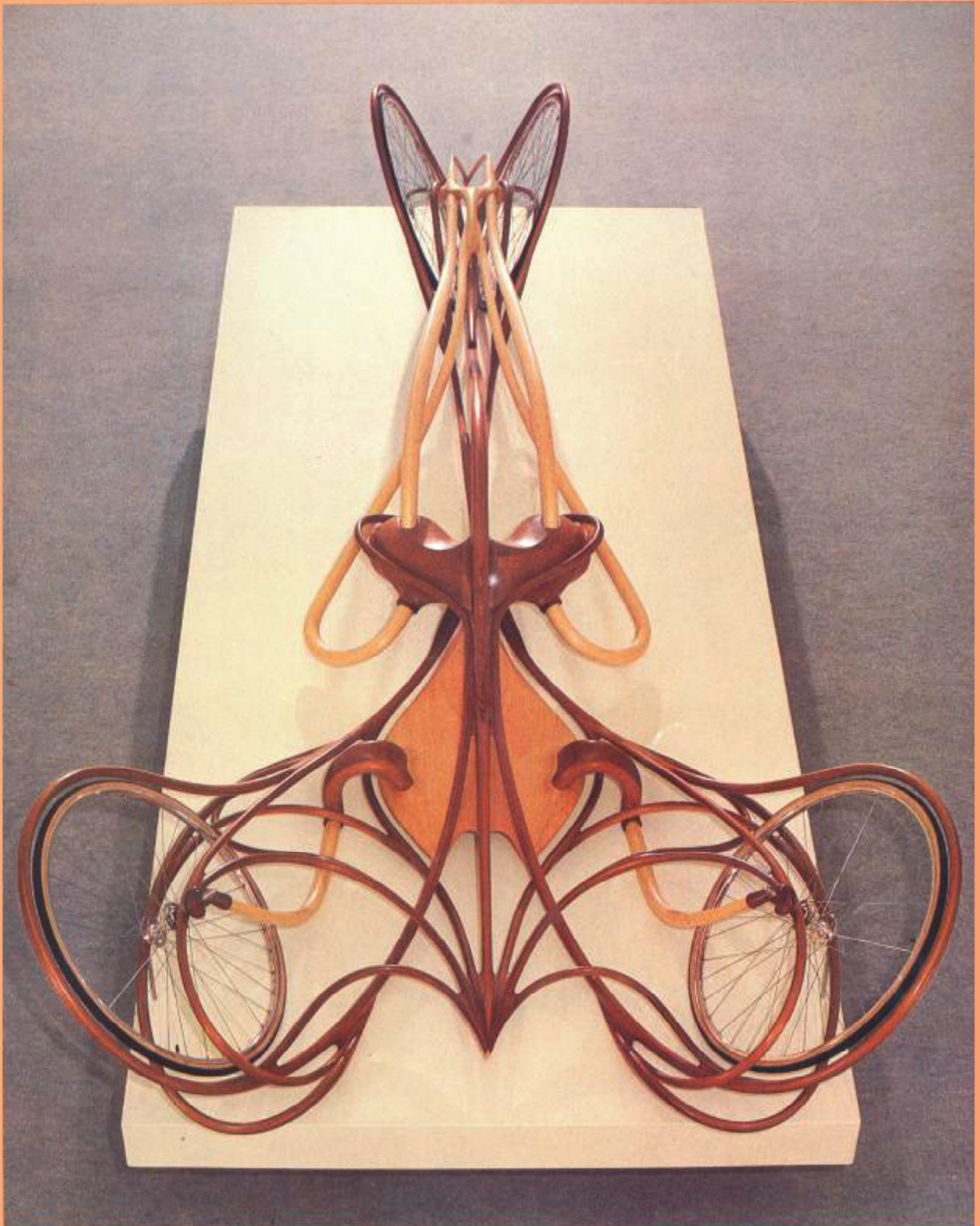


Craft Australia

Summer 1979/4 \$3.00



Michael Cooper



*'Armed Chair' 1977
laminated hardwoods
1.48m h x 1.24m w x
1.35m d.*

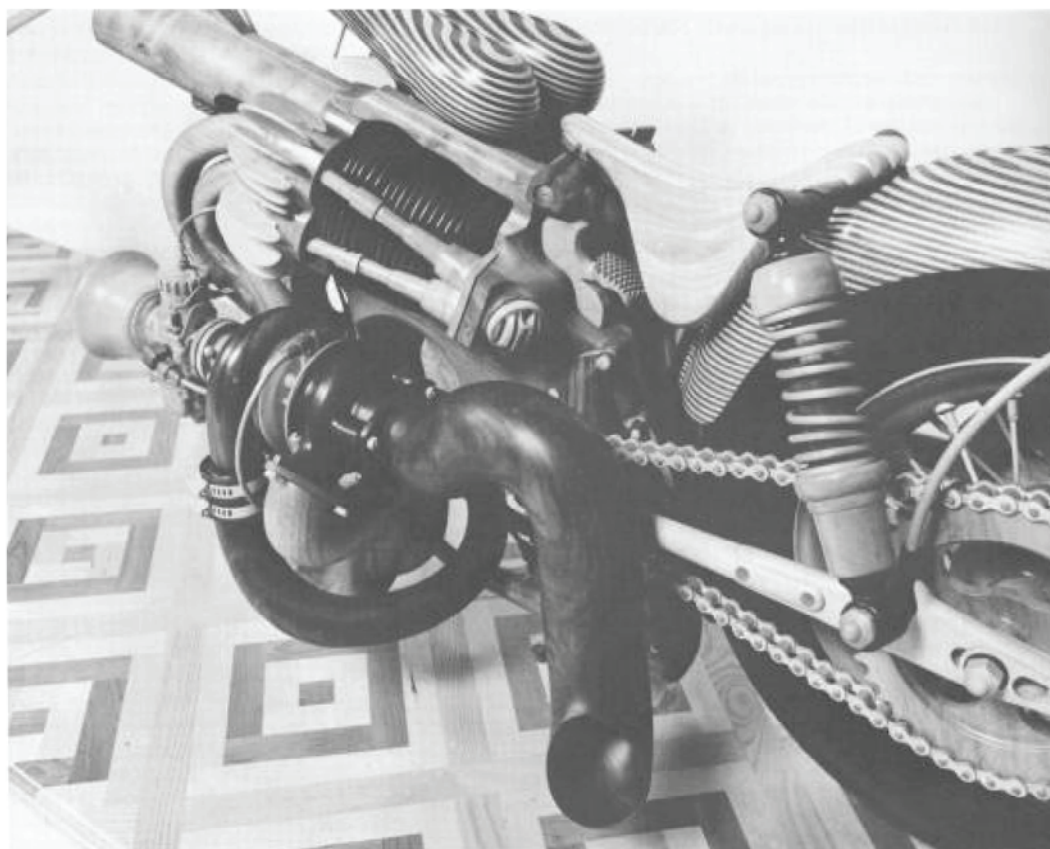
Curriculum vitae can only describe to a limited extent and so despite all the preliminary details received about Michael Cooper, sculptural wood craftsman from California, who was to be the first recipient of the Fellowship of the Crafts Council of Australia, the welcoming committee at Sydney airport waited rather nervously.

This first fellowship was important because it was breaking new ground in two directions not only in the provision of a fellowship tenable in Australia but because it was to establish a link with industry. Additionally, although the Crafts Council of Australia

had intended the fellowship to be applicable to craftsmen throughout the world including Australia, few applications had been received from Australian craftsmen and so it was quite possible that the first Crafts Council Fellow might have been an unpopular choice if he had proved less than perfect.

Our anxieties were quickly dispelled when the broad smile and curly head of Michael Cooper appeared over the top of an enormous trunk filled with tools which he was wheeling carefully down the ramp — all 100 kilos of them. A quiet low key American artist with a dedication to work, and a real sense of responsibility

Detail of 'Turbo'



towards making the most of the fellowship both for himself and for Australia, he was indeed the perfect choice.

