

**DIANA BAKER SMITH**



**SHE SPEAKS IN SCULPTURE**



**UTS ACKNOWLEDGES THE GADIGAL PEOPLE OF THE EORA NATION, THE BOOROOBERONGAL PEOPLE OF THE DHARUG NATION, THE BIDIAGAL PEOPLE AND THE GAMAYGAL PEOPLE UPON WHOSE ANCESTRAL LANDS OUR UNIVERSITY STANDS. WE PAY OUR RESPECTS TO THE ELDERS BOTH PAST AND PRESENT, ACKNOWLEDGING THEM AS THE TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF KNOWLEDGE FOR THESE LANDS.**

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SHE SPEAKS IN SCULPTURE**

**UTS GALLERY**  
**19 JULY – 9 SEPTEMBER 2022**

# MODERN NATURE

*She Speaks in Sculpture* tells the story of an artwork in pieces. Drawing from archival research, and working across moving image, photography, performance, and text, Diana Baker Smith's exhibition explores the politics of art and civic history through Margel Hinder's sculpture *Growth Forms* (1959), held in the UTS Art Collection.

Hinder's iconic modernist sculpture was originally commissioned in 1959 for the Western Assurance Building on Sydney's Pitt Street. The artist intended it to be an organic column between floor and ceiling, immutable except for the passing effects of light and shadow. As a simulacrum of nature, *Growth Forms* can be understood as much by its negative space – the way it relates to and meets the world around it – as its presence.

At four metres high and nearly 500 kilograms, *Growth Forms* was not made to be moved. Yet, as a work of art in the public realm, it has been vulnerable to forces beyond the artist's control; subject to the tides of cultural aspiration, urban development, and political and economic will in Sydney. *She Speaks in Sculpture* traces these currents, reanimating the work and its contexts for new audiences.

In October 1980, on the eve of the Western Assurance Building's demolition, an advertisement for the sale of *Growth Forms* appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald's Antiques Column. With no takers, it was decided to sell the work for scrap metal, and the sculpture was cut into pieces. A sympathetic passer-by observed this and alerted both the artist and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, who salvaged its remnants. *Growth Forms* was then transported to Hinder's home where, at the age of 76, she welded it back together over 8 months.

Following its reconstruction, *Growth Forms* was installed in the State Office Block on Macquarie St. When that building was due to be demolished in 1997, the sculpture was donated to

UTS, in a process led by the original commissioning architect Peter Johnson, who was by that time UTS Chancellor. Since then, it has been placed in several locations on the UTS campus, before being conserved and relocated to the UTS Tower in early 2022.

The sculpture's title, adopted later, alludes to D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson's *On Growth and Form* (1917), a treatise on the laws of motion, and the biological patterns of force and growth in nature.<sup>1</sup> Hinder's *Growth Forms* would be prey to those same laws of motion and the phenomena of urban growth. Though ironic, this fate coalesces with modernist thought, which sought to express the interrelationship between technology and nature.

*Growth Forms* was perhaps the perfect subject for Diana Baker Smith, whose practice reanimates the lesser-known histories of art. Influenced by feminist art theory and the early impact of dance on own Hinder's own practice, Baker Smith reimagines the narrative of *Growth Forms* through performance and recalls Hinder's preoccupation with "the elusive fourth dimension – movement."<sup>2</sup>

In the video *She Speaks in Sculpture*, a dancer's body characterises the sculpture as a body in motion. In counterpoint, we see *Growth Forms* itself being touched, waxed, torched, pushed and pulled during its most recent conservation and relocation. We see the sculpture come together and fall apart across an archival sequence; it is given sonic shape through a score informed by the clangs and echoes of industry; we watch the artist play the role of historian, archivist and conservator. Even the timber lightwell Hinder made twice, first in 1959 and again in 1981, is remade by Baker Smith and staged in the exhibition as a narrative prop. This parallels Baker Smith's conception of the city itself as a work of art constantly falling apart and being remade<sup>3</sup>, wherein

the movement of *Growth Forms* becomes a cypher for the rhythms of civic and urban life and cycles of collective memory and growth, forgetting and neglect.

