

Sammy and the Eagle

by Mike Towler

My girl's not famous. But that's got to be the world's fault and not hers. I reckon that if she'd been around in Renaissance times, when art was art and skill spoke for itself, posh rich guys with commissions would have buzzed around her like bees around a flower and she might have enjoyed the success and reputation of an Artemisia Gentileschi or a Luisa Roldán. If you believe in reincarnation though, she actually looks just like Camille Claudel - Rodin's temperamental lover, muse and more highly-talented artistic rival - who, after spending the last thirty years of her life in an asylum, might just have come back to try again after bugging things up somewhat the first time around.



(a) Keil



(b) Claudel

Today Sammy - or *Samantha Keil*, bronze sculptor to you - is busy. See, in a telephone call from under their mountain on the other side of the world the Tibetans (don't ask) have suggested something new for her to do. These chaps are hard to ignore (and they charge a hundred quid for advice) so she's decided to go with it.

Sammy is going to sculpt a giant bronze eagle.

So I help her to get out the black wax and the wire and the heavy metal stand from the sculpting cupboard, but then I naturally get banished from the studio (I'm never allowed to see things before they're finished) and I decamp to my favourite contemplation spot at La Rocchetta, a little hill a hundred metres or so above our monastery and the village of Vallico Sotto. Centuries ago, this hill-top was the site of an imposing medieval fortress; later and less glamorously, when people round here still grew their own food, it was the village potato field. These days Oriana the old lady who

owns it lets us set up our 'Luxury Bedouin Tent' there during summer events at the Institute.

Digressing wildly, I have to tell you that not long ago I heard from an old guy in the village about a secret tunnel which leads from the Doctor's House far below all the way up to the site of the fortress. This was meant to be used for evacuation purposes if the village was attacked (which it was.. did you know we fought a war against Lucca and won? Forza Vallico Sotto!). Anyway, he says it was bricked up when he was about ten years old by the 1930s equivalent of health'n'safety fascists, on account of its crumbling roof and the tendency of local kids to go exploring. Which, to be honest, was probably fair enough. My first thought about this though is that I feel a Towler Institute Barganews Adventure [see *blogs passim*] coming on - it's long overdue - and I resolve to call my friend Evans. He's good at building walls so I'm sure he can knock them down. Maybe he even knows where we can get a Ground-Penetrating Radar set like on those archaeological TV shows. But that's for another time. Today, we're going to talk about *art*.

I lie down in the soft grass and watch the few wispy clouds drifting ever so slowly in the blue far overhead, a sight which always makes me think I can sense the rotation of the Earth. I begin to think about eagles. And, in one of those coincidences that happen all the time, especially to Samantha, my eye immediately latches onto a couple of specks scudding through the air currents high above. And then another one. That's three. Then another, and another. Christ, you wait all day for an eagle, and then five come along at once (never seen that before). Well look, I say eagles, but one sees these big birds quite often around here and Delma says they are in fact *poiane*, which according to my dictionary means we're looking at buzzards of some kind. Now I'm hardly Mr. Nerd Birdwatcher, but it's fun to observe them; sometimes - particularly up round San Luigi or on the Fornovolasco Road - you can even see them up close, gliding between the trees. It reminds me how lucky we are to be able to spend part of our lives here in Italy. Back in Cambridge we have to make do with sparrows and stuff and it seems that most of those are dead anyway. Make a donation to the Save the Sparrow Fund at www.bto.org/appeals/house_sparrow.htm. Or not.

Eagles as sculpture, though. This is a bit of a departure for Sammy and she wasn't sure what feathers and all that look like. We have a few Victorian stuffed ones in the Institute taxidermy collection, but she needed more, so we ended up going to Lucca to hunt for a suitable book. Little two-year-old Saska got to play horses on the Piazza Napoleone merry-go-round and she had a trawby ice cream; mamma went to the lovely outdoor bookshop in Corte Biancone and found a giant coffee-table book called *La Caccia*, full of eagles swooping onto unsuspecting furry creatures. Ah, the different tastes of the Vallico girls. They both seem satisfied.

