

DEAD LOSS SIDETABLE by KEVIN PERKINS

I met Kevin Perkins at a time when I had started out as a writer and had no idea what to do or how I might do it. It may seem odd, but the generous friendship and example of this gifted furniture-maker was to prove a far greater influence on my writing than any of my writer friends.

Like one of his heroes, the great Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, Kevin Perkins has “worked like a slave to create like a god”. Over the years his furniture has become celebrated as some of the very best in Australia.

In ‘Dead Loss Side Table’ he has returned to the organic forms of his early works, using three pieces of Huon pine to fashion a piece informed by high modernism, the Tasmanian mythos, and his own life.

The table top is inspired by Brancusi’s celebrated ‘Bird In Space’, a seminal series of works in the history of sculpture, that reduced the complex reality of a flying bird to a simple dynamic shape. Perkins shares much with the great Rumanian sculptor—a fascination with pure form, a commitment to craft, an awe of the natural world.

Made since the death of his beloved mother, Madge, in August last year, it is though informed by a deep sense of loss.

“That loss is what it has been about for me,” he tells me one vivid blue July morning. “Loss of my father; loss of my mother; loss of close friends. Loss creeps into your life and you don’t realise it’s there, that it’s loss shaping you, shaping everything about you.”

He shows me another table he is working on, the Huon pine pedestal of which is shaped out of timber retrieved from the west coast many years ago by him and his friend, Dick Bett, on a wood hooking trip that saw them using much of their precious timber to rescue Dick’s bogged truck on Ocean Beach.

Dick, too, is now gone.

Famously, in 1927, when 'Bird In Space' was brought to America by its owner, the US Customs charged import duty, which did not apply to works of art. The owner took the US government to court over the issue. The court ruled in the owner's favour, establishing for the first time in law and to no small extent the larger public consciousness the idea that non-representational sculpture was art.

Looking at 'Dead Loss Side Table' the same quandary arises. Even in today's broad church of art, furniture remains a poor and distant cousin, subject yet to the tariffs of taste.

Outside Kevin Perkins' workshop, a flock of guinea fowl wander, making their strange chirrup. He loves birds, and his home in Franklin is always full of many different birds and animals. He hears them before you see them, knows all the species, explains their ways and habits, and he seems to find in them a truth of transitory beauty.

Much of his work seems inspired by the strange incantory losses that seem so Tasmanian: on one side table leg is inscribed "Tasmanian emu", the unique, little remembered bird that was shot into extinction by the 1850s. On the other leg is inscribed a better known tragedy, the Tasmanian tiger. It all goes on, of course, with the last refuge of the endangered Tasmanian devil, the Tarkine, about to be torn apart for mining.

Yet in this table, as in all his work, Kevin Perkins—a master reflecting on his own life of work as well as the work life makes of us all—somehow transcends such loss to create a memory of beauty and wonder.

For what defence have we against nothingness, save the ark of our soul and our work, in which we ceaselessly try to gather everything precious to us—birds, animals, plants, our friends and our family—everything that we have known and everything that we have loved, everything that is forever on the verge of vanishing?

Richard Flanagan,

Hobart, July 2013