These nuanced modes of embodiment, enactment, and staging personify the sculpture and animate its spatial, rather than its temporal, history. Moreover, they constitute a new work of art, made from the fractured pieces of another object's story.

Stella Rosa McDonald,  
Curator, UTS Gallery & Art Collection

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2. Barrett, M. 'Pioneering Objects', (p. 107) in Harding, L., & Mimmocchi, D. (2021). *Margel Hinder, Modern in Motion*. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Heide Museum of Modern Art.
3. Butler, C. (2012). *Henri Lefebvre: spatial politics, everyday life and the right to the city*, 'The right to the city', (p. 143). Routledge.



























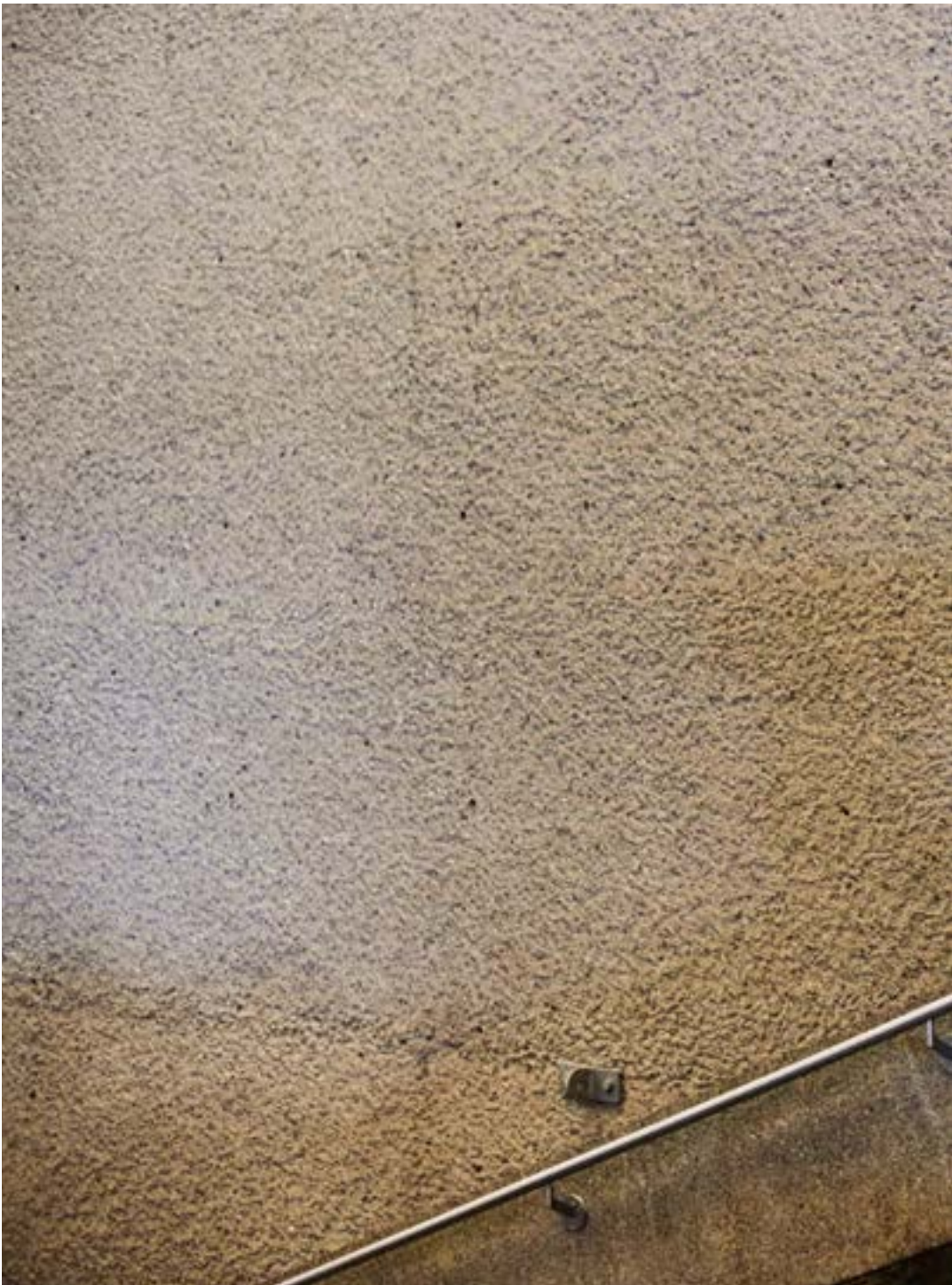




















## SPEAKING IN SCULPTURE

In 1959 the American-born and Sydney-based artist Margel Hinder was commissioned to produce a large-scale sculpture for architect Peter Johnson's ultra-modern Western Assurance Company Building on Pitt Street. At a time when no public buildings in Sydney incorporated free-standing sculptures, Johnson dared to deliver the first. Since migrating to Sydney in 1934, Hinder had established a reputation as a dazzlingly modern artist. In surveying the city's art scene for a fitting sculptor as his collaborator, Hinder became Johnson's obvious choice. Through an exhilarating language of abstraction that was novel in Sydney at the time, her work offered new definitions of what sculpture could be.

Hinder's standing as an innovative artist must have been sealed in Johnson's mind when, in 1957, she exhibited works where she made sculpture move. She composed works of intricate wire geometries that stood as abstract renderings of modern energy. Displayed suspended from the ceiling and specifically lit against darkened backdrops, there was a performative aspect to Hinder's works. Some were motorised, so that the slow rotations of light and shadow played into the choreography of their object form, invoking a world in perpetual motion. Claimed by critic and artist James Gleeson as 'equal parts geometry and poetry', Hinder's 'space age' sculptures (as she called them) remain wondrous things; objects of 'ponderability' to use the lovely term coined by Herbert Read.<sup>1</sup>