You might want to know what Sammy normally does. She started off, years ago, by making bronze horses. Not Little Dobbin the Carthorse, but serious foaming-at-the-mouth bad-assed vicious wild stallions racing and leaping and really really enjoying themselves. And you know what? They move. No, really - ever seen bronze statues that move? It's a neat trick. She has this thing where she can capture violent motion in a completely static figure - never seen it anywhere else. She got into the horses after running away from home aged eighteen to Israel where she used to enjoy galloping bareback across the Negev desert with some Arabs, as she also did years afterwards in Arizona (though with Red Indians this time¹). She managed to repeat the trick later with her amazing *ballet dancing sculptures*. Some of you might remember Matthew Bourne and the Adventures in Motion Pictures chaps from the mid-1990s doing their *Swan Lake* that everybody liked - where they had what I think were described as 'menacing, aggressively-male swans' in place of the usual crowd of ever-so-nice frilly girlies in tutus. Sammy basically did them in bronze and showed off the results in an exhibition for the cast in New York. If you haven't seen the stage show, you might have seen the very end of the *Billy Elliot* film where Billy turns into swan Adam Cooper leaping across the stage. Then you know what I mean.

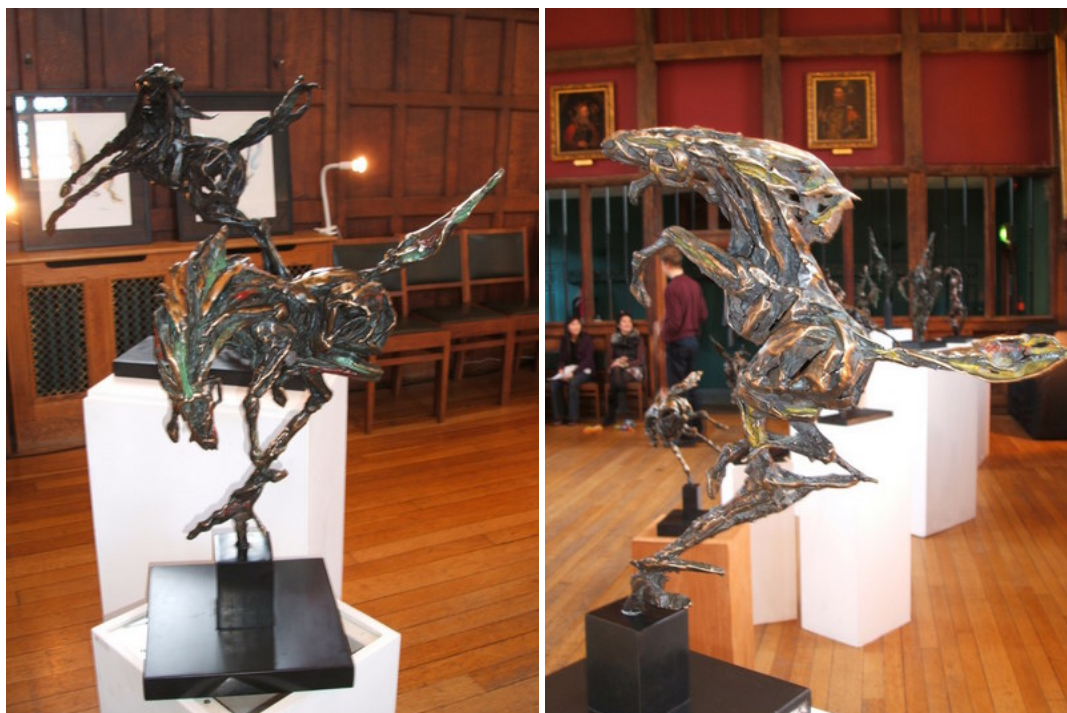
¹Proper Red Indians like in old John Wayne movies as opposed to nice environmentally-friendly Native Americans.

I didn't really want to embarrass her, but apparently it all started when little Sammy was two years old, on the occasion when she marched up to her mother Judy and stated clearly and firmly, and with the characteristic patience which has always served her well: 'Mummy. I gonna be a thculptor. I want thome clay. Now.' She never looked back. I've seen stuff she did as a six year old, and it puts the plasticine cows I do for our daughter to shame. Even the ones with little white plasticine eyes with carefully-placed tiny black pupils.

So OK, here's some ballet dancers that Sammy did.



And, on the next page, some horses.



