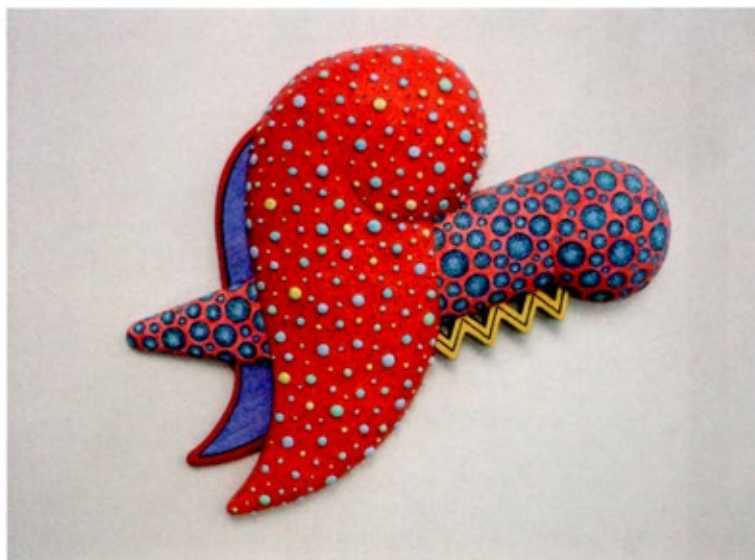




ANDREW WOOD

BY KATE MONTGOMERY



STROUD BASED ARTIST AND SCULPTOR ANDREW WOOD HAS HAD AN ECLECTIC AND HIGHLY DISTINGUISHED CAREER, A POINT HE BRUSHES ASIDE WHEN WE TALK ON A COLD JANUARY AFTERNOON. "I DON'T HAVE A CAREER," HE TELLS ME MODESTLY, "I DON'T EVEN HAVE AN AGENT!" LIKE THE NOSY-PARKER I AM, I NEED TO KNOW MORE...

Andrew has exhibited all over the world, sold work to the famous and flamboyant and started the highly successful Prema Arts Centre in Uley near Dursley. How did it all begin? I ask as I sip fragrant tea from a delicate bone china cup, and settle down to hear his astonishing story.

He first moved to the area aged nineteen as a student of Fine Art at Cheltenham Art College. He fell in love with the area at once, "The Cotswold landscape blew me away after growing up in the polite and tidy home counties." He rented a cottage in the hamlet of Paradise near Painswick., and while he enjoyed his discovery of the rural and bohemian life of the Stroud Valleys he was not so happy with his course at Cheltenham and bridled at the conventions of the Fine Arts faculty "I got away with things at art school," he tells me with a wry smile, "because I was so prolific."

He managed to get a transfer Falmouth College of Art and realises in retrospect that he was nursing an unconscious desire to re-invent himself. Up to this point his passion had been paint and his only ambition was to be a painter. He had been a pre-diploma student at the Camberwell School of Art, studying under Frank Auerbach and other artists of the Bomberg School.

The substance of his painting had been getting thicker and thicker and within weeks of his arrival at Falmouth he discovered clay. "Falmouth was heaven," he tells me, "Eighty students, a Regency house with tropical gardens." Andrew is clear on his chosen medium, there has never really been another "I fell in love with clay" he asserts firmly. "The pottery was virtually unused so I could work completely undisturbed." And work he did. Wood produced piece after piece, culminating in a graduate exhibition whereby everything sold, on the back of which he was given a studio, a salary and a solo exhibition with the Nicholas Treadwell Gallery in London. A feat virtually unheard of at the time. His tutors tried to persuade him to go to the RCA, but Wood decided instead to go with Treadwell, a man who was interested in the future of ceramics and especially fine artists having their work realised in clay.

