

# The Syndicate

Words by Gail Robinson

Part of what it is to be human is to ask: "If you could do anything at all, what would it be?"

The Syndicate was born of such a question, posed by Ron Wise to artist Simon Gilby while he was filming his sculptures for an episode of Lonely Planet at Ron's Eagle Bay winery.

Simon's answer was suitably impossible. He had a desire to translate the ideas behind small-scale works he'd been doing into an installation of ten lifesize figurative sculptures that proposed an intersecting narrative. But to be human also meant Simon had a myriad of reasons why that wasn't possible, not the least of which were the lack of dedicated studio time and finances.

A resourceful businessman, Ron Wise wasn't interested in dwelling on blocks, preferring instead to find a way to make things happen. It took barely a moment, according to Simon, before Ron made his straightforward suggestion. "We'll just get ten people who want one of your works to put in \$10,000 each and you can get started."

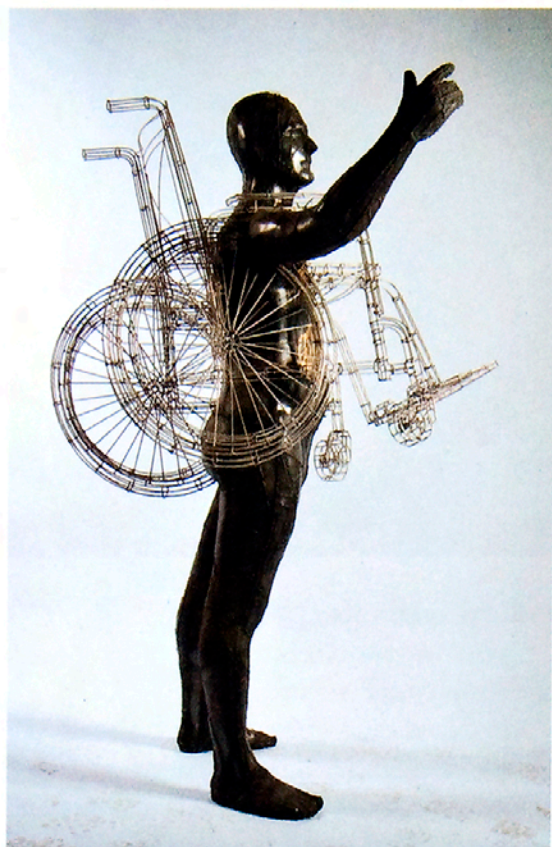
Then Ron handed the baton to his friend and fellow art patron, Lloyd Horn, who rounded up a syndicate of sponsors and removed any possible barriers Simon had to making the best art he could.

On the eve of the launch of his completed dream project, Simon tells Artsource he is "overwhelmed with gratitude to his sponsors".

Given the privilege of a brief that simply required ten original sculptures to which similar time and effort had been devoted, and a flexible deadline, he could also disregard "likeability" and put all censorship aside. For the syndicate to have no artistic input was, according to Simon, "an extremely generous gamble."







A gamble that put him, a mere mortal, in the position of being dually blessed and cursed. "By getting everything I wanted, the only person who could fall short of my expectations was me," he reflects. "It's amazing how much trouble you can make for yourself when nobody makes it for you. It was exactly the challenge it should have been though."

Throughout the process, Simon says he felt greatly and warmly supported by syndicate manager Lloyd Horn. We spoke with Lloyd for the syndicate's view, and to get more details on how the system worked.



As originally suggested ten shares (or units) were issued, but these are actually spread over seven sponsors. It took a month to get the group together, and all were happy to work with a rough agreement until a basic legal document was drafted. Covering details like contribution and payment terms, it also formalised the artist's "complete creative freedom"; how ownership would be decided and the procedure if Simon or a sponsor chose not to stay the distance.

The sponsors financial contribution was made to Simon in four equal payments, based on the status of the project – the first at the beginning

so Simon could equip himself to start, and then progressively as pieces were completed. It was a tidy arrangement which meant there was always artwork ready to cover the investment made (if the worst happened) and equally Simon never ran short of the resources he required to do the work.

Simon also supplemented this income with small projects along the way, like a "small" commission and incidental teaching/consultancy jobs. "As much as anything these "helped me step outside the intense focus of the main works so I could regain my perspective," he explains of the process of living so closely with a major project like his metal family over such a long period.

