

# LIVING ON THE FRONTIER FOUR GENERATIONS OF THE LEWERS FAMILY

## PART 2

*A story of courage, tenacity and adventurous  
creativity across four generations*

Landform, pendant 2014, sterling silver, boulder opal 165x190mm



The Lewers family is probably best known for their gift of the family home in Emu Plains which opened in 1981 as The Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Gallery. In Issue 3 of *Oz Arts* Julian Leatherdale wrote of Adolf Plate, late 19th century traveller in the Pacific and self-taught landscape artist in Sydney and Perth. His children Margo and Carl were the next generation of artist pioneers. Margo married Gerald Lewers, one of Australia's leading sculptors in the 1940s and 50s. From the 1950s to 70s Margo and her brother Carl Plate emerged as prominent abstract expressionist and abstract painters respectively.

In the second part of *Living on the Frontier*, Julian Leatherdale talks to Gerald and Margo's two daughters, both artists. Darani Lewers and husband Helge Larsen are two of Australia's foremost contemporary art jewellers and silversmiths while established printmaker, architect and writer Tanya Crothers collaborates and exhibits with architect-artist husband Jon. And the creative legacy continues in the next generation. Visual artist Pia Larsen and TV commercial art director Aaron Crothers describe the challenges and rewards of their different career paths.



Clockwise from top left:  
*In Association*, 3-finger ring, 2011, sterling silver, bone & glass bead, 35x55mm  
*A Community*, 2-finger ring 2011, sterling silver, enamel, 45x45mm  
*Crypt*, brooch 2014, sterling silver and antique ivory, 40x55mm  
*Green Pasture*, ring 2014, sterling silver, glass shard, 30x30mm  
*Additions*, brooch, 2009, sterling silver, glass shard, 50x70mm  
Centre: *Pharaonic Series*, pendant 2002, sterling silver, painted wood, 175x219mm





*This page, top:*  
*Road Fill, brooch 2008, sterling silver, ceramic shard, 35x55mm*  
*Below: Theatre, brooch 2013, sterling silver, enamel paint, 55x55mm*  
*Opposite page:*  
*Traces, pendant, 2002, sterling silver, ceramic shard, 90x100mm*

### The third generation: a house at the harbour's edge

The Lewers sisters both acknowledge the formative influence of growing up with two artist parents within an extended artistic community in the creative atmosphere of their homes at Cremorne and Emu Plains. 'Without my parents' help and encouragement, it would have been very difficult to establish myself,' says Darani. 'You grow up in an environment and the values of your parents, you just adopt them as your own. They're just absorbed.' Both women are also clear-eyed about their mother's achievements as a woman artist of her generation. 'Tanya says that our mother lived three lives in one,' Darani tells me. 'She is a model for us.' Tanya agrees. 'She never let lack of experience deter her from trying something new.'

When Darani Lewers told Margo and Gerald she wanted to be an artist, they suggested she consider becoming a jeweller. Why? Because, they argued, she was unlikely to make a living as a sculptor or painter. With no formal



courses in Australia at that time and no trade jewellers willing to take on female trainees, Darani was fortunate to meet Estonian master jeweller Niina Ratsip (later Ots). Ratsip was a partner in a workshop in Rowe Street, making the only contemporary jewellery in Sydney, and took Darani on as a trainee for a year. Darani would later honour Ots' work by curating a retrospective touring exhibition in 1995.

At the end of 1958, influenced by Niina Ratsip's use of river stones set with silver wire and sheet, Darani held her first exhibition at the David Jones gallery. As with her parents' generation, she had to make her artistic pilgrimage to 'the mother country', finding work as an assistant in London with a company making fashion jewellery for Madame Tussaud's Museum as well as for filmstars and celebrities.

Some months later, her father Gerald arrived, urging Darani to go to Denmark, a world leader in design at that time, where he had recently seen the most exciting contemporary jewellery. Darani took her father's advice. Walking the streets of Copenhagen with a Danish friend, she came across the studio-shop Solvform. 'I had never seen such unique and original jewellery before, displayed in the window. I thought it was amazing!'