When Johnson offered Hinder the Western Assurance Building commission, she gave her objects of 'ponderability' monumental scale. Despite the new emphasis on weight and seeming durability, Hinder sought to evoke the unseen energies that propel the world. In seeking to realign her practice within the context of built environments, she noted American architect Harrison Gill's observation that 'as we enter the age of Tension, man [sic] ....comes closer in his methods of building to the forces and mechanics of nature that ever before.'<sup>2</sup>

Like other experimental sculptors of her generation, Hinder held to the utopian idea that human-made technologies and the forces of nature might co-exist symbiotically, and she sought to imprint this ideal in public spaces. As such, Hinder delivered a modern monument of machine-organic energies. Over four metres high, it was a towering statement of growth that she made appear to extend beyond the confines of the building. The work became fondly known as *Growth Forms*. Fellow sculptor Clement Meadmore likened the organicism of Hinder's work to the visions of form and growth that were revealed by contemporary science, praising the sculpture as an expression of 'chemical growth of cellular division', its abstraction 'a series of linked mutations which seem on the verge of self-determined development.'<sup>3</sup>

With *Growth Forms*, Hinder took the modernity of her sculpted abstraction to the streets. In doing so, she was instrumental in introducing a new language for public artworks, initiating the wider embrace of modernist monuments in Australia's urban culture during the 1960s. An emphatic statement of change, in the ensuing decades, Hinder's *Growth Forms* would itself become an unwitting subject of transformation and a sculpture of many permutations.

