy men sit on top of the flying figure's head to test the strength of the armature. It didn't budge so I reckoned that it would be strong enough to support at least four lightweight vandals!

The *Footballers* had to be shipped out in one piece which meant a sea voyage so it would be some time before they would be in position. Eventually Ron rang and reported that they were installed and that everyone was delighted. What a relief!



Meridian Foundry under the arches in Peckham



'Footballers' at the National Sports Centre

When Ron rang to let me know that everyone was happy about the finish of the *Footballers*, he had another surprise in store for me, one so incredible, I nearly dropped the telephone. “In fact, Tony is so delighted he wants to order a twice life-size *Pole Vaulter*!”

While all this was going on the *Gymnast* had been delivered to Canberra and erected on one of the largest plinths I have ever seen.



If you are going to have a plinth, have a big one!

The story of the little American girl wasn't quite over. Some years later, again through Ron, I became involved with Sydney's bid for the Olympic Games. The Committee had presented me with the *Sports Artist of the Year* award for the sculptures in Canberra and we had gone out for the presentation in Sydney. I had met the Chairman of the Committee who said he thought that it might help their cause if they gave one of my sculptures to the Lausanne Olympic Sports Museum on Lake Geneva. Could they buy an edition of the *Gymnast*? Well, of course I was delighted and it now takes pride of place on the terrace in

front of the museum in Lausanne. I often wonder what became of the original model and whether she knows that her sculpture is in Canberra and Lausanne, or is she suddenly going to come across them when she is a grandmother? The museum recently asked for the photographic copyright so hopefully they are going to print some postcards and send me one!



'Gymnast', Olympic Sports Museum, Lausanne

The problem of ordering a twice life-size *Pole Vaulter* is that it meant finding a 32-foot long stainless-steel pole with a diameter of four and a half inches! Where can you pick up that length of pipe? Bells started to ring when I thought of the time I had visited a drilling rig at Exmouth Gulf in 1953, Australia's first oil discovery. I was 18 years old and working on a wheat farm 200 miles north of Perth. My friend, Ken Williamson, who did all the hard

work on the farm, had suggested that we drive 300 miles north to have a look at the rig. I remembered the long shiny pipes that I had seen standing in the tower, but where do you go to buy an oil-drilling pipe?

I rang Pat's friend and he told me about a Swedish company called Sanviken that specialised in stainless steel and had a branch in Birmingham. I called them and they told me that yes they could provide me with a 30-foot long, five-inch diameter pipe of stainless steel, and then told me the price.

When I had recovered from the shock I rang Ron and told him that he would have to get the *thumbs up* from Tony about the price before we could start work. Fortunately Tony gave permission to proceed. The pipe I could buy was only 30 foot long and I needed 32 foot. How could I gain the extra two feet and another three foot needed to stick in the ground so the whole thing would stand up, and no one would see the join?

The answer was to join five feet to the top and attach the twice life-size figure to it. This would enable me to stand the thirty feet up straight, stick three feet into concrete and then slip the figure that was attached to the five-foot length into the top. Luckily the join would come directly under the man's armpit and be hidden from view. In theory it should work!

I decided I should look at a pipe before buying one. The branch manager agreed and said he could arrange for me to see one at their factory 200 miles north of Stockholm! He went on to say that if they could use a photograph of the finished sculpture in their company magazine they would provide a car to take us to the factory from Stockholm. So began an amazing trip to Sweden.

