

O u t o n

Alexandra Grant meets self-taught sculptor, Colin Miller at his studio in North Norfolk

Colin Miller is a delightful person to meet, he seems to have a great faith in life and he appears to have acquired the knack of keeping things simple; when many people become stuck in the process of how to do things, Colin just does.

This is possibly why he works so proficiently and also what makes his sculpture so appealing – the approach of potentially complex issues through wonderfully bold yet simplistic forms. When faced with a piece of his work you are compelled to touch it – and in the cases of his smaller pieces of work – to pick it up and feel its solidity. He uses, amongst other materials, olive wood, bronze and marble. His sculpture charms all the senses; they are pleasurable to look at, challenging to consider, a marriage of smooth and textured sensations to feel, cold – particularly if marble – to touch and pleasingly weighted. He has had successful exhibitions all over Europe and his fabulous studio is set in a 19th century barn beside his house in Cley-next-the-Sea.

Colin began sculpting in 1966, after returning to Norwich from



'Pan' olive wood



'Full circle'
Carrara marble

'Abstract'

a limb

travelling around the world for two and a half years. He was then 23 and living with his parents. He says that he taught himself to sculpt with: "Difficulty, time and help from my mum – I was encouraged very much by her." He started off by sculpting a head of his mother while she was painting and then he received some commissions to do other people's heads. When he met his wife Diana, he recalls: "We got married and I decided, with her help, to try and be a sculptor full time. She was buying clothes for the Debenham Group and so she kept the body and soul together, while I had exhibitions and got some of my work in the Royal Academy and it just sort of went on from there really. So, without Diana keeping the house going, I wouldn't have been able to do it, so I am very grateful to her for that." Colin's career took off and he enjoyed one-man exhibitions in Norwich, London, Amsterdam, Dusseldorf and Paris before moving with his family to the Greek island of Paros.

Diana and Colin both have a calm composure about them, an attribute, which must have stood them in good stead

when they decided to move to Greece. Colin remembers how it happened: "We were at a dinner party in mid February and the weather was appalling and we were all talking about why we should just go off to a Greek island – a bit of sun and all that sort of thing. Ten days later, Diana and I and two children in nappies and 15 pieces of luggage were on the Orient Express going to Athens." It was a brave move and they just did it. What greeted them was an idyllic island but they had no running water and they had to dig their own loo. Colin jokes: "We eventually built a loo in the donkey shed and you could get a suntan while sitting on it! My mum made me climb up onto the wall and take a photograph of her sitting on the loo with her parasol up and just her little feet sticking out at the bottom."

They lived in Greece for ten years and built their own house and studio there in the traditional Cycladic style. "I did have some help," says Colin, "but when you imagine that the walls are 50cms thick, made out of uncut, rough marble, you can understand why the project took two years. I did have some physical help and mechanical aid to pour the concrete roof."



Marine life was a source of inspiration to Colin during his time on Paros



Colin began sculpting in 1966 and has enjoyed one-man exhibitions in Norwich, London, Amsterdam and Dusseldorf. He eventually uprooted his family to the Greek island of Paros for ten years, during which time he continued to exhibit abroad as well as sell his work to tourists

'Bird' Parian marble. Colin sculpts in olive wood, bronze and marble and his bold yet simplistic forms charm all the senses

Feelings in to form: Colin's thoughts, feelings and preoccupations are transposed into three-dimensional structure

The shortest distances in the house were covered by chestnut beams and the longest, by stripped bamboo, which was typical Cycladic architecture and that was what we wanted. We had bamboo cleaning parties; people in their swimming trunks just stripping the bamboo and we watered and fed them in the evening. So alcohol and a bite to eat was a return for their stripping."

While living in Greece, Colin had an exhibition in London, two in Athens and a number on the island. Passing tourists also provided an income. The Millers also owned a house in Norfolk, which they were leasing, so the rent money also helped out.

It is almost automatic to assume that a picturesque Greek island, with its wonderful beaches and aquamarine waters is the perfect muse for a sculptor, particularly when he is surrounded by Cycladic architecture and amazing materials to work with. However Colin contradicts this view: "People say 'Oh you must have been so inspired by this beautiful Greek island', but I think really, I was only inspired by the marine life and nothing else because the inspiration is really within my head. It was a beautiful place to work but the inspiration came from within." Colin has done some stunning pieces of sculpture of octopus; aside from the sea life, Greece did have other influences on him. "I think the Greek myths inspired me and it is obvious why artists have been inspired by myths for hundreds of years."

After spending ten years in Greece, the Millers returned to Norfolk. Colin explains: "We came back in 1984, we realised then that



'Inside out' bronze



Left: 'Eternal struggle' bronze

Colin says, "We find our life here is quite similar to life in Paros in the sense that it's out on a limb...we are in our own climatic and social pocket."



we just had to take our heads out of the sand and thank goodness we did because the children had been to Greek school and the school said that they were doing alright but we knew they weren't." So they returned to England so that their children could attend secondary school. Colin continued to sculpt using English stone and woods as well as bronze. He returned to his Paros studio during the summers until 1996 when he sold it. Colin described the sale of the Greek residence as: "A real wrench – particularly for the children – it was their childhood home." However, it made sense to sell and he then created his Norfolk based studio. He and Diana take refuge in the fact that they live in the heart of North Norfolk, which has its own characteristics that parallel those in Greece. Colin says: "We find our life here is quite similar to life in Paros in the sense that it's out on a limb and it is a very insular existence; people aren't going on somewhere else, we are in our own climatic and social pocket."

As Heany entitled a collection of his writings as *Feelings Into Words*, Colin Miller could easily describe his work as 'feelings into form'; it is his own thoughts, feelings and preoccupations transposed into three-dimensional structure – a physical realisation of a unique fusion of metaphysical aspects, which constitute parts of him. He reveals: "I liken the creative process to a card game – pelmanism (or memory), where you put all the cards face down and each person lifts up two and that is what it is like in the computer in my head. There are all sorts of images that I pick up throughout my life and I pick up one and then I pick up another and think 'oh, this one might go with that image' – so I pick up the two and make a sculpture – so that is the nearest way of trying to explain where it all comes from."

Colin has just held an exhibition in The Gallery in Cork Street and he has another interesting project in the offing. He clarifies: "I have

been asked by Oakham School to make a sculpture. The benefactor owns stone quarries and has given them as much stone as they would like and I have been talking to the school about a sculpture for the millennium – an abstract piece symbolising optimism and energy. It will go outside the library and I am going to do it at the school so that the students can watch me doing it." Laughing, he continues: "I don't think I mind being watched and hopefully by watching the process and the progress, it will encourage them to work in three dimensions."

Something that would really put the icing on the cake for Colin would be: "To have another piece of monumental proportions in London in a lovely place; I have got a piece in Hammersmith." However, he derives huge satisfaction from the fact that he has managed to raise a family from sculpting and Diana's support has been fundamental. He concludes: "I have been very, very fortunate and when I get low, I tell myself to shut up and get on with it because I have been so lucky compared to so many." □