

Helen Pollock: Memorial sculpture

ROBIN WOODWARD

When Helen Pollock first started exhibiting in the 1980s, her sculpture had a distinctly feminist perspective in theme, form, and content. More recently, she has focused on commemorative and memorial work, giving particular consideration to the sacrifices made by New Zealanders during World War I (WWI). The impetus for this comes from personal experience. Pollock's father was a member of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force that saw action on the western front during WWI. He died when Pollock was nine years old, and, as was the custom of the time, her mother put a few mementoes in a box in a bottom drawer and the family learned not to talk about it (H. Pollock, personal communication, May 26, 2015).

The catalyst behind Pollock's creative output is her personal experience of loss and grief, in her childhood as well as in later years. By the age of 35, Pollock was on her own, divorced and bringing up three young children. In the years leading up to the breakdown of her marriage, and no doubt impacting on it, one of her young sons died, and another was diagnosed with a serious disease. Thirty years on, Pollock still lives with the constant anxiety of her son's chronic ill health, ongoing hospitalisation, and major surgeries. The universal themes of loss, grief, and memory inform and interweave through all her work.

Through her use of a generic image, the human body, Pollock taps directly into the personal and emotional rather than the academic or the narrative and descriptive. Her forms are figurative and representational, enabling ready access for viewers, be they art literate or not.¹ Her work speaks directly to the heart as she employs a personal but universal signifier modelled in a range of forms that have their roots in her feminist work of the 1980s.

As an emerging artist in the early 1980s, Pollock immediately gravitated to the Women's Art Movement, finding support in the company of like-minded women. She was a member of the Association of Women Artists, regularly showing at their exhibitions. She also participated in collaborative projects such as *Menstrual maze* (1984), the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) *Women make a world: Art environment* at the University of Waikato in 1981, and the *Inner space art environment* at the Women's Health Conference (North Shore Teachers' College, 1983). Her art was featured in *Herstory diary* (1987), *Broadsheet* (September 1991), and *New Zealand women artists* (Kirker, 1991).

More recently, however, Pollock has focused on the creation of commemorative art. Over the past 10 years, her work reflects the 'unpacking' of her father's life, particularly his service in WWI, and her own interest in the broader picture of Aotearoa/New Zealand's involvement. The outcome of this journey is a series of commemorative sculptures, the first of which, *Falls the shadow*, was installed at the Auckland War Memorial Museum in 2008 for the 90th anniversary of the armistice of WWI. It was then exhibited in Arras, northern France, and now has a permanent home at the Passchendaele Memorial Museum, Zonnebeke, Belgium (Pollock, 2013). A second commemorative work, *Victory medal* (2010), is currently touring provincial museums in Aotearoa/New Zealand as part of the nation's observance of the centenary of WWI.² The most recent of Pollock's memorial artworks, *As above, so below*, was installed at

the Royal New Zealand Navy Museum at Devonport, Auckland, in April 2015.

Falls the shadow (Figure 1) is a contemplative work comprising 18 arms that reach out from a reflective pool and symbolise the 5,000 New Zealanders who lie forever in the battlefields of Flanders. Displayed in a darkened room against a barren background, these gestures of futility and of hope are accompanied by text and an evocative soundscape of the shovelling and sloshing of clay, distant thunder, rain, wind, and birdsong. Installed in its dedicated space at the Passchendaele Memorial Museum, *Falls the shadow* is the culmination of an immersive experience for visitors who wind through rooms of remembrance and are then channelled along the narrow twists and turns of underground trenches, re-creations of front-line conditions in WWI. The museum focuses on the part played by the Allied forces in the Battle of Passchendaele where, on October 12, 1917, 846 New Zealand soldiers were killed in just two hours, making it the bloodiest day in Aotearoa/New Zealand's history.



Figure 1: Helen Pollock *Falls the shadow* 2007/08. Terracotta, rusted steel, water, text; 1600 × 2200 × 4800 mm

As a young man of 20, Pollock's father served as a signaller on the western front, moving with the New Zealand Division across northern France (including the liberation of Le Quesnoy) and then marching into Cologne as part of the British Occupation Force. *Falls the shadow* is the visible mapping of this journey. It is modelled in clay from the Coromandel mixed with mud retrieved from the battlefields of Flanders where the Canterbury and Otago troops were stationed in 1917. Clay hardens and fuses under the stress of the intense heat of the firing process; the material is pushed to

its limit. This is a metaphor for what happened at the western front – ordinary young men were changed forever. In *Falls the shadow*, through the synecdoche of fragments of the human body, we see the damaged whole.