When Helge Larsen told his father he wanted to be an artist, he too was advised to learn a craft to make a living. Following a four-year jewellery apprenticeship and a two-year art and design school course, majoring in silversmithing, Helge won a two-year American Exchange Fellowship. On his return to Denmark in 1955, he set up Solvform in Copenhagen in partnership with a former design school colleague.

Darani enjoys telling the story of the serendipitous misunderstanding that changed her life. When she walked into the shop and asked Helge's partner if she could be taken on as a trainee, he went upstairs and 'told Helge I was an American'. Wanting to return some hospitality from his time in the USA, Helge agreed to a two-week trial. 'The American' turned out to be Australian and the two-week trial turned into nine-months—and the beginning of a unique, five-decade partnership back in Australia.

Helge migrated in 1961 and he and Darani established their studio in The Rocks, Sydney, then a slum area before its gentrification in the 1970s. Thanks to an introduction from Margo, 'our greatest supporter', Macquarie Galleries agreed to hold an exhibition that August. A great deal hinged on its success as they had found no shops or jewellers in Sydney willing to take on their work. 'If it does not go well, we will return to Europe,' Helge said.

The exhibition was a success, setting the pattern for Larsen and Lewers to display their one-off pieces through leading art galleries rather than shops and craft galleries. They celebrated their wedding in the garden at Emu Plains that same month and later that year participated in the International Exhibition of Modern Jewellery 1890-1961, organised by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. 'It was very encouraging to receive international recognition in the first year of our partnership,' says Darani.

In the early 1960s Darani and Helge were lone pioneers in the field of contemporary jewellery. As well as growing their own practice and reputation, they both took on important public roles to build institutional support for design and craft in Australia.

Helge taught for twelve years in the Department of Industrial Arts at the University of New South Wales and was a founding member and later President of the Crafts Association of Australia. He was appointed to the Sydney College of the Arts and was the founding Head of Jewellery and Silversmithing and later Associate Professor and Head of the School of Visual Arts. As a consultant to the Crafts Board of the Australia Council and through his overseas connections, Helge fostered international exchanges of European and Australian jewellers and curated major Australian jewellery exhibitions in Europe and Japan.

Darani served as Chairperson of the Australia Council Crafts Board and then as a Trustee of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, appointments that introduced her to public advocacy for the arts. She was a member of the NSW Women and Arts Festival Committee in the early 1980s with more overtly political work. This included the 1983 Worn Issues touring exhibition which questioned the concept of jewellery as 'wearable wealth', using non-precious materials to make social and political statements. The 1985 installation Peace and Nuclear War in the Australian Landscape, a collaboration with her sister Tanya and artist Jan Birmingham, was assembled from found objects secured with staples, tape and blu tack and featured at the Palm Sunday Peace Rally in Adelaide. In 1982 Darani's stature as an artist and her public advocacy for craft was recognised when she was appointed a member in the General Division of The Order of Australia.

Since 1961 Larsen and Lewers have held over sixty-nine exhibitions in Australia, Europe and the USA, gaining an international reputation as jewellers, silversmiths and designers. Their work is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia and all Australian state galleries, as well as collections in Europe and Asia.



In recognition of their significant pioneering role and substantial body of work, the National Gallery of Victoria organised a retrospective exhibition which toured Australia and Europe from 1986 to 1988. A second touring survey exhibition (covering work from 1986 to 2002) was curated by Manly Art Gallery and Museum. In 2007 Helge and Darani were each awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Visual Arts from The University of Sydney.

Originating in the modern Danish tradition of jewellery with its simple forged forms and a modernist preference for minimalist, abstract design, Larsen and Lewers' vision has continued to evolve with its own exploratory, inventive and socially engaged aesthetic. Since the early 1960s, their home and studio at Seaforth in Sydney has provided a visual backdrop of bushland, harbour and cityscape as inspiration. Early work was influenced by the Australian bush and landscape with kinetic elements entering during the 1960s to explore movement. After their stay at the Cité Internationale des Arts studio in Paris in 1974, they introduced, for the first time, the figurative image together with architectural icons. City streetscapes became enduring design elements.