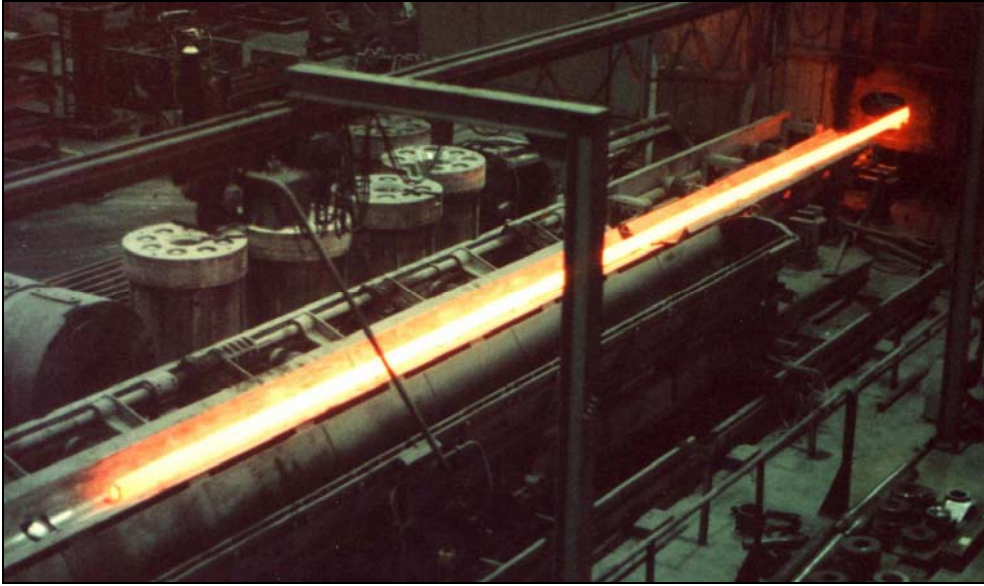
We very nearly didn't make it as we had gone out to dinner the night before and I ate a bad oyster. What a night! I won't go into details but I honestly thought I was going to die. I eventually fell asleep exhausted around five in the morning, by which time I was totally uninterested in going to Sweden in the middle of winter. Fortunately by the time the alarm went off at seven I felt absolutely fine. I was very wary about eating oysters for years!

We flew into Stockholm in a snow blizzard unable to see anything out of the aeroplane window as we landed. How the pilot managed it I have no idea. The hotel Sanviken had booked us into was the grandest in the city with great gas torches spurting out flames all along the front wall!

Next morning we found an enormous chauffeur-driven Mercedes waiting for us at the hotel door, climbed in and were driven north for two hours along a white-carpeted corridor walled in by a pine forest. The car was very snug and the driver had little English so I dozed while Margie knitted a scarf for the doll that hung from the rear-vision mirror!

At last we arrived at the factory and were handed over to a very pretty girl rugged up in arctic gear. Golly was it cold! The girl said that we should first see how they made the pipe and then she would take us out to the stockyards and stand one up for us to photograph.

The pipe was made by forcing a plug of steel through a die with an enormous ram that was the size of a steam-train engine. The white-hot plug was dropped into a slot, like a bullet into a gun barrel, and then *whoosh*, out squirted a 30-foot length of toothpaste with a hole down the middle. It is one of the most impressive pieces of manufacturing that I have ever seen. The flexible red-hot pipe was cooled on spinning rollers to keep it straight. Completely overwhelmed we walked from the tropics out into the arctic and drove to the yards where a crane was ready to lift a pipe into the sky so I could take a photograph for Tony.



Red-hot toothpaste



Ice-cold steel

It was time to warm up in the office canteen and fortunately it was the staff's Christmas lunch. After a beautiful smorgasbord meal, washed down by ale, we fell back into our warm car and were driven back to the airport, having a good sleep on the way!

I now had a pipe and could see in my head what the sculpture would look like so when I arrived home I rang Morris Singer and explained what I wanted to do. I had come to the conclusion that it would be best to sculpt the figure in the foundry rather than at home, especially as the manager said I could use one of their studios and he would lend me a worker to help. The cast had to be of aluminium to keep the weight down to a minimum. I brought a length of brown plastic pipe of the same diameter as the steel one and with the help of the assistant, a very capable girl, we transferred the measurements of the six-inch high maquette to a twelve-foot high figure using resin foam. Without her help I would never have been able to do this. When the foam model was finished Roy took a waste mould and produced a plaster sculpture fixed to the brown plastic pipe.