As you can see, she even colours them in. The pretty colours you can see are not paint, but carefully-considered patinations etched into the bronze by a complicated chemical process that I don't pretend to understand, but which make the things shimmer and glow in the right light.

Now, come on though, these are quality pieces, aren't they? (I know I'm her husband, but I can still puff them up if I want to, so there). How do we define *quality* in art then? I'm only a physicist, and what do I know, but I guess there are quite a few ways. We could say, for example, it's good if 'it looks as much as possible like a real horse'. That's clearly not what Sammy's up to but it's one definition of quality - possibly the most obvious one - and one practised by most of the great masters of the art of sculpture. And if the horse is doing something interesting while looking as much as possible like a real horse then so much the better. So Sammy's doing figurative art then, but not purely representational art. She's trying to invoke the quality and power and muscle and emotion and energy and spirit and life force of a real horse by exaggerating its characteristics, in a style so original that you won't see any other sculptures like them anywhere else. But the thing is still quite clearly a horse. So part of the quality is the originality of the style, and surely to produce something that no-one has ever seen before in such an ancient medium has to be profoundly difficult. The trouble though with the most prevalent *modern* definition of quality is that it goes something like 'maximising the degree of spluttering outrage experienced by a set of non-existent defenders of the status quo'. So to produce a horse sculpture a modern get-ahead fellow might put a tin of horse shit on a plinth and call it 'Horse'. And this viewpoint is so predominant that fine artists - people doing fine art using highly-skilled techniques refined over centuries - get elbowed off stage by the political artists and the cartoon artists and people who aren't artists at all but get up one morning and feel like being one. Well OK, that's all great fun of course - but you know, that French chap was doing this with his urinal during the First World War, wasn't he? And as an outsider looking in, I wonder, is this really the most important thing to be doing in art nearly a century later?

Anyway, you know the consequences of this. That's where we started. Sammy is not famous. Not famous at all. Nor is she even infamous. In fact, to a first approximation, nobody has ever heard of her. You've never heard of her. I've never heard of her. It's amazing she recognizes herself in the mirror whilst brushing her teeth in the morning. I've seen her, on very rare occasions when she can be bothered, walk into galleries to see if there might be a possibility of sticking one of her sculptures in the back of the shop, and some overdressed glorified shop assistant looks at her like she's something they just scraped off their boot. Try looking Sammy up on an internet search engine and

you'll find nothing but the website www.vallico.net/sam/sam.html which I made for her a few years ago (computers are a mystery to her, bless) along with a couple of links from stupid craft sites that I did link exchanges with so the site would register in Google. And that's it.

So as I lie in the grass on La Rocchetta I make a decision. It's time for Sammy to become famous.

How on earth does she do that? Let's start by recalling who are the most famous present-day artists, and then thinking how we can emulate them. Well now, in England we have this thing called the *Turner Prize*, and because of its giant media exposure this is just about the most prestigious prize in British Art. For the last twenty years or so, when the winner is announced, we have the same unvarying annual pantomime on the TV bulletins. Ding dong. "It's ten o'clock and here is the News. And tonight, on the News.." [*amused smile, one eyebrow slightly raised*] "...we ask - is this art?". Cut to balls of elephant dung stuck to a wall. Or a room with the lights going on and off. Last time around (I'm not making this up) a guy won the forty-thousand pound Turner Prize for dressing up as a bear. Hmmm.. alright. If that's the game, let's see if we can play it. I smile as the beginnings of an idea begin to permeate into my little brain, and thirty seconds later I have a plan..

So that night over dinner, following Sammy's first afternoon of work on the Eagle, I tell her what to do. "Look sweetheart - while you're making your sculptures you gotta dress up as some sort of furry woodland creature. The guys who appreciate fine art will just see the quality of the sculpture. The conceptual bullshit artists will look at the forest-dwelling mammal stuff and think you're making some kind of ironic statement about figurative art. You can't lose! Look, there's these funny creatures that live on top of mountains round here called marmites or something.. I saw this documentary once. If we can dress you up like that.."



Four hours later, I emerge from the casualty department of Barga Hospital. My head is swathed in bandages where the fork has been surgically removed from the centre of my forehead.

She don't like it.

