

CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

FATHER TED KENNEDY AND MUM SHIRL MEMORIAL PROJECT

Name: Suzanne Alexopoulos

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Place: Balmain

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

Recorder: Marantz PMD 671

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 MB: This is an interview with Sue Alexopoulos. It's taking place in her home in Balmain. The project is the Father Ted Kennedy and Mum Shirl Memorial Sculpture project and this is an oral history project to go with that and it's part of the City of Sydney's history programme. I'm Margo Beasley. The date is the - - -

SA: 14th of November.

MB: - - - 14th of November 2008. O.K, so we're here to talk today about the project that you've been working on for some time now through the Tom Bass Sculpture School, which is this memorial sculpture, proposed memorial sculpture to both Ted Kennedy and Mum Shirl.

SA: That's right.

MB: Shirley Smith was her more formal name and it's a project that's been going on for quite a while now, since the death of Ted Kennedy, I suppose, Father Ted Kennedy, who was predeceased

by Mum Shirl but the two of them had worked very closely together.

SA: That's right.

MB: And you are a sculptor at the school?

SA: That's right, I am, yep.

MB: And you've been very involved with this project which will actually be, if it comes to fruition a work of public art on a street in Redfern but with four collaborative sculptors. Is that right?

SA: Well, that's right. Well, headed by Tom Bass [Australian sculptor]; Tom Bass and three others.

MB: Right.

SA: Yep. Yes, we began work on this, I think, probably the end of last year, I think it was, and the beginning of it was I think it had been talked about by Tom Bass because he was a friend of Ted's and had attended the church at Redfern when Mum Shirl was in her prime and officiating in lots of the smaller parts of the ceremonies that Ted encouraged her to do.

2.04 So Tom was interested in remembering Ted and in carrying out Ted's wish to have a memorial to Mum Shirl. And they talked about it for a while with the church at Redfern and the people who are running the church and had a meeting late last year - probably about this time last year, actually – of the congregation after a Sunday mass where Tom Bass addressed the congregation and talked about this memorial and asked the people of that group to tell their stories about what they remembered of Ted and what they remembered of Mum Shirl and what were the things they thought should be commemorated, what were the issues at the time that they thought should be taken into account. So the artists, myself and two others, Peter Bartlett and Damian Lucas, were there at the time as was Tom and Margo and a number of other people from the school and - - -

MB: That's Margo Hoekstra.

SA: Margo, Margo, Margo Hoekstra, yes - - -

MB: Hoekstra.

SA: - - - Tom's wife. And at that meeting – it went for over an hour – there was a lot of comment about what Ted represented mostly, mostly about what, I remember, mostly about Ted, and it was about the things they thought that were most notable. And I've found in carrying out research since then that those things have remained paramount that

the congregation pointed to in the first instance and they were basically openness and hospitality and acceptance of everyone but particularly the marginalised: marginalised blacks, marginalised whites, anybody who wasn't doing well in the system he would open his door to.

- 4.14 He was also notable for hanging a rainbow banner outside his place at times to encourage the gay people to also feel free to come to his church and of course it made him a little bit unpopular with the hierarchy of the church but that was the thing people remembered about him. The caretaker of the place remembered that he [Ted Kennedy] got the door locks ripped off [removed] the presbytery within the first few days of moving in.

MB: Ted did?

SA: Ted did, because the first person who turned up at his presbytery was an Aboriginal woman with nowhere to stay and he felt he couldn't sleep in his comfortable bed while other people had nowhere to sleep. So he allowed them to use the presbytery and of course he made himself very unpopular with South Sydney Council by having more and more and more Aboriginals moving into his church, so that at times he had two hundred people sleeping in his presbytery and it wasn't a good look as far as they were concerned but it demonstrates Ted's immediate hands-on solutions to things, to be there and to do himself. So that was the beginning of my research into this project and at that meeting also there was one Aboriginal woman in particular who spoke quite a bit about Mum Shirl and she was a niece of Mum Shirl and had lived with her quite a bit of the time - that was Anne Weldon - and it was asked of her what sort of symbols she would think could be considered for some representation of Mum Shirl, whether she thought that there was a problem with direct representation with a physical photograph or a statue that looked like Mum Shirl because we hear these comments constantly about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders should be aware that "There may be images in this program".

- 6.27 You know, you've heard it yourself on the major ABC programs where there are Aboriginals photographed, as if this is an issue anyway. It became clear that for the Wiradjuri people [Indigenous nation, central New South Wales] that was not an issue.

MB: So for you that's the idea that you should or should not be using somebody figuratively in a sculpture?

SA: That's right, that's right.

MB: And that was O.K, that proved to be O.K. for Wiradjuri people?

