

## **NICOLE GRECH**

**Jethro Lyne - 2004**

**Co-ordinator of Public Programs - The Art Gallery of NSW  
& Senior Lecturer - National Art School, Sydney**

There is something rather unfashionable about the sculpture of Nicole Grech. That she should sculpt figures and not forms would appear to position her in a camp not dominant within the teaching of sculpture in many of today's art schools. That her figures are assembled through traditional hands-on processes and not devised through computer modelling and ordered from the factory may well exclude her from the next national pavilion in Venice or the Primavera round-up at the MCA. That she should employ ancient mythological themes for the vehicle of her gestural language which are neither Australian nor overtly political – nor indeed self-consciously non-western – further alienates her from the figurative minority to which she might otherwise belong. And so the art-going public may well wonder at the possible reasons for the rapidly-growing success of her art in commercial and public shows in Sydney during the past three years. The answer is quite simple and lies in a combination of technique and practice, observation and imagination, modesty and sincerity.

In this age of easy image reproduction, the uniqueness of each piece of Nicole's work is an attractive proposition for the art collector. Her smaller works are often cast in bronze according to the ancient lost wax process.

But these are not maquettes for larger works and no system of pointing is then used to transfer the figure to another scale or medium. They stand alone, and no cast is created from which an edition may be made. In the case of the larger figures, material costs and the architectonics of the work necessitate resin in place of bronze and it is here that the viewer can enjoy closely the sensation of the artist's hand in the modelling of the surface – in the manner of a Giacometti or an Elizabeth Frink.

The subject of the Minotaurs reflects Nicole's international background, having spent some years living in Italy where, among other things, she studied painting at the Brera Academia di Cesare Crespi in Milan. She readily admits that she derived the theme via the conduit of a series of works which she viewed by the Swiss-Italian sculptor Nag Arnoldi, and not in the first instance from its Cretan source. It is immediately obvious to the viewer why she should be so candid about her borrowings, since it is not the idea of the Minotaur and its legendary vanquish that are the end result in her work; lest we should arrive at a successor to the alarmingly fascistic 1932 representation of the theme on Sydney's very own Archibald Fountain in Hyde Park, by the French sculptor Francois Sicard.

Nicole's characters are just persons, acutely observed and imagined, engaging in common activities - drinking, discussing, balancing, bicycling – who also happen to be Minotaurs. The effect of this literary device is (at least) three-fold. Firstly, it arrests us by making the given strange. Then it lifts the mundane activity from its temporal sphere, one might say to the poetic realm. Lastly (although I do not pretend to encapsulate all the aspects of these subtle works in a few short

sentences), it reverses the traditional role of the player and causes us to reflect on those conditions which have historically demonised the defeated – ‘history to the victors’ – a very timely issue in today’s media-driven world of awesome interest groups and ever-diminishing alternatives. One need only touch upon the significance of such a gesture within the provenance of art history as each new cultural position asserts itself over its predecessor. In fact the very idea of ‘demonising’ plays a direct part in this discussion since the daemons of pagan Greek culture were far more ambivalent than their Christian usurpers. And then in medieval Christian iconography it became common practice to stand haloed martyrs upon their persecutors to ensure the absolute clarity of the reasons for their sanctity.

Nicole’s Minotaurs intelligently occupy a more ambiguous space since in living among us they neither defy Theseus nor recollect their crimes, but instead elicit our compassion for their own humanity – a choice never afforded them by the isolation of the monstrous archetype in the Labyrinth.

Contrary to any question of the current work being ‘un-Australian’ (admittedly a term which should be widely recognised as a positive quality on account of its recent and extensive political misuse), Nicole conveys a clear love of her native environment: choosing to divide her time between the city of Sydney and the pastures of Wollombi. But the ideas that these places give her for how to ground her art (and after all, St Francis understood well the underpinning of ‘humility’ with ‘humus’) do not confine her to a particular repertoire for her subject matter, but instead afford her an excellent sense of the possibilities of situating her work within the Australian environment, confirmed by the success of her recent group of a family of bicycling Minotaurs in Sculpture by the Sea 2004. But effectively ‘grounding’ one’s art also depends upon a high degree of art historical competence, and this is a quality that Nicole always displayed in the academic components of her degree at the National Art School. It is perhaps this sense of belonging both within a tradition and an active contemporary community of artists that has led Nicole to so effectively contribute to the operations of the Friends of the National Art School (FONAS), an organisation for which she is currently the President.

Already one senses a building up of series in her work. In her final degree works at the NAS she was principally working in an abstract lexicon, but this she followed shortly thereafter with figurative works, the first of the ‘Encounters’ series, for the New Talent Exhibition at the Robin Gibson Gallery in 2002. Since then, the Minotaurs have served her well and the community of aficionados for her work eagerly await the next thematic direction in her art.