With an increasing focus on cross-cultural connections and indigenous art, their work has responded to natural and built environments encountered in their travels which can be likened to field trips: making sketches,



*This page :*  
 Top: Larsen & Lewers, Town, 2-finger ring, 2011, sterling silver, 30x40 mm  
 Below: Tanya Crothers, 'Northern Forest', hand-coloured collagraph 2010  
 Opposite page: Jon Crothers, 'At the top of the mountain', hand cut zinc plate, rusted steel 2005

taking photographs and gathering objects at sites around Australia, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. For exhibitions that reflect ideas from these travels, the jewellers work in thematic series, reinterpreting cultural symbols and forms and literally incorporating antique fragments and found objects and materials into the contemporary context of a sterling silver ring, pendant or brooch.

Hollow wear, such as tea and coffee sets, and largescale commissioned works have played a complementary role in their jewellery practice. Liturgical and ceremonial pieces, wall reliefs and a lightfitting for Parliament House, Canberra (in association with glass artist Maureen Cahill) have also broadened the scope of their practice. Darani and Helge have found this collaboration with a variety of people including their children, Pia and Tor, a valuable experience. 'Many of these commissions provide the opportunity to create contemporary symbols in order to renew the original meaning,' says Darani. 'Often the work is site specific, designed for an

architectural space and a particular audience, adding relevance to the completed work.'

In April this year, I saw the latest exhibition 'Recent Works' at the Peter Pinson Gallery in Dank Street, Sydney, opened by former senior curator of Australian decorative arts and design at the Powerhouse Museum, Grace Cochrane. Overall I was struck by the clarity of the sculptural qualities of the work that appealed strongly to both heart and head. Thinking about family legacy, I was reminded of Gerald's dynamic sculptural fountains and Margo's gift for line and space that I imagine must have made an impression on Darani's development as a young designer.

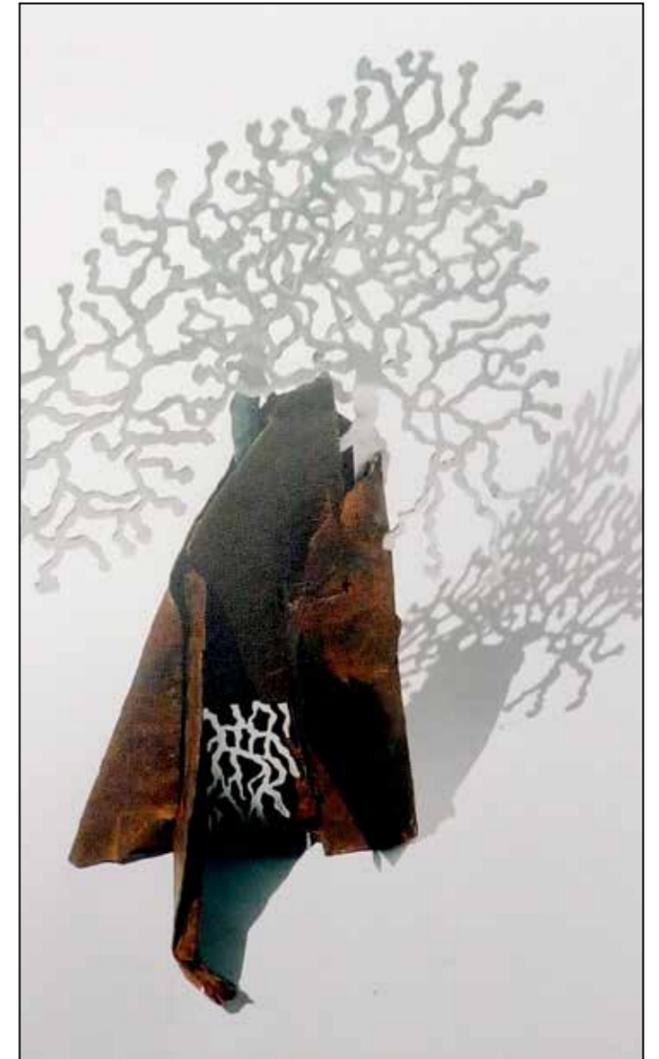
'We see our work as a form of social interaction, a three-way relationship between the maker, the wearer and the viewer,' says Darani, talking about the motivation behind her and Helge's work. 'The meaning of the jewellery changes in each new context.' She elaborates on their role as creators: 'We act as mediators between our work and the public, holding workshops and talks during our exhibitions where possible. While we are the only body-related makers in the family (the jewellery is only complete when worn on the body), we believe that all of us in the family view our work as a form of social exchange.'