SA: That proved to be O.K. for the Wiradjuri people, it was not their problem. They said they have special arrangements for the first year

perhaps after somebody's died like the same as a widow might wear black for a year but that they had absolutely no problem with a physical representation of Mum Shirl. And we had a lot of discussion in the early stages about whether it should be an abstract piece or whether it should be a figurative piece and those who were for figuration were heavily for it and those for abstract the other way and it was rather difficult to come to any quick agreements.

MB: You're talking here about the people you consulted with rather than the sculptors themselves?

SA: No, I'm actually talking more about the sculptors themselves.

MB: The sculptors.

SA: The sculptors themselves were concerned as to what they could actually put in that place that would be accepted by the locals and whenever we spoke, whenever I spoke, to people who were concerned, I didn't have any feedback from them generally one way or another.

8.06 I would ask directly but they really didn't feel like they had a very clear idea what sculpture could provide anyway and felt that it was really up to us. It was more than that but the big argument, really, about abstract and figuration came within the artists' group. So that's a very big divide and as a beginning, before we did anything it was decided we really had a lot of stuff on Ted Kennedy, we had a lot of written material from his own book, 'Who is Worthy?', we had written material on Mum Shirl too in Mum Shirl's book but – anyway, we had that but we didn't have Aboriginal feedback on anything else, anything about Mum Shirl, really, other than that she was an Aboriginal woman that worked with Ted in this capacity. So we had to go around and find out from the Aboriginal people how she fitted in and I was charged with a lot of the research and so I visited a number of local places that the Aboriginal population may frequent in Redfern. I went to the Children's Centre where Ann Weldon was working and spoke to her and to her sisters. It's about ten women that I think are loosely cousins; I don't think they've all got the same parents, but they are in the Aboriginal system as sisters and they've grown up in close contact with each other and continue to have that.

10.00 They look like a very disparate group, though; they're all Aboriginal women but they look all very different from one another. And so I spoke to them about Mum Shirl and they spoke a lot about their childhood experiences with Mum Shirl, how she was a large, warm woman that inspired a feeling of confidence and security to those around her; if you got a hug from Mum Shirl, you knew you were getting a hug, it was this vast woman who enveloped you. And these children remember her in that way still and they felt that she carried that same feeling wherever she went that when she arrived people would say

“Mum Shirl’s here” or as they would say “Aunty Shirley’s here” and feel like life was under control again now that there was somebody to stand up for them. They told me that she won back numbers of their sisters from the welfare which had taken them away because one or other of their parents wasn’t there or for whatever reason they were judged to be in moral danger or they had a white father and perhaps they should be better off elsewhere. But Mum Shirl managed to fight the authorities and not go away until she got these children back and they remember that of her. And I think in prisons the Mum Shirl thing, she began to get involved with prisons early on, which they told me about, these girls. When her brother, Laurie, was imprisoned and she used to go to visit him and in doing so she found she became very aware of the Aboriginals being incarcerated in vast numbers and in visiting Laurie she found many others also locked up with families that couldn’t get to visit them and so she took on the social worker role of visiting all of these people.

12.16 And I needed to find some of them, I thought, that she had visited in prisons and I visited the ‘Share the Meal’ that they have at Redfern Church on a Friday.

MB: This is at St Vincent’s?

SA: At St Vincent’s. Actually, it’s not a Friday. Friday’s at the community centre that the council runs – I went to that one as well. But trying to find local people who remembered Mum Shirl and I mostly found elders who told me about knowing her as a young woman. They all really felt proud of her, they felt that she worked for all their people, they felt that she needed honouring and some of them felt that she was bigger than the Catholic church and that she needed more than to be just included with Ted and that that was a very limited role, that her biggest role was in visiting divided families, visiting people locked up in prison, relaying letters and messages back and forth and getting people services they needed or medications that they needed, bringing people to funerals from wherever where people had died in custody or somewhere else. So she was this self appointed social worker for all of her people. And it wasn’t just all her people; there were also sort of old, white derelicts she might find that she would also bring, to put a roof over their head.

14.06 She was just interested in anybody who had a problem with authority and the rules and the system and she was interested in making their lot better in a very immediate, practical way. When she had her own home, it was full of mattresses up and down the halls everywhere; wherever she’d find people needing she would bring them in. And I just found this same story repeated of Mum Shirl giving herself to whoever was there basically as a mother. Apparently she got the Mum Shirl title because of going into prisons and asking to see somebody that she heard was locked up there and they’d say “Well, who are you?” and she’d just say “I’m their mum” so she became

known as “Well, Mum Shirl’s here”, you know, “Whose mum she is today but she’s here again”. And I began to feel that that wider involvement that Mum Shirl had with the whole community, wherever they were, the whole community of marginalised and needy that spread out from the prison systems meant that she needed a huge amount of recognition. There was a group of people who told me about her activities when the tent embassy was set up in Canberra and her activities in influencing the young radicals of the time, like the Coes and Jenny Coe and now Jenny Munro and Isabel Coe and a number of these young people became strong leaders for the Aboriginal cause with the encouragement of Mum Shirl and that sort of she would be there as well, she was on the lawn with them and she would put herself wherever the problem was. So in exploring Mum Shirl she just grew and grew and grew for me.