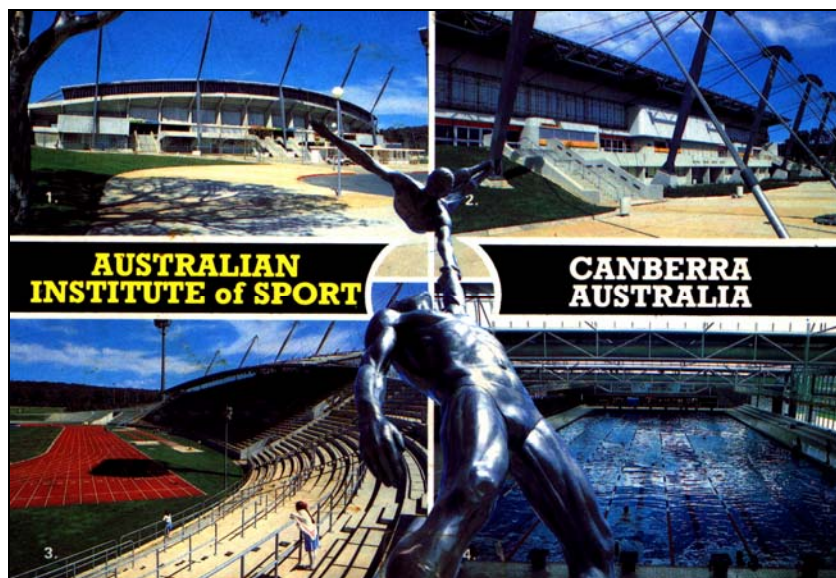
Roy showing Ron and Betty his finished plaster

When the aluminium cast was completed we set it up in the yard to make sure it worked before shipping it out to Australia.



'Pole Vaulter', 32 feet high

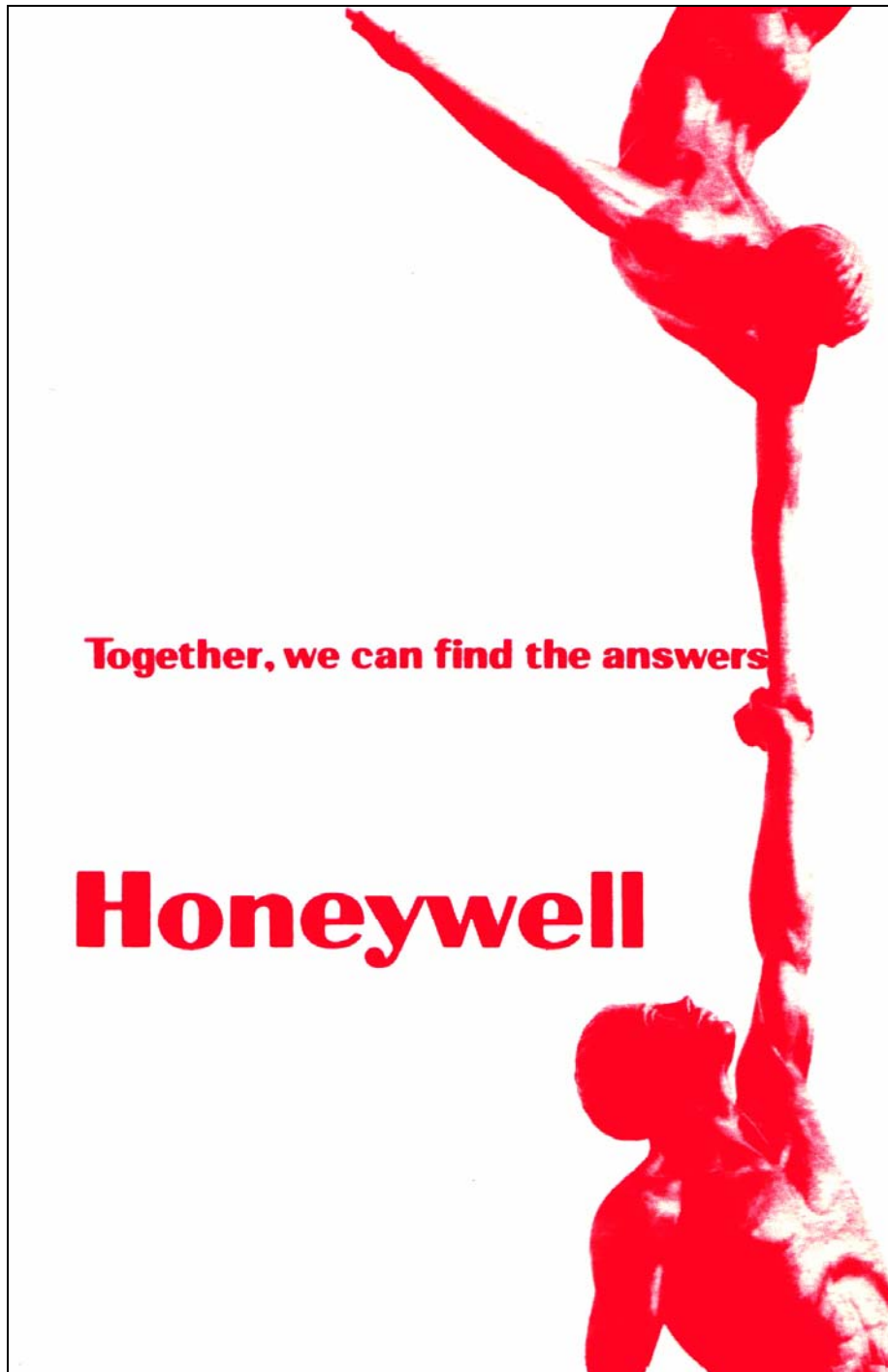
A couple of years later when we were in Canberra Ron took us to see the *Pole Vaulter* in position. I must say that the collection of the *Acrobats*, *Gymnast*, *Footballers* and *Pole Vaulter* really did add a much needed human dimension to the ultra-modern buildings. Ron and Tony had certainly done a wonderful job.