During his time in Australia he has worked at the Robert Dunlop Furniture Factory in Brisbane, Queensland and at Pinewood Studios, Ed Jane's furniture workshop in Fremantle, West Australia. He has made himself freely available to lecture to schools, colleges and service clubs and has welcomed interested groups to 'watch him in action'. He has been conducting workshops and lecturing in all capital cities including Darwin and has forged links between the trades and the crafts which will hopefully remain.

Over and above this heavy programme which might have been quite enough in itself, he has completed three pieces of work, one of them at least a very important milestone in his own development — Dunlop his Queensland sculpture which is quite probably the final development of his car and motor cycle series. The gun sculpture in West Australian jarrah is an American commission stemming from his earlier gun series and the small elegant piece that he erected in Darwin is an exploration of Australian wood. Michael Cooper has been delighted with Australian wood. In his major piece Dunlop he used Tasmanian blackwood, Queensland silver ash, silky oak, black

bean, blue gum and red cedar. His respect for the silver ash in particular has made him determined to arrange to have supplies exported to him when he leaves Australia. Jarrah too he feels is a superb wood ranging in colour from shades of palest gold to deep red.

"Not only am I amazed that Australian woods don't seem to be available in other countries but they don't seem to be available in other states. This is limiting to wood craftsmen and unnecessarily so. Access to all these exciting woods should be commonplace."

Cooper worked a 14-hour day in Brisbane to get his project completed. He felt it was important to complete the sculpture while he was in the Dunlop factory. "It's not enough to show people a part of something.

"Reaction in the factory was very mixed. Among the 29 workers there were some who were only interested in their job and could see no importance in gaining another dimension. Some were curious. Others applied practical attitudes to the work — why make a machine that won't run? The real effects of such a scheme must be revealed over a long period. The immediate effects were on Robert Dunlop himself and his designer Tom Larsen. They now have a new approach to the furniture they are making and intend to include laminated designs. The effect on the total community again is a long reaching one. Art is not



*'Captain's Chair' 1975,
laminated hardwoods 1.35 m
h x 1.24m w x 1.24m d*

*Photography:
Howard Photographics*

news in Australia and so it took a little while for people to know I was there. Fourteen lectures later and the word was out. We had a great number of visitors in Queensland."

In Western Australia the original scheme to work at another furniture factory Catts was changed because of accommodation and Michael Cooper worked in the combination studio workshop housed in an old wool store where Ed Jane and a group of craftsmen and apprentices work sharing the accommodation with artists and sculptors. Although still a factory in one sense Pinewood Studios is a very relaxed, comfortable work place where flexitime is acceptable and Michael Cooper settled in quickly and began his commissioned piece.

Again determined to complete the piece he set himself a schedule which would take up 57 of the 60 days he had available.

Cooper works from sketches but regards them more as ideas, as rough notes changing his emphasis as he goes. He enjoys the engineering involved in his make-believe vehicles and creates the most perfectly accurate components for his wildly improbable statements. Dunlop splayed out over 23 feet of convoluted splicing and forms to its four real bicycle wheels has an almost human intestinal quality but the wooden rims holding the wheels are perfectly machined.

Michael Cooper grew up in the farmlands of Central California — the land of 'American Graffiti' and 'The Last Picture Show'.

"I grew up in the 60s listening to the Beatles and surfing records. It was easy to get a car and you had one as a matter of course by the age of 16. Mine was an old Model A Ford in bad shape. The sun was shining for us though and it was easy to fix up cars. Cars were an extension of our personalities. I disassembled my Model A and it was such an awesome task to put it back together it is still apart. After that I had real hot rods, modified engines, no fenders. I worked at them in the car port and we all borrowed each others' tools and welding equipment. In the crudest possible way we were learning about design by the seat of our pants.

