

Identity in Art & Literature

Susan Steggall

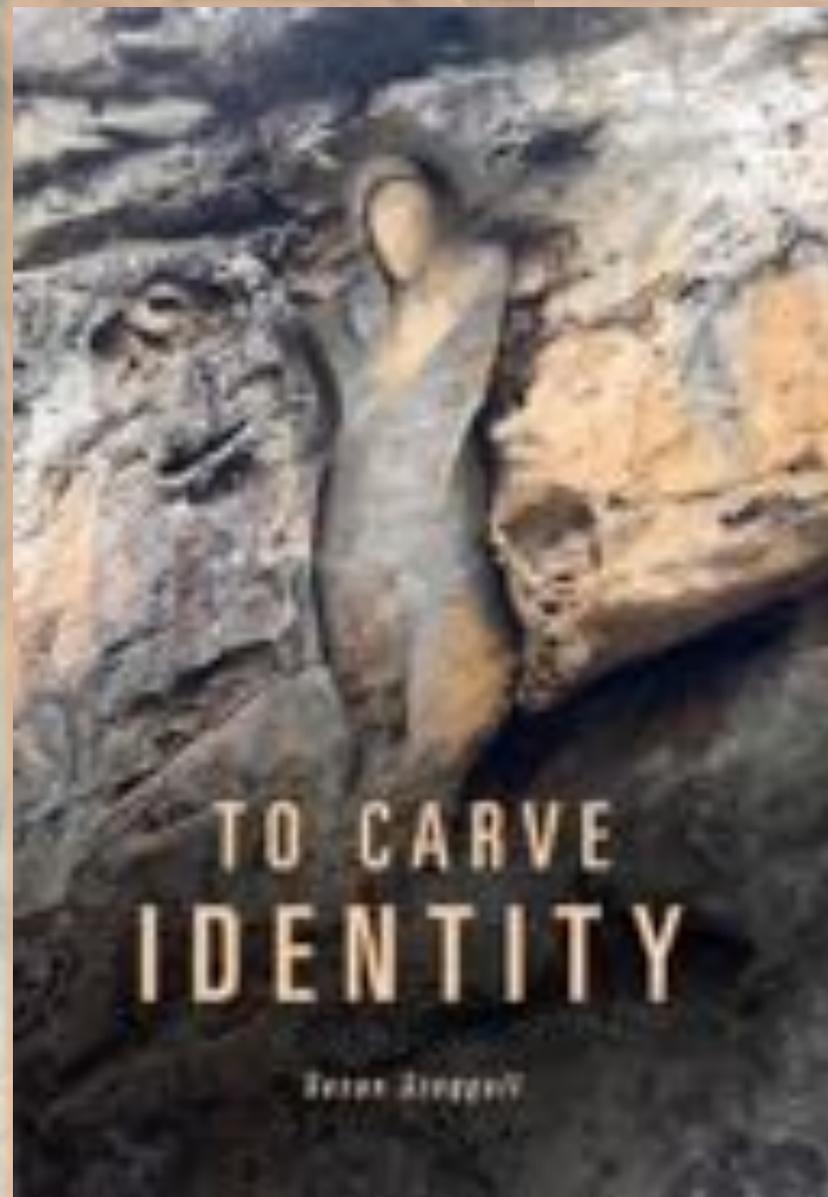




IDENTITY: I began by quoting M H S Hunt

- Our identity is who we are and what defines us. Identity is a combination of pieces, which make up a bigger puzzle and like a jigsaw, our identities are extremely complex. There are a lot of different sized pieces in different colours, however unlike a puzzle, our identities can change over time.
- HUNT finds her identity through experiences, because she likes to live her life to the full and never waste time. She continues: From experiences, you make memories, learn lessons and create your own stories. These all influence you. (<https://mhshuntblog.wordpress.com>)
- My recently-published novel, *To Carve Identity*, follows Scottish-Australian sculptor Ellie (Gilmartin) Blackwood as she negotiates her life as sculptor, wife and mother in mid 20th-century Australia. Sometimes well, sometimes with difficulty but always true to herself. Family life? We can all draw on our own – and others’ - experiences (writers are bowerbirds, right?) to create fiction.
- But an interesting challenge (puzzle?) in this novel was: how to describe visual art, that is put into words – literary form – artworks that do not exist! I called on my years of study in art history, as well as my abiding interest in sculpture, allied to a curiosity as to how non-Indigenous Australian artists articulate their love of, and respect for, the land.
- With that in mind, I have prepared a few slides, mostly of sculptors and their work whom I admire and who then ‘influenced’ Ellie across her life and career.

The rocks in the background – and on the book's cover – are from my photos of the escarpments I walk past on my way to the Manly Aquatic Centre in the mornings.



These are some of my experimental clay 'sketches' from the 1990s, which were the 'inspiration' for the cover.