Australian Sports Institute postcard

The *Acrobats* had one last trick to play. As we were waiting to board the plane at Canberra Airport and Ron and I were talking, Margie left us to buy some postcards. However, within seconds she came running back and ordered us to follow her as she had seen *something* amazing. The *something* turned out to be an advertisement for Honeywell Computers.

The slogan read, *Together, we can find the answers* and was plastered right across a photograph of the *Acrobats*. As there is no copyright on sculptures if they are outside public buildings, Honeywell had done nothing illegal. It was the *Hammer Thrower's* 'underpants' all over again!



Honeywell's advertisement

I asked Ron if he could find out more about what was going on and we took off Melbourne. Ron being Ron went straight to Sydney to meet the chairman of Honeywell. It turned out that he could not have been a nicer man and asked me if I could come and see him in Sydney on my way home to London. After Ron had reported all this to me I arranged to have lunch with the chairman the following week.

He told me that the idea behind the advertisement was to entice recruits into their business and that the *Acrobats* advertisement had been so successful they had more than doubled the number of applications. Over lunch I told the chairman about what had happened the week before in Melbourne.

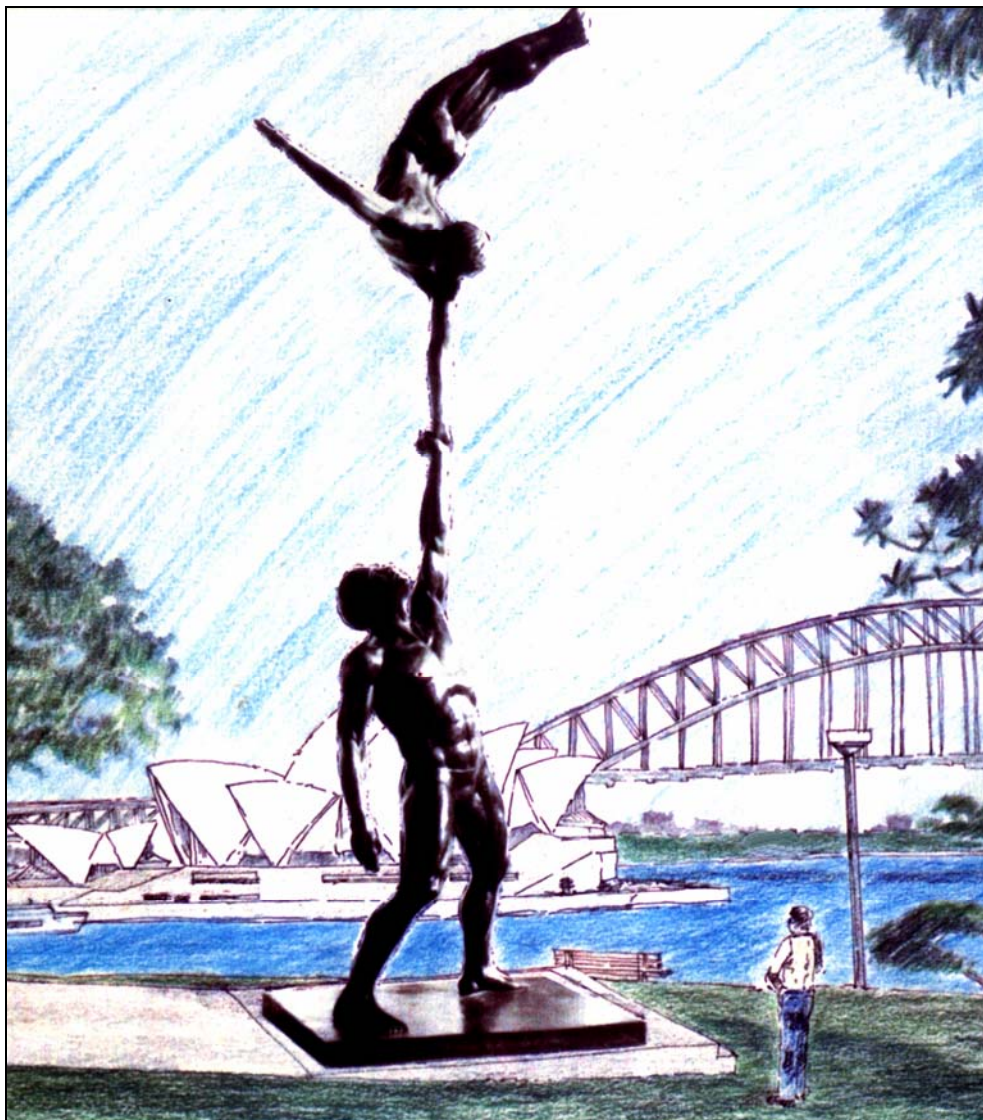
Between leaving Canberra and the lunch in Sydney I had been to see Pam Warrender in Melbourne about an idea I had had after completing the *Pole Vaulter*. The sculpture had introduced me to the possibility of using foam to build another giant. Because of the success of the *Acrobats* I thought, *Why not build one 48 foot high?* Pam knew a director of a Melbourne bank and she thought that he might be interested in the idea. To cut a long story short the banker verbally agreed to Pam's project and inferred that I was to start work while he would talk to his board. I flew home in Seventh Heaven.



The 48-foot high 'Acrobats' begins to take shape

On arriving home I set about planning the sculpture. I talked to the foundry and they foresaw no problems. I consulted the structural engineers, Ove Arup, about the armatures and they also foresaw no problem. I talked to the girl who had helped me build the *Pole Vaulter* and she said she would be delighted to help build the giant. Roy wanted to help and my son, Peter, had returned from Canada, so we had a team and started to work.