In her 2013 interview with Peter Pinson [see Resources], Darani reflects on her collaboration with Helge: 'I like to think that although we are very different people... we're actually able to complement each other and that we make better work as a couple than we do individually' While Darani and Helge consult at critical stages in the making of individual pieces, they also bring specialist skills. Helge remains the master silversmith but says 'I'm quite happy to let Darani do all the decisions about colour in our work.'

The Lewers sisters agree that colour and form are an important continuity between their mother's artistic practice and their own. When they were young adults, Margo would invite them to criticise her paintings, seeking their input. 'Colour was an incredibly important part of her practice,' says Tanya. 'I care about colour too.'

Tanya Lewers commenced her architecture degree in 1959 at The University of Sydney where she met fellow student Jon Crothers. Tanya's parents, who knew and worked with architects, guided her choice of studies but art was a major subject in the course and, according to Tanya, their teacher Lloyd Rees, was particularly influential: 'The students loved him.'

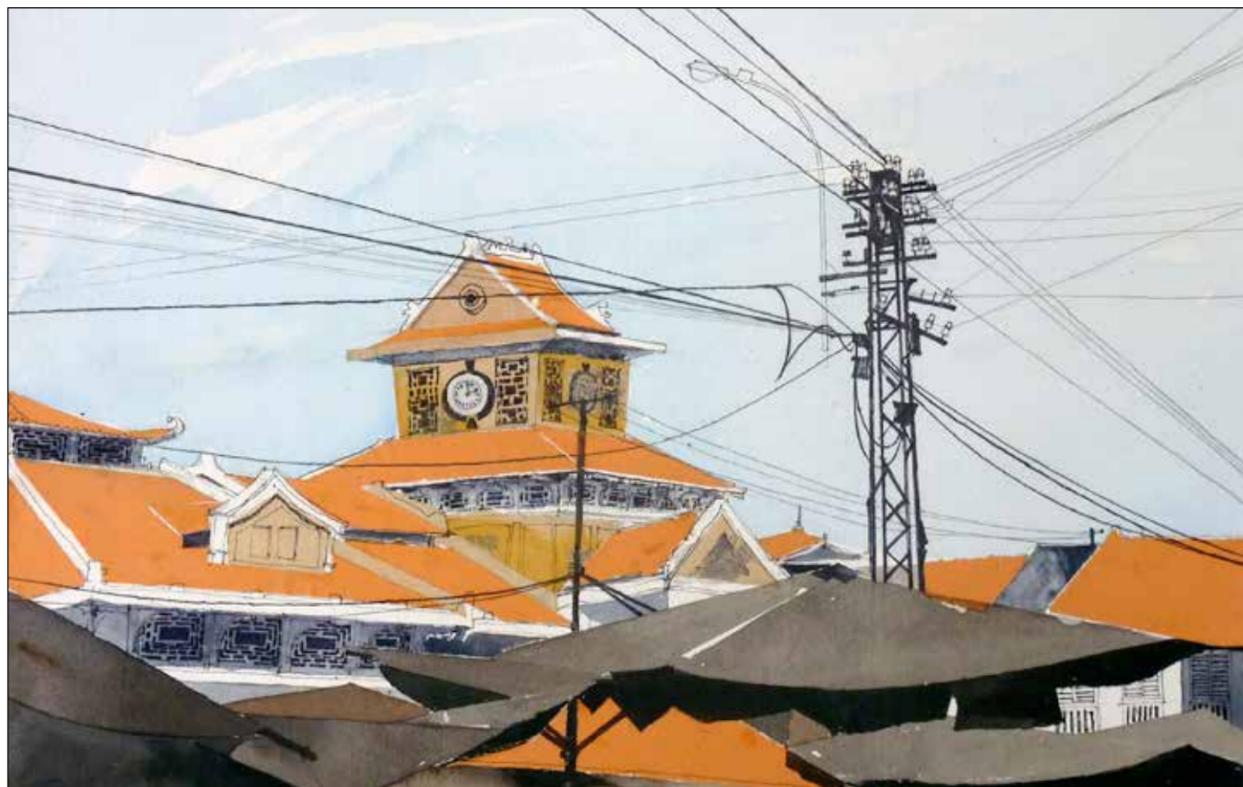
In 1960 six architecture students exhibited together in a show titled Six Young Artists at the War Memorial Gallery