#### Left

Works in progress  
Simon Gilby's studio  
Photo: Ashley de Prazer

#### Top Left

Simon Gilby  
welded mild steel, welded stainless steel, etched text  
1.85m tall  
Photo: Annie Hsiao-Wen Wang

#### Top Right

Works in progress, Simon Gilby's studio  
mixed media including forged and welded steel,  
filigree, lead, cast pewter, winterstone and flocked sand.  
Photo: Ashley de Prazer



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## A statement from the artist, Simon Gilby

My intention in producing life size figures for this exhibition was to shift the viewer's position when reading my artworks. In my previous work, primarily small scale, plinth based, human figures played out intimate and personal dramae for the viewer as a comfortable voyeur. I intended this exhibition to be an installation of presences (or absences) in which the works are presented as physical co-inhabitants instead of cartoons or maquettes. We share with the life-sized works our own human form and scale and this presents us with an invitation to experience a more empathetic engagement with the forms. Having said this, the bizarre manipulations and extensions on the naked and ornamented figures act to encourage but also confound this reading.

After all, even when the figures are bodily intact and free of external intrusions, there is no real pretence that they are human – they only index life – not contain it. These figures present as static and contained whilst the imagery and text etched or flocked onto the surface hints at the person's past or future activities. In this way, they are both sarcophagi and anxious chrysalis.

Each of these works is the artist's portrayal of an imagined or actual character in an unrevealed drama, with the ten subjects ranging in gender, age and type thereby acting as a core sample of some particular social spectrum. The heritage of this work is the range of figurative sculpture from ancient to modern, irrespective of fashion, and in that very contemporary way, takes nothing and everything seriously, albeit unevenly. For instance, whilst these sculptures may consciously pastiche civic statuary, they still act as sincere monuments to the unknown and the unregarded. Finally, though some of the imagery throughout the exhibition tends towards the darkly gothic, the overall exhibition intends to express a hopeful yet conflicted humanity.

### The Syndicate will be exhibited:

Central TAFE Gallery from 19 Oct – 14 Nov  
Travelling with Art on the Move beginning with Bunbury next April

### Right

Simon Gilby  
Work in progress  
welded mild steel, braised  
steel filigree, lead, cast  
pewter, winterstone  
1.65m tall  
Photo: Ashley de Prazer



The contract stated Simon was to use his "best endeavours" to complete the ten works in 18 months. It has taken a year longer.

All concerns he may have had about this overrun causing the sponsors anxiety were soon allayed by Lloyd Horn, who confirms, "most people know Simon, so there were no rumblings and no pressure from any of the syndicate members."

It is an indication of the trust that is the glue binding this group together, as is the fact that few syndicate members have had the urge to visit the studio to see or comment on the work in progress. So it is difficult to know if each work will find a natural home by selection from a member. This will no doubt be decided at the syndicate's first public showing at Central TAFE Gallery. It will then go on the road with Art on the Move. Which means the sponsors will have to wait another year to take possession of their artwork. Whether or not they are able to choose their favourite or have allocation decided by ballot (and whether that will be followed by some carpark negotiation) remains to be seen. Until then what matters most to the artist is the fulfilment of his very human desire "that the work is as good as all that goodwill, all those dollars and all that patience."

### Will the syndicate continue?

"That was the idea," says Lloyd, "that if it was successful it could become an ongoing thing. Assuming we can find the right artist that 10 people would be willing to get behind on the same basis. Although the current economic climate is likely to have some effect," he adds.

So who is the "right" sort of artist? Though the hint of renaissance-style philanthropy about the syndicate makes Simon and his figurative work an apt choice as it's inaugural subject, he doesn't profess to be more worthy than any other artist. "Maybe it was simply another example of the unevenness of luck", he says, admitting when pressed that the syndicate was made possible to put together only because enough people already had an appreciation of the artist's work to think it was worth gambling on possibilities.

Which makes this concept right for any artist who has earned a gathering of supporters and who wishes to make a rich investigation of their practice. Just be careful what you wish for... ☺



Gail Robinson is an established freelance writer and editor with a particular interest in art.