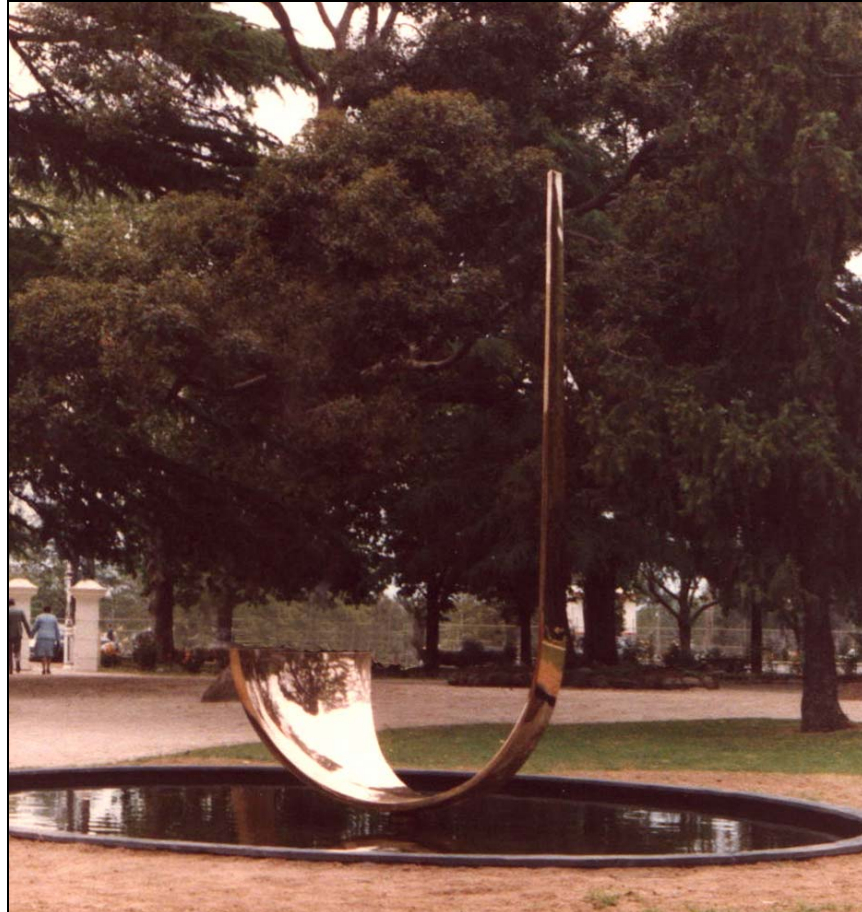
About a month after we had begun I received a call from Pam in Melbourne telling me that the board of the bank had turned down the director's proposal. *Ouch*, I thought, *what a pity*, (or something of the sort!). I then thought of Honeywell and wrote to them asking if they would be interested in taking over the commission and erecting it in Sydney. They immediately agreed and within days had done a graphic display for the City Council, who promptly turned it down!



Honeywell's presentation

It was the end of the road and we had to break up the foam sculpture. The director refused to honour his commitment so I was left responsible for all the cost of what we had done, which very nearly bankrupted me!

I still think it would have been a showstopper, but on the other hand it could have taken me away from the Symbolic Sculpture and not to have gone down that road sends shudders down my spine. Perhaps the cancellation was a fortuitous thing to have happened, although I still wish I could have seen it finished. If the 16 footer was a success with the public what would they have thought of one 48 foot high? There was one nibble from Chicago, but...



'Transcend', Benalla

Ron and Betty decided to retire and hand over the Beaver Galleries to their son. It was the end of an era. Ron had sold several children sculptures to private buyers and arranged for an *Umbrella Children* sculpture to be erected in a public garden in the centre of Canberra. It was unveiled but only lasted one night before the vandals destroyed it. The same thing happened to a ten-foot high Symbolic bronze, *Transcend*, that Ron sold to the Benalla Art Museum, this time destroyed by drunks. *Mortality* at the Mildura Art Museum has survived! One out of three is not really good enough!

When we were asked to the 1981 unveiling of *Eternity* in Canberra very our trip fortunately coincided with son Peter arriving in Australia. He was hiking round the world before going up to Durham University for a three-year course in Geology. I decided that while Margie was doing the round of her relations, I would take Peter into the Outback to show him the real Australia and where better to do this than in Kimberley? Of course my desire to get back there as well had nothing to do with the choice! The trip opened another floodgate in my life as it introduced me to a whole new world.



'Mortality', Mildura

For Margie and myself being at the unveiling of *Eternity* in Canberra was a highlight in our lives. We privately dedicated the sculpture to the memory of her parents, Ken and Helen. On the day Margie's nephew, Andrew Begg, took the best photograph of *Eternity* and we have used it time and time again.

It is hard to believe that everything that took place in Canberra was because Ron and Betty just happened to walk into the Wells Cathedral Chapter House, the day before my exhibition closed! I know he didn't want to climb the stairs as I had heard him complaining on the way up! I am glad Betty made him make the trip as he created an amazing adventure for me and was the first man to encourage me to continue working on the Symbolic Sculpture. Without that encouragement and his success in exhibiting and selling the sculpture, maybe the whole collection would have just disappeared. Everything that followed was Ron's doing. *The Universe Series* is my tribute to Ron and Betty and our chance meeting at Wells, a journey that began when Dean Patrick Mitchell asked me to mount the exhibition in the Cathedral in the first place. Life is a serendipitous whirlpool!