Archives visualise episodes in the history of *Growth Forms*, and from slides, photographs and press accounts a narrative can be pieced together of the work's existence across time and place. The manifold movements in the history of *Growth Forms* defy the modernist belief in the self-contained, autonomous art object. In Diana Baker Smith's *She Speaks in Sculpture*, Hinder's work continues to permeate and is featured as a subject of an artistic crossover and relational change. Baker Smith's practice is based on remembering. She engages with archives as repositories of collective memories, meanings, and actions, searching for moments that might be embodied and reanimated

in the present. As an artist that creates from the legacies and traces of things lost, Hinder's *Growth Forms* was perhaps a readymade subject for Baker Smith.

Baker Smith's two-channel video installation is grounded in the aesthetic formations of Hinder's sculpture, but it conceptually expands on them seeing the abstraction of the work serve as a platform for her enquiry into the experiences and histories of built environments. *She Speaks in Sculpture* features a series of dance solos performed by Ivey Wawn and choreographed by Brooke Stamp. Motion, and as some have argued dance, were crucial motivators of Hinder's practice, and here the performer's body adopts and augments the contours of *Growth Forms*, reanimating its shapes across sites of the work's past placement in Sydney's urban landscape. Wawn's performance gestures towards the sculpture's displacement, but the dance might further suggest broader movements of negation in the city's history of lost monuments, lost buildings, and their associated expressions of labour and culture that are so readily consumed by new fabrications of the millionaire's metropolis that Sydney has become.

Baker Smith's *She Speaks in Sculpture* lingers over what we may refer to as the ponderability of *Growth Forms*, and revolves around actions of cultural labour. The twin screens depict a mesmerising choreography that oscillates between Baker Smith's archival investigation (itself a performance), the dancer's performing body, the gestural scrubbing of the conservator's brush restoring the sculpture, and the rigging and lifting of *Growth Forms* into its most recent placement at UTS. In parallel, archive and action seamlessly connect and continually return to the linked formations of *Growth Forms*. Bree van Reyk's arresting percussive soundscape, like Hinder's monument, merges the ambience of organic and industrial worlds.

*She Speaks in Sculpture* refers to the creative movements between thought, object and action, a continual dance between forms of permanence and impermanence. Hinder considered light as part of the substance of her art and when she was awarded the commission for the Western Assurance Building she tested ideas for her monument in a series of maquettes. As Baker Smith searches through archives, she pauses on a photograph in which Hinder had her *Growth Forms* maquette photographed against open sky and ocean, testing how its surface and open formations might let in luminosity. Hinder did indeed 'speak in sculpture' (as a 1949 Woman's Day article on the artist proclaimed<sup>4</sup>) but these archival moments show the artist *imagining* in sculpture too, emphasising how the act of imagining is itself central to creative labour. Baker Smith's video cuts to the *Growth Forms* maquette in the UTS Art Collection storeroom. We see it being secured to its marble base with museum wax, but the binder doesn't hold and while the sculpture tilts, it doesn't topple. It's a moment that poignantly encapsulates the fleeting, unexpected and instantaneous life of *Growth Forms*.

In the final sequence of *She Speaks in Sculpture* we enter the UTS Tower, the site of the restored sculpture's current placement. Emptied of all other human presence, Wawn's performance, across concrete floor, down stairways and precariously along railings instil a 'striking note' against the building's imposing features.<sup>5</sup> A parallel projection shows Hinder's crated sculpture being positioned in the same space. The intervention of body and sculpture posit an animating, even haunting quality against the architecture's concrete forms. A play of structure and transcendence, tracing the way artistic endeavours inhabit, interact with, and challenge public spaces and activate collective social imaginings.

While Hinder remained vocally committed to the modernist definitions of sculpture, her investigations of the temporality of light, the metaphysics of growth, and the motivation of mobility saw possibilities of sculpture outside of object form alone. Baker Smith creates a work around the memories of a sculpture, its permutations around the city, and the strange histories of its dismantling and restorations. In doing so she extends the iterations of Hinder's *Growth Forms*, mapping its movements from a beacon of modernity to a subject of flux, providing a further frame of reference in the work's continued reinvention.