Symbolizing sacrifice, *Falls the shadow* also represents the indestructibility of the human spirit and the vigour of new growth – a powerful symbol of peace and regeneration, which is an enduring undertone in Pollock's work. Mired in the mud and water of the battlefield, Pollock's forest of bisque-fired clay arms has become a sustained and emotive motif in her work as she has grappled with issues that have beset her personal life. She links her own family experience with the dire circumstances of those at the front, the distress of the wives and families back home, the consistent under-reporting, and an artificial 'collective cheerfulness'.

Thematically aligned to *Falls the shadow* is *Standing to* (Figure 2), exhibited at *New Zealand sculpture onshore*, Narrow Neck, Auckland, in 2008. This sculpture comprises two pairs of slightly larger-than-life-size feet, positioned in line and 'standing to'. 'Standing to' is a twice-daily ritual in the British Army – facing the east at sunrise and the west at sunset – to steady the troops for the day's or night's action. The subject references the historical use of Narrow Neck by the military, and the link to the biblical image, 'feet of clay', is open to multiple interpretations.

Figure 2: Helen Pollock *Standing to* 2008. Terracotta, rusted steel; 450 × 400 × 400 mm

From *Standing to* evolved *Victory medal* (Figure 3), a work that also has important links with its predecessor, *Falls the shadow*. All forces of the (then) British Empire who served in WWI received a British War Medal and a Victory Medal. Six million British Victory Medals were minted, which in itself serves as an indication of the scale of this conflict. They commemorate the victory of the allies. Pollock's *Victory medal* is a sardonic look at the idea of 'victory' in war.

In *Victory medal*, 36 pairs of feet, the number in a small platoon, stand mounted on a rusted steel 'medal' cast in four sections, creating a cross formation. Pollock's platoon of over life-size pairs of feet is positioned 'standing to' and aligned like crosses in a military cemetery, facing east (sunrise) as with tradition.

The feet are bare, vulnerable, and stripped of any sign of individuality; all were initially modelled in rough, unprocessed clay, fashioned into sinewy footsloggers' feet and moulded into a 'cohesive fighting unit'. In the process, they have been torn, cut, distressed, and fired under intense heat over a period of three days. They are permanently altered and hardened. So too were the men and women who lived through the war. Again, Pollock speaks from personal experience and again she turns to that symbol of endless endeavour, the human body. Her symbols are neither abstract nor esoteric; they are universally recognisable forms that resonate and make a direct connection with the viewer.



Figure 3: Helen Pollock *Victory medal* 2010. Terracotta, bronze, rusted steel; diameter 4800 mm, height 460 mm

the ceramic feet, which are still rough, unprocessed clay, even after firing, suggest conformity – and disposability. In contrast, the bronze feet are enduring and ritualistic, symbolic of a 'recognised hero'. But suffering and death are indiscriminate – they respect no hierarchies – and in *Victory medal* Pollock acknowledges *all* of our heroes, *all* of those men and women whose lives were lost or blighted by circumstances beyond their control.

As distinct from Pollock's earlier commemorative works, *As above, so below* (Figures 4 and 5) is a work specifically commissioned as a permanent memorial. Installed at the National Museum of the Royal New Zealand Navy, the sculpture acknowledges the raw struggle and sacrifice of the New Zealand men who chose to serve at sea during WWI. It honours and commemorates those who died in service and those who survived.