16.18 **MB: But one of complicating factors in this is I think that in fact Ted Kennedy left some money in his will for a memorial to Mum Shirl - - -**

SA: He did indeed.

MB: - - - and he didn’t leave it for a memorial for himself.

SA: No, he didn’t.

MB: And everybody says that he wouldn’t have wanted that - - -

SA: No.

MB: - - - but I think it may have come from his sister, Marnie [Sister Marnie Kennedy] - - -

SA: Yes.

MB: - - - the suggestion that it could be a combined thing. So it means that you end up with a very complex task because they’re both people with huge reputations - - -

SA: Yes.

MB: - - - and they’re well and comfortably within living memory - - -

SA: Yes.

MB: - - - but there are also then all the complexities of it being a collaborative work of art, not just amongst the sculptors but to have the impetus from the community - - -

SA: Across communities, yes.

MB: - - - various communities and then also having to put it into a particular site and negotiate all the things - - -

SA: That's right.

MB: - - - that you have to negotiate with a work of public art.

SA: That's right, that's right.

MB: So maybe if we could talk a bit about now, like what was the first stage in starting to think in practical terms amongst yourselves about what that sculpture might mean.

SA: The first time I think was after the research phase with the local people was finished and been around and spoken to everybody and we began to then think about what it could physically look like. We'd cleared up that it didn't matter to the Aboriginal people whether it was figurative or not but Tom Bass who's our leader in this was very keen that it be an abstract sculpture.

18.00 What his thing was was he wanted it to be abstract, completely abstract. He wanted also for people walking along the street in front of the church who saw this sculpture, immediately they saw it he wanted them to know what it was about, he wanted it to be clear. And to be honest I just really couldn't see how I could develop an abstract form or abstract forms that would speak to Joe Blow and Maria Casli [?] and whoever else is walking along the street and that they would see.

MB: And what about the other sculptors? Is there a kind of a chain of command? Like, you said Tom in a way is your leader.

SA: Tom is the boss, yes, master.

MB: The boss, yes.

SA: Master, master sculptor.

MB: There's you and two - - -

SA: And two others.

MB: And so is there a kind of a hierarchy?

SA: Hierarchy? Well, I feel that there's Tom and there's the rest of us basically. I think that whole school, his school works like that too: Tom is the only master. We have several teachers in the school as well but they teach in Tom's way, teach his methods, and the school is built on Tom Bass' methods.

MB: So the other two sculptors, their names are - - -

SA: Damien Lucas, and Damien is a teacher at the school as well and Peter Bartlett who was been involved with the school for over a decade. His background, I think, is in theatre design, theatre sets and props and that sort of thing but he's also sort of a long term artist with the Bass School.

MB: With the school.

20.00 SA: And then there's me; I'm probably the most recent to the school of the group.

MB: And when you said that you found it very difficult to try and envisage something that could be pure abstraction and yet would be immediately comprehensible to the ordinary person on the street, what about Peter and Damien, did they - - -

SA: I think they shared the same problem, Damien less so. He has been more involved with abstract type pieces but his take on it tended to be less abstract than maybe symbolic. He became interested very early on in the idea of hands. Tom wanted this sculpture to say to people and express what Mum Shirl and Ted did, he wanted it to express what they did. So Damien had the feeling that hands are doing but he made real hands in various postures and he had like a man's hand and a woman's hand, a black hand and a white hand, and he'd been thinking of Ted offering shelter and Mum Shirl offering support and so he would maybe have a device with two hands, one cupped to hold and support, and one peeked overhead almost to shelter like a roof because Ted had provided the space and the place and Mum Shirl had provided the connections and the physical contact with people to get them to that place.

22.00 And then Damien felt like putting some sort of small figure in the hand as well, to indicate it's like the everyman, marginalised person but Tom wanted it cleaner than that, less in it. He felt it would be more powerful if you threw away the figure and let people fill in their own figure. But I still felt walking along the street if I, never mind John Citizen, saw a pair of hands, giant hands – they were quite big, much bigger than life-size, like big that you could see – I couldn't see how they could see that that's what Mum Shirl and Ted Kennedy were doing; I felt like you had to know the story to have any idea what that might be about. But we were still working with it. So the idea of completely abstract form kept hounding us; we would come in with little mockups of things. Like at one stage I - - -

MB: So everybody would sort of go home and fiddle around with something and think about it?