Back up at Rocchetta some time later, gazing at the Colognora ridge, I try again. Right then, Nicholas Serota. Charles Saatchi. Tracey Emin. Mr. Bear Suit Man. If we can't join you we have

to fight you. I have a vague memory of some people dressed as clowns demonstrating outside the Turner Prize Award ceremony. Maybe there's some movement or a bandwagon that Sammy can join. People like to pigeonhole artists, to say that they belong to this or that group, or in this or that category. Maybe we can do something like that. I head back to the monastery, fire up the laptop, and start to dig on the net.

I find some interesting quotes:

"Turner Prize art is based on a formula where something looks startling at first and then turns out to be expressing some kind of banal idea, which somebody will be sure to tell you about. The ideas are never important or even really ideas, more notions, like the notions in advertising. Nobody pursues them anyway, because there's nothing there to pursue." (Jonathan Jones)

And in shock news tonight, a member of the government expresses a radical thought:

"If this is the best British artists can produce then British art is lost. It is cold, mechanical, conceptual bullshit. Kim Howells. P.S. The attempts at conceptualisation are particularly pathetic and symptomatic of a lack of conviction." (Note pinned by British Culture Secretary to comments board on visiting the Turner Prize exhibition in 2002).

I learn that before one of the Turner prize ceremonies, famous graffiti artist Banksy stencilled *"Mind the crap"* on the steps of the Tate Gallery, who had to call in emergency cleaners to remove it. Ho ho.

And then.



Finally, I have it. The Stuckists! These are the clown demonstrators. The Stuckists haven't heard of Sammy either, but I think they might like what she does. This is a group founded in 1999 that *"places great importance on the value of painting as a medium, as well as the use of it for communication and the expression of emotion and experience - as opposed to what they see as the superficial novelty, nihilism and irony of conceptual art and postmodernism"*. And they also like to publically annoy and irritate the Turner Prize crowd whenever they get the chance. *"Artists who don't paint*

aren't artists", they say (and luckily for us, if you delve deep enough into their various manifestos, you find "*Sculptors who don't sculpt aren't sculptors*" at www.stuckism.com/handyhints.html).

That's all very well. But what's really interesting is their derived movement of *Remodernism* which is "an attempt to introduce a period of new spirituality into art, culture and society to replace Post-modernism, which they accused of being bankrupt and cynical." You can read their detailed manifesto at www.stuckism.com/remod.html, but here's some fun selected extracts:

5. *"We don't need more dull, boring, brainless destruction of convention, what we need is not new, but perennial. We need an art that integrates body and soul and recognises enduring and underlying principles which have sustained wisdom and insight throughout humanity's history. This is the proper function of tradition."*

7. *"Spirituality is the journey of the soul on earth. Its first principle is a declaration of intent to face the truth. Truth is what it is, regardless of what we want it to be. Being a spiritual artist means addressing unflinchingly our projections, good and bad, the attractive and the grotesque, our strengths as well as our delusions, in order to know ourselves and thereby our true relationship with others and our connection to the divine."*

9. *"Spiritual art is not religion. Spirituality is humanity's quest to understand itself and finds its symbology through the clarity and integrity of its artists."*

10. *"The making of true art is man's desire to communicate with himself, his fellows and his God. Art that fails to address these issues is not art."*

14. *"Why do we need a new spirituality in art? Because connecting in a meaningful way is what makes people happy. Being understood and understanding each other makes life enjoyable and worth living."*

That sounds *exactly* like the sort of stuff that Sammy's been spouting at me for years. And all without ever engaging with the Art World at all. So there you have it. Sammy must be a Remodernist. I'll get round to telling her about it later. But here's something I haven't told you either - and I apologize for this - but I thought it might be more fun if I left it to the end. And that is that Sammy has actually, finally got a couple of public commissions - in London (essentially because she knows one guy with connections). She still isn't famous. But hopefully someone might notice her stuff, because the sculptures are going to be sitting outside in the street and someone might accidentally trip over them or something.

