

ART

Sculptor pours his own molten bronze casts

By **JOHN DEWAR**

Perhaps no one equates that sometimes gentle art of dancing with the art of making cast bronze sculpture but there is, in part, a certain analogy.

And it has little to do with the sophisticated perambulations of the waltz or slow foxtrot but is more in keeping with the freneticism of some Xhosa tribal dances where one imagines the participants are manipulating through a pit of vipers.

All this is according to sculptor Desmond Greig who is one of the very few sculptors in the country to pour his own bronze casts from a crucible of red hot molten metal. When the procedure goes wrong or the mould breaks, that's when the dancing starts, mainly to prevent feet and legs from turning into something like fried fillet.

His exhibition of bronze cast torsos (see picture on Page 1) opened at the Natalie Knight Gallery at Hyde Park Corner on Sunday in a show called "Homage to Rodin". Greig uses the lost wax bronze casting process which is considered the classical method and is thousands of years old. He started doing it 15 years ago and at this stage has done nearly 450 melts, or pourings of casts, with the assistance of his wife, Barbara, who is a ceramacist and a painter. They pour the metal at a heat of more than 1 000 deg. F.

Tears of blood

Greig is self taught in this process and says he has wept "tears of blood" in doing it but finds it exhilarating and fascinating when a good piece comes out of the mould.

The work on show consists of male torsos and much of it springs from his interest in classical Greek sculpture and the Grecian mathematical approach to the male torso where the muscle structure is apparent.

He thought about initially modelling from the female torso and says: "Well, you know what we are — it's too emotional and this can cloud the issue."

The female form, he maintains, also hides itself much more skeletally.

"It's covered with the boobs, large backside and pelvic girdle and these hide the mathematics and solid geometry seen in the male torso."

There will be 25 pieces on exhibition, each in an edition of three. After the third casting (from a plaster mould) he guarantees destruction of the mould since he feels there is much more exclusivity in three castings than in the eight, ten or more of some sculptural work.

The work is patinaed chemically, using heat and acid, a process which is impervious and ranges from black to various shades of green, each piece reacting differently to the process.

"Of course", he says "in the old days they would bury the bronzes shallowly in a cattle pasture and after about a year of the animals urinating on the ground and the seepage covering the bronzes, they'd be dug up perfectly patinaed."

Certain of the pieces have been burnished back to the bronze in places to give contrast to the patinas. The whole thing is a long business, he says, but at least it's a case of the artist carrying out every step of his own creativity.

"On the other hand it is probably the logical thing for a sculptor not to cast his or her own work. At the same time, to do it is cheaper than sending it to a commercial foundry and eliminates for the buyer the cost of having to pay the added price of a middleman."

He signs the work when it is in the wax stage and says he has reached the point of fingerprint quality. In other words if he presses a fingerprint into the wax when it's hot it will come out in the bronze.

Greig is a sculptor, painter, a published poet and author of a number of books including novels and short stories. One of his books won the Sanlam Youth Literature Award. He was also at one time editor of the magazine "Artlook".