SA: Yes, yes, people would go home and read more books, read more interviews, think more, get more thoughts as to what could be represented in what way. Then they would make in clay little mockups, what we call maquettes, something about six inches high that was sort of an indication of what you're thinking of or we would draw and bring that in and talk about how that would work in the space. And there were a lot of difficulties; nobody seemed to be coming up with a purely abstract form. Peter Bartlett spent quite a bit of time thinking about a shape which just represents a figure.

24.00 It seemed to me if you have a shape that represents a figure you might as well have the figure. I couldn't see the point of a wobbly shape a bit narrower in the middle or something, why that's better than a real figure, but that was just my bent. But anyway they came in. Tom would come in with a couple of pieces of clay, not hands any more, just lumps of shapes twisted around one another or leaning together or something like that but they looked more like not people working together as people maybe mutually admiring one another, which wasn't what we want to show with – it'd be the last thing you'd want to show with Mum Shirl and Ted Kennedy. So in looking for the two of them in a purely abstract shape, we kept suggesting physical, real things that seemed hard to see why you would bother to complicate it by making it a funny shape and then trying to find a shape which is just aesthetically pleasing. So we battled around with lots of these little archways with hands clasped at the top and praying at the top and all sorts of things, a lot of hands but still not getting it. And in fact it was probably only five or six weeks ago I remember going to the administrator of the studio and saying "Well, I just can't see how we're ever going to get anywhere with this. It feels like we keep coming in with more and more disparate little mockups of things". You know, Peter at one stage had a bird clamped between a pair of hands and it looked like something to suggest imprisonment, you know, and it was the idea of keeping a bird still and without flight is imprisonment and he'd been thinking more like the injured bird and looking after it but it was just a physical thing again; it wasn't abstract, it was symbolic but it wasn't the right symbol and we kept getting things then that were symbolic but not quite the right symbol, the wrong symbol; I didn't think we were ever going to get there.

26.21 And Tom kept saying – each week he'd give us a lecture - we were meeting weekly at this stage – "Let me just remind you", he'd say, "how great it's going to be when we get this. We're going to feel like heaven has come and manna has fallen from heaven and we'll feel replete and happy" and I just got so sick of this thing, I thought "If he tells me that again I'm going to hit him for sure". I wanted to get to where we had something we could actually work on and develop. We couldn't get to this agreement of a particular thing and we seemed to be nowhere near it. But then in the process Peter came in with a pair of hands that he'd cut out of a flat piece of wood and so it was just this

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MB: So they look like more or less two-dimensional?

SA: Drawing, two-dimensional flat hands they look like and it just reminded me of those prints of hands on Aboriginal caves where they use an ochre and blow over their hand and leave a print and they had that sort of lack of detail, just a print look about them, and I felt “Well, we could maybe work with that”. That says to people, “Even though it’s not a print, it’s the actual thing standing there, it looks like it’s certainly related to aboriginal something”. They seem to have made this symbol of hands very much their own and we could use that. And we started working with that and moving the hands around and thinking about how they could be: one could be different from the other, thinking about they did work with their hands, it’s appropriate, and they have left their mark on the place which, you know, a print of a hand on a cave is like a signature of who was there.

28.17 So it felt like it had stuff going for it. And then we began to think about wounds and Peter put a wound in his Mum Shirl hand that looked like sort of a wound from the hand of Christ and directly opposite the little space on the pavement, written on the front of the church is a sign about the Aboriginal Christ crucified on every city street, you know; it’s a line of poetry from an Aboriginal poet whom Ted used to read a lot from.

MB: Who is - - -

SA: Somebody called Davis, I think his name was Jack Davis.

MB: Jack Davis, the poet and playwright.

SA: That’s right. He used to read a lot of his stuff and I think this line comes from that and the idea of the Christ-like wound felt really appropriate and we were looking at that and - - -

MB: Like stigmata?

SA: A stigmata, yes. We were looking at this hole in the hand and thinking about only one hand – Peter began with just one hand and he had a divided hand with sort of a line in the wound, running the length of the hand from the middle finger right down through it, through this stigmata wound and he was going to put the hand, half a white hand and half a black hand but we decided there needed to be two. And so we wanted to discriminate them so that it wasn’t all within the one group of Australians, they were really distinct groups. And Tom at this stage was talking about reconciliation, how this had to be reconciliation between the races and I kept feeling like “There’s no place for reconciliation here, this was about people”. That feels like something very now, a word now that we talk about and it feels political and I think what they were - - -

30.16 **MB: And that also I think was in the immediate period after the Rudd Apology [then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's formal apology to Aboriginal Australia regarding the Stolen Generations].**

SA: Sorry, it was.