After the closure of Treadwells experimental ceramics factory, Andrew gathered together his precious slides (photographic slides being the visual currency of the time), put them into a sock "I couldn't even afford a nice box to put them in!", and bought a one way ticket to UC Davis near Sacramento. He arrived

unannounced with without and appointment at the world famous ceramics department was run by renowned ceramicist Robert Arneson. Arneson liked Andrew's work so much he gave him a studio and found him a place to live. "It was just great, I produced six very ambitious pieces, I loved it there. I had a great time."

But the Cotswolds beckoned him back to their green folds, "I'd made friends in the Cotswolds, I was introduced to the bohemian element of Gloucestershire. Having grown up in the boring Home Counties, I suddenly had people around me who talked about art and painting, it was great!"

No interview with Andrew is complete without mentioning the highly successful Prema Arts Centre which he began seemingly by accident in 1981. "A friend and I went along to view a disused baptist chapel, which had just come on the market, in the village of Uley. It was Georgian, very attractive, but I didn't think too much about it." But three weeks later a friend suggested they go along to the auction and he found himself bidding - and winning. "What I didn't know is that you had to sign a cheque there and then for ten per cent. I had precisely £84 in the bank." He smiles at the memory "I guess its the way I've lived my life ,taking reckless risks, I managed to borrow a bit from friends and family through sheer enthusiasm. I had no plan, I just lived in it."

Andrew became involved with village life, especially with the children in the area. "I used to give them lumps of clay to play with after school." It was at this point in his life that Wood found Sathya Sai Baba, who would become his spiritual guru. The teachings resonated with Wood, especially his emphasis on service. "I was looking for a way to be of service." From this Prema (the sanskrit word for divine love) was born. "I didn't really have a clue what I was doing, I had no idea what an arts centre was, I'd never set foot in one before. I was unbelievably naive!" Wood laughs, "But I soon learnt about trusts, foundations and charities and set it up as a charitable trust." The centre was opened in 1981 by Sheila Hancock and John Thaw and world renowned artists, musicians, actors and poets exhibited, danced, talked and taught their way through the centre for the next eight years.

Prema continues today, as a highly successful family arts centre and still promotes the value Andrew instilled in the very beginning; to provide a centre for all the arts, culture and education, a centre of excellence which would

demystify the arts, make the practice and enjoyment of art accessible to all and to expand people's cultural horizons. No small feat.

His work with Prema is testament to his tenacious outlook on the adventure of life, and it's this playful outlook which is so abundant in his work. From the gloriously naked Narcissi (inspired by the male vanity Wood witnessed while living near Venice Beach), to the beautifully intricate 'Madam Joy' which resides on the studio wall he explores his clay based love affair with gusto. Each piece is infused with vibrancy and life. It is a celebration of colour and form and as he says "my personal and entirely subjective challenge is trying to create harmony between colour and form."

Andrew returned to his "green and pleasant land" three years ago after living on an olive grove in Tuscany. He now lives and works in a cosy studio in the centre of Stroud and seems very much at home, "I love it here, Stroud is a brilliant place to be, it really is phenomenal."

Andrew was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2005. While it has not stopped him working, he is actually aware of the gradual decline of his physical energy as the Parkinson's develops. The frustration that he experiences is that his physical energy and abilities cannot keep pace with his creative imagination which is more active than ever. "I've never had a problem with ideas. I'm able to tap into my imagination both instinctively and at will. It's been one of the most frustrating things in my time as an artist, I have far too many ideas and not the capacity to do more about them." Not that he is without options, "I'd love to have a few assistants or interns, because that would really multiply my output."

Andrew's playful outlook and charisma have seen him live all over the world, from California to Italy. His work hangs in a multitude of fascinating places and his commissions come from a diverse range of clients, his 118 plaster relief portraits of Blues Gods hang in the House of Blues Museums across America. His work has been bought by the collectors and taste makers who define our generation, and it's easy to see why. His exuberance for life shines through his work. "I just want to keep going for as long as possible." He tells me, "You never know who's going to walk through the door. I love that about life. The mystery and the adventure."

To see some of his work you can visit his studio at number 2 Fromedale on London Road in the centre of town. Further examples are also available on his website at andrew-wood.com

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