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Clay works, 1990s



Dorothea Barclay,

1883-1964

Ellie's mother, Finella Craig, was modelled on the career of real-life sculptor Fairlie Cunninghame who was a contemporary of Barclay's. I studied both of them in my successful Master of Art Theory & History thesis. They belonged to the first generation of women artists allowed to undertake formal, state sanctioned, art training – Barclay at the Hobart Technical College, Cunninghame at Sydney Tech. I have used these figurines by Barclay to stand for Finella's sculpture as they tap into the late 19th and early 20th century trend for naturalism.



Barbara Hepworth, 1903-1975

- BARBARA HEPWORTH: was an influence and a role model for Ellie from her days at the Glasgow School of Art. Ellie admired how Hepworth stripped an idea to its essence AND how she placed her work in landscape: be it her lush garden, or the rugged Cornish coastline. Hepworth writes that she was inspired by nature and the world around her: 'the bumps and ridges of the roads, hills and fields'. She wanted to capture the feeling of being in both the ancient landscape and in the modern world. This was something Ellie aspired to *vis-à-vis* the landscape of east coast Australia.
- The following two slides show examples of Hepworth's sculpture.



Barbara Hepworth, 1903-1975

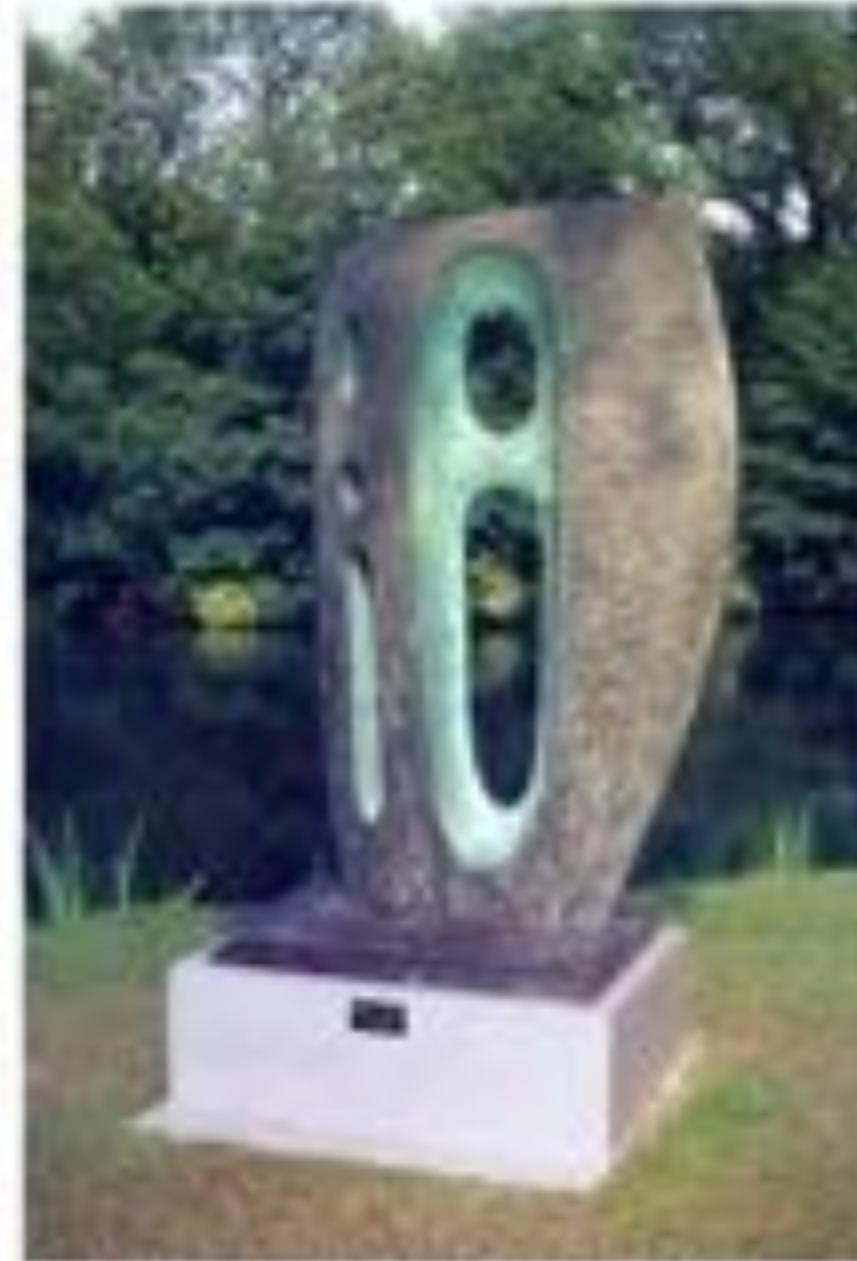
L: with plaster of *Curved Form (Bryher II)*, 1961

C: *Rock Face*, 1973

R: *Youth, Ultimate Form & Bridegroom (Family of Man)* 1970



Barbara Hepworth



Two Forms (Abstract) Bronze, 1944 (94 1/2) x 112 x 112 inches (240 x 285 x 285 cm) © City of Toronto / Museum / Dulac Museum of Art

Jean Bellette, 1908-1991

In BELLETTE's paintings the figures seem to emerge from a primaeval landscape. Ellie experiments with a similar theme although it is the Australian landscape rather than an idealised Classical one, that influences her sculpture.