MB: So, like the whole country was really gripped by that idea.

SA: That Reconciliation idea, they were.

MB: And that Reconciliation has been also a formal but not very successful process over the preceding few years.

SA: That's right, it had. But his Sorry statement, as you said, with Rudd actually saying it as soon as he was elected to office, was what was going on in our minds, I guess. But it didn't feel right, I felt like this. From my talking with the Aboriginal people in the area, it feels to me and continues to feel to me through their advice that there's no reconciliation here at all, that there hasn't been a togetherness of enough note generally to talk about re anything; they haven't yet actually had a coming together on an equal basis, so we really need to establish that. Anyway, it was all with – that was part of our argument and discussion too as too as to – I kept saying “No Reconciliation”, that's why we've got these figures leaning together and wrapping their arms around each other which felt totally wrong to me. It's because of that current context of Reconciliation and I kept being the person demanding edge, demanding edge, I felt like there's a lot more - - -

MB: By “edge” you mean metaphoric edge?

SA: Metaphoric edge. It's sharp, it's not all sorted out, we are not all happy and one. There is more to do and that's why this job was necessary these people were doing, Ted and Shirl.

32.01 And we ended up with two hands and in trying to look at the wound and the hurt that still persists with Aboriginal people, Peter came up with the idea of putting bars across the wound in the Mum Shirl hand and he showed that to an Aboriginal friend of his who'd seen the hand before when it was divided and had a wound in it, said “Oh, yes, that's good” but when he saw it with the bars in it he sort of literally took the piece and looked at it closely and said “Now you're saying something” and I felt that too, I felt like it's not just, you know, stigmata, we can romanticise that sort of thing, you know, she suffered for her people, “Po po” you know, “We don't care” but when you put bars in it it's happening now and Aboriginal deaths in custody is still ongoing and Palm Island and the current sort of problems there with the court hearings and about exactly the same issues with Aboriginal people and incarceration and suicides or not in custody. So it brought it into the present and it was also extraordinarily relevant for the past because

Mum Shirl mostly devoted a lot of her time to prisoners and visiting prisons. And then we needed a Ted figure and to go with the Ted symbol and to go with this other hand it felt like the thing he offered was the open door: "You can come to my place any time. I will never call the police, I will never give you a hard time. You can sort your problems out here and you can have my church and you can use the resources of my church and I'll love you and so will God and come in and it doesn't matter who you are". So we needed a big entranceway through his hand.

34.01 So at the moment that's where we're at. We're looking at Mum Shirl representing the Aboriginal marginalised, the worst of the Aboriginal predicaments, which she was helping and him being a man of the church in a Christ-like way opened his door to the marginalised as Jesus did and I feel that Ted did model himself on the Jesus model of how to be a priest. He wasn't involved with the hierarchy, he wasn't interested in who was bishop and who was boss. He was very interested in each person being a little temple of God, with their own little conscience which is their own little voice of God, as if everybody really knows what's good and bad, it's in your own head, you just have to listen. And he allowed them to make their own judgements, he made no judgements of anybody, he opened his door and he offered everything he had. So I think we've come a long way in the project. We've come from feeling like there was nothing at all we could use that we could agree on to at least now a few basic strong concepts that we want to put up in the sculpture and we're even getting ideas about how to display it. At the moment we're refining it to see how big it could really be in the space, how it could be positioned and it's a very, very, very small space. It's a piece of footpath and you've got to be careful of progress, people have got to be able to progress back and forth along the footpath, they have to be able to see from the road and it's a great - - -

SA: And you also have to get it through council and - - -

36.01 SA: That's right.

MB: - - - get the approval that's got to fit in - - -

SA: The council have been particularly nice, though, and particularly involved. From the beginning they've been comfortable with saying "Yes, we will consider this. We think this needs commemorating or happy to commemorate the people of our city that have done big things".

MB: Yes, I was meaning in the sense that there are certain rules and bylaws and so on governing what you can do.

SA: What sort of thing, yes.

MB: Yes, and the size and so on - - -

SA: The size.

MB: - - - because people have to be able to see the bus coming or all of that kind of thing that will on what you can do.

SA: That's right, that's right. Yes, and the public liability problem, so you can't have anything dangerous. And I suppose they'll think too about whether it's sturdy enough or it's just going to get rubbished really quickly. Yes, there is all of that to go through but it's very nice to not have to go cap in hand to ask to just consider maybe we can use the site. They've said "Yes, well it's possible you can. We do have guidelines and we'll provide you with all of those and we do have a committee that will oversee any public artwork". But it's a possibility which is much better than the – well, Ted really wanted this sculpture positioned in between the church and the presbytery in the small garden, yard there.

