



The Life and Work of Ante Dabro, Australian-Croatian Sculptor: The Midnight Sea in the Blood, Peter Read

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In this new book, *The Life and Work of Ante Dabro, Australian-Croatian Sculptor: The Midnight Sea in the Blood*, oral historian Peter Read reveals his 30-year association with the artist and sculptor, Ante Dabro, as biographer and friend. Read also makes known his admiration for the humanities and the creative act in any genre. His writing and professionalism as a historian, particularly in relation to his expertise in oral history, are evident in this biography. The content does not disappoint.

The book is organised into nine chapters, each title beginning with the word 'Making', a clever emphasis on the process of 'making' sculpture. The chapters are

preceded by a preface by the author and by the photographer, Con Boekel. An introduction by the author leads into the first chapter, *Making the Outsider*, describing Dabro's birth in January 1938 just before the outbreak of World War Two, and his early childhood throughout the war years. Following his grandmother's advice to 'get away from here, do something with your life' (p. 23), at age 14 Dabro resolved to leave the family farm to become a sculptor. During his studies as a young man in Europe, Dabro became firmly enamoured with the works of the Italian Renaissance sculptors, particularly Michelangelo.

Searching for more freedom in his life and work, in 1967 (aged 29) Dabro was faced with the decision to emigrate to either Canada or Australia. He made the decision to travel to Australia partly because he had a cousin living in Canberra and partly because Australia, being far away from the political problems in Croatia, would provide him with the artistic freedom he needed to continue his work as a sculptor. After arriving at Sydney Airport, he and his cousin immediately set out for Canberra. Like most artists arriving in or returning to Australia from Europe after a lengthy sojourn overseas, he was struck by the Australian light – particularly the morning light in Canberra in Spring. He refers to it as the 'finest asset' (p. 61) for Australian artists.

From Chapter 3 – *Making the Australian* – the book follows the trajectory of Dabro's work and experiences in Canberra, from his early years of striving for recognition, through to disillusionment and finally, his concern for the future of art in Australia. This is a serious look at the life of a man who has struggled for much of his life to perfect an exacting art form under, at times, very challenging conditions as indicated by the subtitle of the book, *The Midnight Sea in the Blood*, an epigraph referring to a line in a poem by Douglas Stewart. Those challenging conditions began early in Dabro's career, from the political scene in 1960s Croatia through to his years at the School of Art at the Australian National University, where the artist's admiration for the Renaissance sculptors often led to him being categorised as a dinosaur. Dabro rejoiced in the term and his complex works reflect his love of the Renaissance sculptors and his projection of humanity, especially in his works displaying the female form.

When recording oral history it can be extremely difficult to reach beyond the public persona often presented by artists in media interviews. Like the author and his association with Dabro, I, too, have been following the life and career of a friend and artist for many years. Usually, when an artist starts talking about their life and work, they tend to slip into a well-practised rhetoric that avoids the more private and personal aspects of their lives. Their public and private personae tend to be quite distinct. In this book, Read reaches below the surface of Dabro's artistic demeanour to draw out layers of narrative to reveal hidden memories.

So strong are Dabro's memories as explored in the book that they ultimately influence, and sometimes overtake, his work. Read thus interprets Dabro's sculptures as humanistic 'self-revelations of different phases of his life and thought' (p. 4), particularly the migration sculpture titled *Resilience*, which Dabro himself explains is 'the most autobiographical of all his sculptures' (p. 163) in reference to the sculptor's emigration from Croatia to Australia: 'The standing man? That's me!...I'm an outsider' (p. 164). Those memories recall a troubled, and at the time, lonely childhood as Dabro, his family and fellow villagers experienced the strafing and bombing attacks by German, Allied and Italian forces during World War Two on his farming village of Čavoglave in Croatia (previously known as Yugoslavia). Most vivid is the memory of the thoughtless, brutal killing by a soldier in front of the five-year-old Dabro of his pet, bottle-fed goat, adding to the despair and hatred of violence forever burned into Dabro's psyche.

Read relates, 'to be able to write the life of a living artist is a special privilege' (p. xv), and he makes full use of the knowledge conveyed to him by Dabro over many conversations and recorded interviews. Read explains he has learned much about the technicalities and nuances of sculpture and art during his 30-year association with the sculptor, allowing him to look beyond the mechanics of Dabro's work and delve deeply into the mind of the artist to try and understand the humanity and passion inherent in his powerful sculptures. Additionally, Read's expertise as an oral historian is obvious in the way he has maintained a professional relationship with Dabro throughout the oral history and biographical processes, skilfully recording his understanding of the sculptor's often unreserved political and social attitudes.

As a timely example of the use of traditional methodologies, Read has combined excerpts from oral histories and conversations with historical and artistic background knowledge, as shown in the list of works consulted. The author uses explanatory notes at the end of the book for each chapter instead of footnotes, but as far as the style of writing goes this work should be classed as academic because of the lengthy explanations of artistic processes, the use of artistic terminology and the frequent references to examples throughout art history. This is not a criticism. On the contrary, this work is a successful interdisciplinary piece of writing and the artistic and social history content only adds to the book's relevance as a valuable addition to the fields of oral history, biography and art history, especially sculpture. It will appeal to experienced oral historians and biographers and to those with an interest or passion for art and sculpture, as well as to those new to the genres.