Denise Mimmocchi,  
Senior Curator, Australian Art,  
Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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5. 'Striking note' was a reference used in the press headlines to describe Hinder's work when the Western Assurance Building opened in 1960. "Abstract Sculpture Introduces Striking Note." (1960). *Sydney Morning Herald*.

## ARTIST ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work began in the summer of 2021 when, like everyone else, I was in lockdown and feeling adrift. All the familiar places I went to each day were suddenly deserted. I spent a lot of time pondering how something as seemingly immobile as a city could change so unexpectedly.

I was reminded of Henri Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis*, and his method of looking at places as intersecting rhythms which, most of the time, we take for granted. "We are only conscious of most of our rhythms," he wrote, "when we begin to suffer some irregularity." I suppose everyone was thinking similar thoughts at the time, and I presume I'm not the only one who found that irregularity difficult to express.

Fortunately for me, somewhere between one lockdown ending and another beginning, I spent an hour walking around the UTS Tower with Stella Rosa McDonald and Eleanor Zeichner. I'd been contemplating making a work on the Tower itself when Stella pointed out Margel Hinder's *Growth Forms*. It was, she said, being relocated. We spent some time talking about the process of moving something so immense, and then she told me of its history; of sixty years of motion, buoyed along on the rhythms of development and re-development until it had, unexpectedly, washed up in the UTS Tower.

That was the first of dozens of conversations I've had with the innumerable people who've contributed to this work, and I wanted to begin by locating the origins of *She Speaks in Sculpture* with Stella and Eleanor. I thank them and their colleagues Janet Ollevou and Connie Anthes for their help in turning my initial irregularity into something tangible.

I am similarly indebted to Denise Mimmocchi, Senior Curator of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of NSW, and co-curator of the recent exhibition Margel Hinder: Modern in Motion who is a wealth of knowledge and, on top of that, kind of enough to write an essay for this catalogue. Thanks also to Claire Eggleston,

Senior Librarian at the Art Gallery of NSW, for helping me access and film Hinder's archival material.

Special acknowledgements are due to my collaborators; choreographer Brooke Stamp and performer Ivey Wawn, musician Bree van Reyk, costume designer Leah Giblin, cinematographer Gotaro Uematsu, photographer Lucy Parakhina, production manager Jade Muratore, production assistants April Mountford and Alia Patterson, colour grader Justin Tran, edit assistant Annie Zhang, sound engineer Bob Scott and, finally, Kate Blackmore, who did so many things I cannot list them all. Collectively, you not only helped me bring an idea to fruition, but dodged security guards, argued with building managers, patiently watched a sculpture not fit into its assigned slot, and held my newborn baby.

Thanks are also due to Frances Barrett, Lauren Brincat, Fernando do Campo, Jade Muratore, Bree Richards and Verónica Tello, for being both friends and frank advisors on the work in its many stages of development. On a more personal level, my thanks to Ianto Ware and Ellis Baker Ware for all their love, and all the conversations in between.

Finally, I want to thank Enid Hawkins, who helped connect my own work back to that of another artist fascinated by the relationship between fixity and movement; her mother, Margel Hinder. I've often walked past Hinder's sculptures but, until talking to Enid, hadn't thought that, like the buildings and streets around them, they were the work of a human being, and a human being who brilliantly articulated those rhythms we can't usually hear.

Diana Baker Smith

1. Lefebvre, H. (2004). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time, and everyday life* (p.77). London: Continuum

## IMAGE CREDITS

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**Published by UTS Gallery & Art Collection**  
University of Technology Sydney  
Level 4, 702 Harris St, Ultimo NSW 2007  
art.uts.edu.au

in association with the exhibition  
**She Speaks in Sculpture**  
Diana Baker Smith  
UTS Gallery  
19 July – 9 September 2022

Catalogue design:  
Daryl Prondoso

ISBN 978-0-9874811-3-9

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*This project has been supported by the City of Sydney's Cultural and Creative Grants and UNSW Art and Design*

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