MB: That was originally with his idea about a memorial to Mum Shirl.

SA: It was.

MB: He wasn't in that design to move that?

SA: No, he wasn't in that, no, he wasn't involved with that. He wanted it for Mum Shirl and it's a great pity we can't have that but I can see that there will not be agreement from the Catholic church - well, the boss of the Catholic church.

MB: Because there's been so much change there since Ted's death, hasn't there?

SA: That's right.

MB: So in effect it's like a whole new breed of Catholicism there that's very different to - - -

37.59 SA: It's very sad actually, it's very sad. If you go into the church it makes me want to cry. The guttering's hanging off the outside, the sandstone decorations and cappings of the fence are all sort of cancered and eaten away and falling off and it's in a horrible state of disrepair and obviously the congregation can't afford to improve it themselves, nothing's coming from further up, and to boot George Pell [then Catholic Archbishop of Sydney] has installed some Neocatechumenal missionaries from South America who are coming here to preach – the boss will – to our natives in Redfern. It just is mindbogglingly out of touch, you know, it's insulting, I think. And so the Neocatechumenal movement seems to be a reversion back to

earlier times where the hierarchy was in charge, the priests were in charge, and the laity are the ignorant people down the bottom who do as they're told which was just the total opposite way from Ted's way of thinking, that "Each of you is equal to me and to each other and you all have a bit of God and you're all just as good". This is "Don't you dare try to think about that. I'll tell you which bits to listen to and which bits not to and where to sit and which way to orientate the church". So the Aboriginal people have been cut out again; there aren't black faces in the congregation very much at all any more.

39.56 I went about four times in the process of this to look at what's happening in the church and there's one young man or middle aged man who occasionally reads a lesson who's an Aboriginal man and an old woman, Auntie Glad, who cancer and not doing very well, who seemed to be there and they come for the meal on a – I've forgotten the day, Thursday or Tuesday, I've forgotten but they don't seem to any longer have the space for any religious involvement. They had bad experiences when Ted first left and the Neocatechumenal one, one Neocatechumenal first was appointed there. He was very concerned about who attended communion and who he gave the Eucharist to. He made judgements about whether this scruffy little Aboriginal girl was really baptised and fit to be getting the Eucharist and so walked past her and there are lots of stories of Aboriginal people being humiliated in that way. And they weren't ready for it because Ted didn't do it and suddenly they were made to feel, well, less than human and certainly unworthy and so they don't go there any more. So, the congregation's shrinking and the church is falling apart and we have this monument to put in the street and it might be all that's left. It feels very sad to me. I really feel that the monument – part of me feels distressed to be putting up a monument when I feel what I should do is raise money and buy the presbytery and give it back to them, you know, but I don't think – George Pell wouldn't sell it to me anyway, so I mean forget that.

42.09 **MB: I wanted to ask you a bit about yourself. You're a sculptor and do you teach at the school as well?**

SA: Yes, I do.

MB: And have you always been a sculptor?

SA: No, I haven't.

MB: So what's your background?

SA: Well, I didn't do art at school. I was really good at it in primary school but I didn't do it. I was considered in the day – I'm sixty – and in the days that I was at school and the school I was at you were only really permitted to do art if you were stupid and couldn't write or something. So although for me it was the thing that made my life

exciting and fun I wasn't allowed to do it. So I didn't come to art until after I'd finished my university degree and was ready to do a serious, real job and so I worked Family Court of Australia as a research psychologist and New South Wales Ombudsman's Office as an investigative officer. I used to investigate allegations of misconduct made by children in remand centres and Youth and Community Services as it was then, complaints from kids that weren't being taken seriously because of course kids have no – they just have – they're not believed and they have no credibility; they're in remand centres so they're considered liars and thieves and delinquents anyway. But in dealing with their complaints I put them together and got convergences of information and made the point that while these children had never won a case before or won an investigation because they had no credibility, if you put all their cases together and you found the same remarks being made about the same officers, about holding kids by the ankles, for instance, and bashing their heads on the bathroom floor, they're sort of years apart, decades apart but the same guy named, I think you can believe that, even if you are trying to think case by case as lawyers do.