Two versions of *Figures in a Classical Landscape*, c.1950



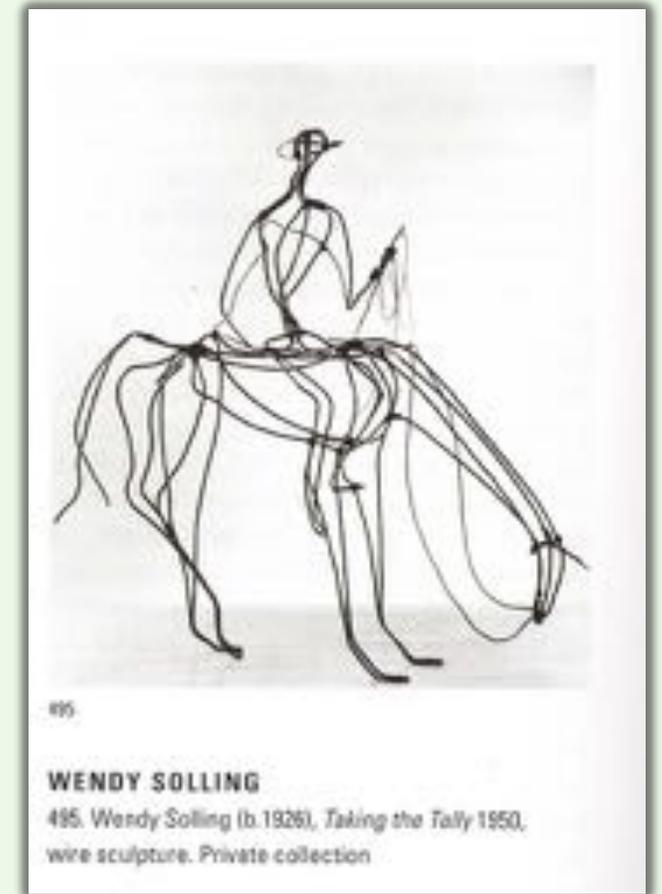
Jean Bellette, 1908-1991

Figures in a Classical Landscape, 1955



Wendy Solling, 1926-2002

Solling carved in wood and stone but also made a series of spare, intriguing wire sculptures of drovers and stockmen, which impressed Ellie. I QUOTE SOLLING IN THE NOVEL: 'It's the stripping back to essentials...It's like the country itself, the bare bones.'
Unlike Solling, Ellie needed three dimensions and so added plaster and fabric.



Jackie Gorring c.1952-

JACKIE GORRING creates quirky woodblock prints on themes of domesticity. I have included here Jackie's equally quirky sculptures in found materials to evoke Ellie's experiments with wire, fabric and found objects.



Margel Hinder, 1906-1995

- HINDER: Hinder worked in many materials – wood, wire, string, bronze –
- but it is her streamlined carvings that I have used as ‘models’ for Ellie’s
- development as a sculptor from realistic to more abstract pieces.
- In the titles of the pieces in SLIDE 16 – *Six Day War* (1967 & 1973) –
- it is clear Hinder was politically engaged.
- The following three slides show examples of Hinder’s work

- POSTSCRIPT:
- If you are ever walking up Martin Place,
- past the Reserve Bank Building, cast
- an eye over Hinder’s monumental sculpture.



Margel Hinder, 1906-1995

L: *Demoiselle Crane*, 1946

R: *Abstract wood Carving*, 1952



Margel Hinder, 1906-1995

Cat, Crane & Currawong



Cat 1948



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Crane 1948



Currawong 1948

Margel Hinder, 1906-1995



Unknown Political Prisoner Competition

1952-1953

Before leaving London, Ellie created a maquette for the Unknown Political Prisoner Competition, organised in 1952/53 by the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Both Hepworth and Hinder submitted works – Hepworth won one of four second prizes of £750 and Hinder was one of seven artists awarded third prize. Of course, Ellie could not make the final list since she and her work did not exist.

L: Margel Hinder



R: Barbara Hepworth



Cover images: *The Heritage You Leave Behind*

These are my clay figurines of women 'doing things' – not just sitting around sewing a fine seam. I used them on the cover of my previous novel *The Heritage You Leave Behind*, not only to evoke Ellie's passion for sculpture but also to draw attention to all intelligent creative women who think, dream, make, compose, write – and remain true to themselves.