"I'd always known how to get by with little money — how to improvise. My uncle and my grandfather were cabinetmakers and there was a real honest-to-God blacksmith down the road. Later the smithy and I worked on a go-cart before they were in vogue. I had to straddle it but it worked.

"My parents were against motor-bikes so I only touched briefly on them. We used to wait until it rained and the mud was thick and then get out and race each other in it. I still have a small dirt bike for trailing. But I have no fantasies about cycles. I think show bikes are

Michael Cooper at work at Ed Jane's Pinewood Studio in Fremantle, WA

Photography: John Ogden



wonderful — a true folk art. I have been involved too in exhibitions which bridged the gap between hot-rodging and sculptured works and that's been a fantastic experience."

Michael Cooper's seeming obsession with guns stemmed also from his childhood. In California farming and hunting were fairly synonymous. Rabbits had to be kept down and the traditions of hunting are very much a part of American country life.

"I've had three traumatic experiences with guns. As a small boy, like all my friends I longed for the day when I could have a gun and go hunting. One day I borrowed a B.B. gun and I shot a small bird. I was horrified with the result. It really bothered me that I had killed something. Before that my excitement was all about shooting and hunting but when it was done it really sank home, that I had killed the bird. Then when I was a teenager I was minding my grandfather's little corner store which my father managed when I was held up. The experience was terrifying. The man was huge. He was six feet nine inches tall and weighed 270 lbs. He was desperately nervous, the gun shaking and pointing in his hand as he ordered me to lie down on the floor. I thought he was so nervous that he would kill me accidentally and I lay there hearing him shaking and expecting to die at any moment or to have my father walk in and get shot.

"Finally like all my generation I had to face the Vietnam war and make a decision. At 18 you are not prepared to make a clear stand on issues, the ramifications of which are unknown to you. The Vietnam war seemed to have nothing to do with the issues and feelings in the environment in which I had grown up. Adults didn't discuss issues with their kids in those days. We were bewildered and although we came from a very dutiful kind of background I for one decided to be a conscientious objector and after three years of argument with the government I was allowed to register as one. All of these things 15 years later seemed to be triggers for the gun series."

Michael went on to San Jose State College to get a degree in commercial art, but it was not until a friend persuaded him to spend the \$13 air fare to go to Los Angeles to attend the Sculpture of the 60s show which exposed him to kinetic sculpture that he became aware that he could actually continue to work on the things that interested him and that it would still be considered art. It was at this show that he first met

Peter Voukos who became an important catalyst in his life.

"It was the first time I had thought about what I wanted to do. Previously I had just gone along my appointed path following what seemed to be the best thing to do. You see where I had grown up there were unwritten rules of behaviour — dances were hops, holding hands was rather a big deal — and thinking for oneself was definitely not one of the normal things."

But Michael's fascination with mechanical objects launched him into sculpture. Although originally as interested in metal as in wood Michael Cooper quickly changed to a major involvement in wood.

"Wood is both interesting and extremely workable. People have a strong bond with wood. They are comfortable with it. They look at it differently. What is normally a quick glance at a metal object becomes a lingering look at wood and there is time to relate to the idea because the material holds the interest."

If there is one idea that Cooper would most like to impart to Australian craftsmen it is probably to get on with their ideas, to experiment and try not to worry about what other people think.

"It is what you feel inside that matters. I hear a lot about the lack of critical analysis here. I don't think that is important in itself. It's just a kind of communication and if you disagree with a critic it might strengthen your determination to go on. It should in fact do so if you feel they have misunderstood your intention. The excitement of working is what matters. The direct stimulus you get by being involved."

Michael Cooper leaves us to take up another fellowship in Rome — the Rome Prize given by the American Academy in Rome which will allow him to work for a year in his own studio high on the Janiculum Hill with a stipend, board and housing at the Academy, supplies, materials and access not only to the 86,000 volumes in the library but to a company of scholars, poets, artists, sculptors all chosen by a panel of eminent men as representatives of America. To move from working in industry as the Crafts Council of Australia Fellow to the sophisticated and exquisite surroundings of the Academy as a Rome Fellow will be quite a jump — from a very new world to one steeped in ancient traditions. It is one that the young man from American graffiti country will take in his stride.