44.21 So anyway I've been involved in those sorts of things, thinking about people. My degree was in economics and psychology and psychology has been the important thing through my work life. And then when my children were little I went to university, got a DipEd and worked as a teacher to have school holidays and look after my children when they were little. And at that stage I started doing art at home a bit as well as teaching at the local primary school and I attended Balmain Art School up the road here, run by Stephen Wilson, and did a lot of drawing and painting and got a job at the local school also as a relief, casual relief teacher, taking classes, each class in the primary school for two hours a week for visual arts and while the teachers had their release from face to face teaching, prepared their lessons or whatever. So I did that for a couple of years and I think you can see I've had this interest in art all the way along but mostly I made my money in the more serious jobs. And for the last nine years of work I worked for my husband who was an engineer who made and owned a company that made yoghurt and cheese, Attiki yoghurt and cheese, and I worked with him for the last nine years, setting up a computerised accounting system for his business.

46.04 And that was my last work activity and after I left Attiki and he sold Attiki that's when I started getting seriously into sculpture.

MB: And did you enrol at the school?

SA: When I enrolled at Tom Bass Sculpture School. I had already done about four or five years, just one night a week with Ian Shaw in Newtown and his sculpture Studio and I began seeking out life study and life drawing and sculpture and painting. So pretty much you can see why I had trouble throwing away the figuration idea: I really love

the human body, it continues to thrill and excite me to reproduce these things.

MB: And I think I've seen a little bit of your sculpture here. That's primarily what you're interested in in your work?

SA: That's what I do as – it's all those tiny little figures about eighteen inches high or a foot high or whatever they are, those little naked figures, I consider it like five finger exercises for sculptures. It's like it gets my eye in, gets me used to looking at forms and how they work and I guess the human body is the most various of how it can be expressed and it's generally hairless so you can get a good look at how everything works and I feel that if I can produce what see in studying a figure I can produce whatever I have in my mind that I want to do. So it's like I love to do it and it gives me a lovely satisfaction but I feel it gives me a store of knowledge from which to then work myself. Like, if I want to sculpt a hand for something, just a little maquette to see what it'd look like or I want to make a little Mum Shirl I know a lot about the way the human body works and how the neck - - -

48.04 **MB: How it all holds together.**

SA: - - - and body all holds together. So I can do a quick mockup of something and not have to get a model to sort of see how it works. So I think I've spent the first maybe decade or so studying figures and now I want to use that further at the moment. I've been looking at, as my development as a sculptor I've been looking at the movement of things around a figure like the movement of water as you come into a wave in the sea, the movement of water around a figure and how it breaks and I've been thinking about leaving cavities where the figure might be and just having the movement around it. Or a figure on a speeding bike, of how the air might hit and bounce off and create eddies and whirlies. Anyway, so everything I think about, I think, is the human figure in an environment of some sort and pressures upon it, which leads on from my psychology interests, really: it's all about people in the world.

MB: Yes. So how does that fit with doing a collaborative work then? Have you done a collaborative work before?

SA: Never.

MB: So this must be quite a challenge for all of you.

SA: It is. Yes, yes, it is, it's a challenge. The men don't seem to be having so much trouble. I think personality is part of it. Like I'm a bit of a bull at a gate type person: I get an idea and I want to get right into it and worry it and tease it out and solve it, you know. But that's not what this is about. This is much more slow and measured and feeding in everybody's thing and working through everybody's ideas; whether

they seem stupid or not you work right through them and I find like I feel as though I'm being reined in or whipped back.

50.10 **MB: So do any noses get out of joint in this process?**

SA: Probably only mine and only for a little while, you know. No, I don't think so.

MB: Which is quite something to say, really, isn't it?

SA: It is.

MB: It must mean there's a lot of goodwill amongst all of you, even when there's disagreement.

SA: I would say that goodwill's the biggest part, that's the thing that gets us through. Yes, goodwill and being able to give, give ground, give up ideas.

MB: Which I think probably it's a very hard thing for an artist to do, I would imagine, because that's what art is, is - - -

SA: Expressing what you have - - -

MB: - - - expressing your ideas.

SA: - - - in here, yes.

MB: Yes. And successful art, I guess, is an idea that is expressed very successfully, usually through an extremely individual - - -

SA: Yes, an individual take on something.

MB: - - - take on something, exactly.

SA: Yes.

MB: So although - I mean there are other art forms like film, say, or theatre where it an extremely collaborative work but I guess the kind of visual art that we're talking about that is sculpture or - - -

SA: Especially in this day when we don't really know what sculpture is. For eighteen months after I finished with Attiki I was going to do art properly and I had done a lot of short courses over the years with the National Art School with various people who teach there regularly, so I felt like I'd been through a lot of their teachers and I decided I knew nothing about Sydney College of the Arts up at Rozelle, very nearby, and I thought "I'll enrol in a basic Bachelor of Fine Arts in sculpture" because I've never studied art, don't know any art history except what I've picked up along the way.