The first of these is a pair of bronze panels to go either side of the main door on the facade of the new Embassy Court apartment building in Wellington Road, St. John's Wood - a posh part of central London. These huge things are each more than fifteen feet across - and will incorporate dozens of balletic bronze figures in a sculptural ensemble on a background of inscribed sacred geometry. The second commission is in another district in South London called Elephant and Castle. This zone was carefully redesigned by the Luftwaffe in the 1940s, and not so carefully redesigned by local developers in the post-war years. Which is why it is now having to have its whole town centre replaced, and the guys in charge of that want Sammy to sculpt a big piece for a fountain in a new public square. A big elephant with water soaring from his trunk. Posh people buying new fancy apartments in the area will also find they have little bronze elephant key rings to open their new front doors. (Sammy's first attempt at this was actually squashed and partially eaten by one of Evans's many children after I left it on a sideboard in the monastery. This caused much consternation all round and resulted in the removal of several of my testicles).

Oh and by the way, I was right about the French guy. In their Open Letter To Nicholas Serota

[www.stuckism.com/serotaletter.html], the Stuckists/Remodernists write: “*You can’t help feeling that Saatchi’s insipid sensationalism would make Duchamp wish that he’d never ever exhibited his piss-pot in the first place and had become a water-colourist instead.*”. Hmmm...

Anyway, enough. Just then, from my perch on the hilltop I see that far below, Sammy the Newly Remodernist Sculptor has finally emerged from the monastery. Great. She’s due to finish around now - maybe it’s time to go and see the bird..

But then I see her put her head in her hands and I hear the anguished wail “MIIIIIIIIIIIIKE!!!”. Shit. From previous experience I know we have about thirty seconds before Mr. Eagle is toast. Leaping to my feet as quickly as I dare without straining something I start to run down the hill but I know I’m more than a minute away, and as I duck under the olive tree half-way down I watch helplessly as Sammy disappears back inside and the inevitable shrieking and smashing sounds begin.. I burst through the door of the studio to see the Eagle hanging upside-down from its pedestal, held to its base only by the horribly bent wire skeleton. Sammy is beating what remains of the sculpture into a pulp with one of the auditorium chairs. I dive into the restraint cupboard for the straightjacket and soon Sammy is trussed up in the corner, blubbing quietly. The Eagle, however, is ruined.

A certain amount of time and several cups of tea later, Sammy confesses that the left wing had begun to sag under the weight of all the wax that had been loaded onto it, and once that happens there’s nothing that can be done to rescue it. It wasn’t her fault. But sculptors invest so much mental and physical effort in their creations that the realization that they’re irretrievably broken can be overwhelming. It turns out that we had run out of aluminium wire of adequate thickness, and never having built a wing before she had decided to risk using the next smallest gauge to build the skeleton. Then I realize that the fault is probably mine; as her official assistant and dogsbody one of my jobs is to keep the sculpture cupboard well stocked and I hadn’t noticed that some vital things were missing. I mentally shoot myself, then take Sammy into the back garden to look at the mountains.

Sammy is vaguely aware that I am writing a story about the Eagle, and after a while she agrees with my suggestion that we attempt to put the thing back on its pedestal and straighten it up a bit so we can take some photos. Just about all that remains is the right wing and the head. The beautiful fanned tail section is completely gone. The left wing is in pieces all over the floor. What a waste. Sighing to myself, I get out the Canon Powershot G9 and begin to take some snaps.





I shake my head and marvel. And not for the first time. This would have been a brilliant sculpture, created in less than a week (though of course the mental conceptualization of these things can take much longer). And, thankfully, I know she can do it again, and better. That's the benefit of using wax. Think of the poor marble chaps in the Renaissance who usually took months, if not years, to chisel out their creations and they had to live with the constant mental stress that one single misplaced blow of the chisel could shear a wing or an arm off. At least you can bend wax back into place and reshape it should it get damaged. At least unless you physically assault it with a chair. So yes, she'll try again I have no doubt, and then we'll take it to London so that Sammy's ace foundry man and long-term collaborator Chris at Arch Bronze (www.archbronze.com) can cast it in metal.. Replacing a wax maquette with an exact replica in bronze through the lost wax procedure is an ancient and incredibly complicated technical skill in itself of course, but that's another story (See

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost-wax_casting.)

So that evening, Sammy and Saska and I tuck up in front of some DVDs and I give my wife a hug, promising her that by the end of 2008, at least five people around the world will have heard of her. You've got to start somewhere, after all.

Ladies and gentlemen. I offer you Sammy - the Poster Girl for the Barga-News-sponsored Remodernist movement in sculpture. And not only can she sculpt, but she's got a nice bottom. Today, Aristo's bar. Tomorrow - THE WORLD!