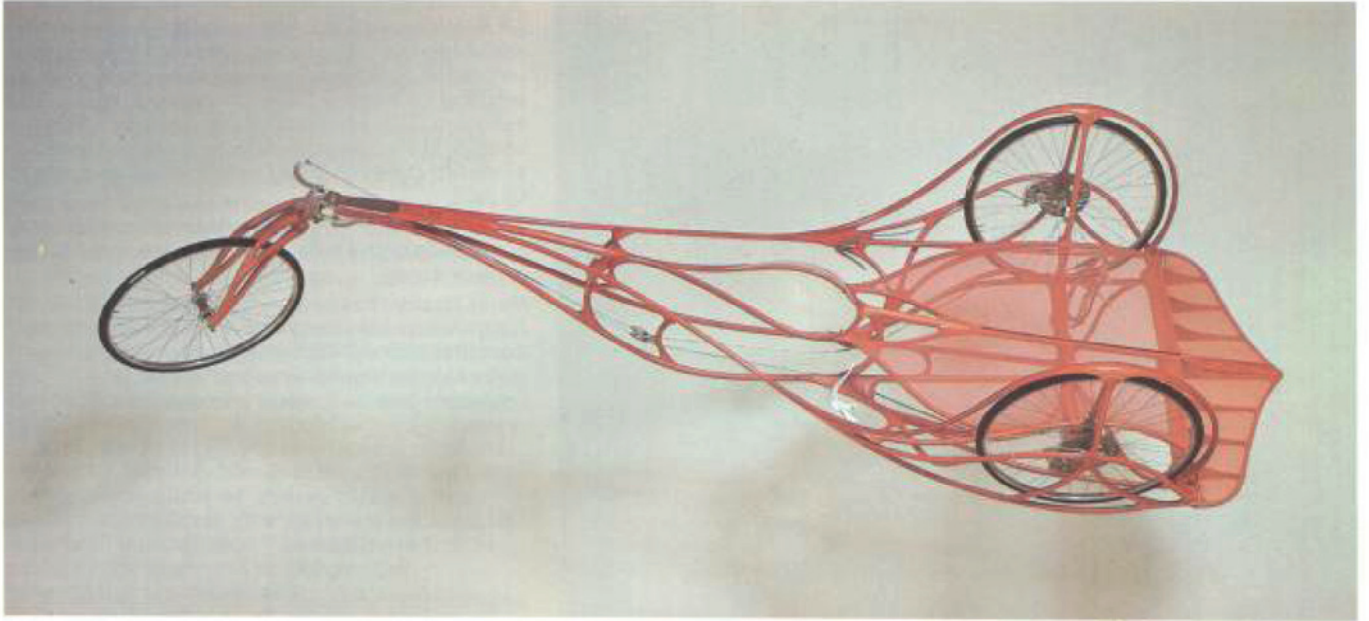
"What you are doing is what is important not where you are doing it. And once you have completed the work the involvement is important not the object. The objects are really just a record of your passing. The way I see it you are seeking something out there which is not always clear. One has to try and try again.

The further exploration of the elaborate forms the organic feeling created in Dunlop will be the departure point for future work.

"And humour. I didn't begin the gun series intending humour. It developed. And I think it is a natural area to explore further.

"In Rome I'll be working with natural objects, boats, guns and fluid shapes. Kinetics with metals and with sounds. I want to programme a cycle that expands and rises and then slides away from the viewer!"

April Hersey



'Soapbox Racer' 1975,
laminated oak, aluminium,
steel, rubber and Plexiglas
72cm h x 1.35m w x 3.43m d.

Photography: Raja Muna



'Turbo' 1977, laminated
hardwoods (22 varieties)
1m h x 57m w x 2.96m d

Photography: Jeff Shyshka