52.10 And I enrolled in this course and I stuck it for eighteen months. And I got very good results, I got, you know, Distinctions of course, as all mature age students always do - I mean, you know what they want you to do and you do it – but I had more and more resentment about what I was doing. There was nothing – any of the skills I had were not called for and most of the art you'd have a 'crit' every Friday where we'd walk around and look at people's artwork and I had trouble identifying what was the normal place and which thing in it was the artwork because Sydney College of the Arts is very avant-garde, it sees itself as at the front of development of what's happening in art now. They weren't interested in seeing anything that anybody had ever seen before or anything like anything that anybody had seen before; they were pursuing sort of a post-modern, new, expressive way of operating and sculpture was not sculpture it was SPI, Sculpture Performance and Installation. And I felt that – I've done a lot of acting, amateur acting way back when I was working and New Theatre at Newtown - and I thought that acting, if you're going to do performance you should get some real skills like an actor. Don't just walk around as an artist and walk through a wheat field with a towel on your head and have it recorded and say "Here is art". It just didn't seem hard enough, it didn't seem attractive enough, and it seemed like everything that was put forward was built by a word picture, which didn't seem to me to be visual. So it took me eighteen months to learn what post-modernism really meant in sculpture and to realise that I was never going to be a post-modernist voluntarily, that whenever I did it I felt like I'd had my guts ripped out and I got depressed, so I gave it up.

54.23 **MB: To simplify all of that, I think what you're saying is figurative sculpture, for instance, would have been regarded as - - -**

SA: Total no-no.

MB: - - - completely old hat.

SA: Total no-no, yes. You didn't even have to be able to draw. I don't know how you can work anything out if you can't draw. But I was pleased – going there they said "You have to do an extra two hours of drawing every day". What they meant is they wanted me to study Photoshop for two hours extra a day so that I could operate Photoshop to produce things that could never have been produced without a computer. Oh, come on, give me a break. You know, like it wasn't for me.

MB: A bit pointless.

SA: I bit pointless. So I don't know why I was telling you about – oh, who I am, yes. I went there and tried to get into art seriously and to do a proper course and learn where it was up to and I realised that where it was up to and what it was doing now wasn't what I thought and it

wasn't what I was seeking and in the course of doing this I was losing my own joy in what I used to do and I was losing respect for what I used to do but nothing was taking the place and I got very, very, very depressed and down. And Tom Bass called me back, basically, said "Where have you been?" I said "I think I've given up art". He said "What do you mean? How can you do it? It's part of you" and I said "Well, you know, I feel like I'm in the wrong century for what I do". Anyway, he said "Come and see me".

56.00 And I went and saw him and he got out this funny little old bag of rune stones and he had a book of runes and he said "Why don't you ask it a question?" We can all guess what the question was, you know: you know "Should I go on with art now, what should I do?" except it was very clear, something "Should I go on with art now?" Anyway, I asked it, thinking "I don't think so". Can't remember what it said but what it ended up with at the end of the meeting was Tom had got me to come back for a workshop and I think I've been going back every week ever since so I realised I can do art even if it isn't flavour of the age.

MB: And that - - -

SA: And that it has a valuable role, that it gives me a lot of joy and pleasure and my friends get joy and pleasure out of it, so I don't need to be the new find of this age; really, all I want is to be able to continue to explore the things that I'm exploring in the way that is comfortable and good for me. So that's who I am.

MB: And so do you think now as far as the Ted Kennedy/Mum Shirl sculpture is concerned - you were saying that really only a few weeks ago you felt as though perhaps it was hopeless - - -

SA: Yes.

MB: - - - but I'm guessing you're saying you feel somewhat more optimistic now.

SA: I feel a lot more optimistic now. Since then I venture to say we may just have had that moment Tom promised about manna falling from heaven and all the doors flying open and, yes, because with the idea of the Aboriginal printed hand but as a solid thing – as we talked about earlier – that we have something that we're now agreed we will all work with that idea and how those few things can be used to present a memorial that is relevant and meaningful and attractive to us all, whereas we hadn't come to any common agreement "Yes, we will continue with this line of thinking" even; it was all these disparate ideas coming in, we seemed to be getting more divergent.

58.18 But now I feel we're all focusing on these few things which seem like we've reached the essence of what it was about and I think we

have, I think that is the essence of what it's about. It'll be exciting once we get a mockup and we now go to people who are interested in this and have a stake in this monument how they feel about it, if they can see what we see. I reckon if I give them a good talk at the beginning they'll see it my way. But I don't think that's the way you do it; I think you're supposed to just present it there and see if they can see it as they walk along the street but I don't know.

MB: That sounds like a really great spot to end.

SA: Good.

MB: Thank you for that.

Interview ends