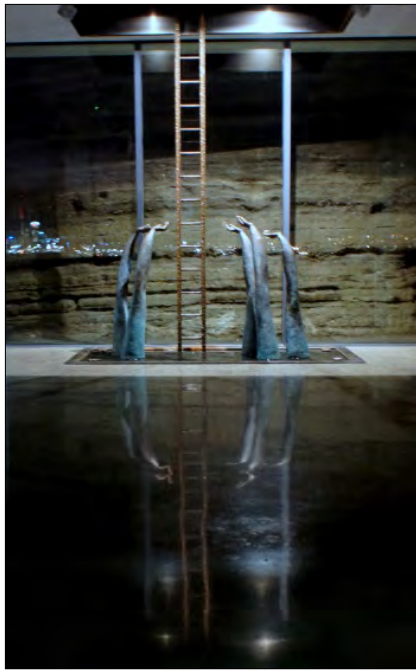


Figure 4: Helen Pollock *As above, so below* 2015. Bronze, water; pool 3500 × 1200 mm, ladder 4800 mm

The title of the work, *As above, so below*, is an ancient phrase used to explain how the world works. It means that everything, no matter how big or small, is interconnected. Whatever happens on any level, emotional, physical, or spiritual, affects everything else. In Pollock's specific context, it references the camaraderie and the mutual interdependence of sailors at sea, and their relationship with the elements around them.

The composition of the memorial is a sea of human arms anchored by its central feature, a ladder. The ladder in this sculpture has a rusted and weathered appearance; it looks like a well-worn ship's ladder, an old corroded ladder, one that must have had another 'life' prior to this. The rungs have sagged with use; they are worn but enduring. By association, the ladder represents a soul's journey through life and beyond.

Taking the analogy further, an individual life journey can be likened to Jacob's ladder, one of Pollock's favourite motifs. The biblical Jacob's ladder is a staircase to heaven that the patriarch Jacob dreams about and is described in the Book of Genesis as the biblical symbol of personal transformation. The ladder in *As above, so below* therefore signifies the bridge between heaven and our earthly realm. In a multi-cultural reading, many see Jacob's ladder as representing the essence of Islam, which emphasises following the 'straight path'.

There is also a nautical association. Used on a ship, the term Jacob's ladder applies to two kinds of ladders. The first is a flexible hanging ladder that is used to allow people to board a ship from small boats. The second is found on modern-day tall ships, reaching the highest point of the upper mast. Climbing it requires daring and fortitude; therefore, in this context, *As above, so below* implies a challenging journey, aspirational as well as plummeting the depths. Pollock's ladder is also the story of a life – and it weeps silently. Intermittently, a trickle of tears runs down its face into the reflective pool. Collectively, the tears create the pool, which appears incalculably deep, a well of remembrance; there is a silence and stillness with an occasional ripple in the water.

The ladder in *As above, so below*, stretching upwards from the pool, is reflected downwards, seemingly infinite. So too are the arms. There are five arms, which are representative of an untold number; symbolically, in a Christian context, the number five equates to the stigmata – the five physical wounds to Christ on the cross. The number five therefore stands for sacrifice.

Through her use of universal imagery, the human body, Pollock taps directly into the personal and emotional rather than the academic or the narrative and descriptive. Her forms are figurative and representational, enabling ready access for viewers. Her work speaks directly to the heart, an expression of a personal but universal experience.



Figure 5: Helen Pollock *As above, so below* 2015 (detail)

DR ROBIN WOODWARD is a Senior Lecturer in Art History at The University of Auckland, New Zealand. She is a specialist in Aotearoa/New Zealand art, with particular expertise in contemporary sculpture and public art. In addition to her teaching and academic research, Robin works in an advisory role to arts trusts and civic bodies as well as undertaking curatorial and editorial work. Her approach addresses the artistic and historical context of the work of individual artists and the visual analysis of specific artworks and sites. She has written monographs and thematic texts on aspects of modern and contemporary sculpture and painting.

Notes

1 View Helen Pollock's portfolio at <http://www.helenpollock.com/portfolio/index.html>.

2 *Victory medal* will then be shown in Arras (France) and Messines (Belgium) before being permanently installed at Le Quesnoy on November 4, 2018, the centennial of the date of the liberation of this French town by New Zealand forces.

References

- Kirker, A. (1991). *New Zealand women artists: a survey of 150 years*. Sydney, NSW: Craftsman House.
- Pollock, H. (2013). *Falls the shadow* [Art installation]. Zonnebeke, Belgium: Passchendaele Memorial Museum. Retrieved from <http://passchendaelesociety.org/about-us/supporters/falls-the-shadow-2/>.