at The University of Sydney. In 2012, the Sydney Student Union gallery Verge hosted The Edge to exhibit the current work of five of those original six: Lawrence Nield, Jon Crothers, Philip Cox, Tony Corkill and Tanya Crothers joined by Darrel Conybeare (John Paynter had died in 1987). In the interests of 'intergenerational exchange', these six were paired with current students from Sydney College of the Arts (SCA). Darani's daughter Pia Larsen, herself an artist and lecturer, wrote the catalogue essay. Light and Shadow, a second exhibition in June this year, again saw Tanya and Jon in a collaborative pairing with two young artists.

On graduation in 1965, Tanya headed overseas and worked for an architecture firm in Oslo and later in London and Cambridge. She and Jon married in 1966. Back in Australia and settled into the house at Mosman that remains their residence today, Tanya decided to find a way to balance her work life with the raising of her children Kirsty, Aaron and Sam. She undertook a Dip Ed by correspondence from the University of New England.





In 1969 Tanya started part-time work as a primary school art teacher and commenced print-making at Willoughby Workshop Arts Centre with Michael West. From 1970 on, she exhibited in group shows with Sydney Printmakers, Eight Graphic Artists, the Winslow Group, the Print Council of Australia and the Print Circle among others.

'When I started, Sydney Printmakers was a pretty exclusive group; it was quite a coup to be invited.' The postwar influx of European migrant artists had ignited a revival of interest in printmaking that had once flourished in 1930s Sydney. Tanya says that one of the group's major aims from its establishment in 1961 was educating the public to appreciate the qualities of a hand-printed work as distinct from a commercial print.

'I do think I've been influenced by Margo particularly,' says Tanya. 'It's subconscious but you look at your work and you think 'I know where some of that came from.'



This page top:  
Tanya Crothers  
Cholon Market Saigon,  
watercolour and ink,  
2005  
Left:  
Blankets in the Town  
Square, watercolour  
and ink 2011  
Opposite page:  
Jon Crothers  
Flame trees, laser cut  
mild steel, 2010

This influence can be seen perhaps, in *Shadows on the Plains*, a hand-coloured collagraph Tanya contributed to *Hot Off The Press: New Directions* exhibition that celebrated 50 years of the Sydney Printmakers at Manly Art Gallery & Museum in 2011.

Tanya has explored and, at times, combined techniques of linocut, lithography and etching with hand colour as well as ink and watercolour, ink sketches and painting in acrylic. In the last few years she has been using cardboard plates inked up in the same way as an etching. Inexpensive compared with zinc and available in larger sizes, cardboard has given Tanya more freedom to experiment and has also encouraged her to create one-off prints combined with painting.

In 1980 she produced an edition of 50 prints for the Print Council of Australia. That same year she exhibited with her teacher Michael West at the Printers Gallery in Brisbane and Harrington Street Gallery in Hobart. 'Experimentation and collaboration in the visual arts was important and taken seriously by the funding bodies during the 1980s,' says Tanya, talking about the body-part collages she contributed to *The Body Show* with Darani and other artists at the Hogarth Gallery, Sydney and Gryphon Gallery, Melbourne from 1982 to 1984. A collaboration with her sister and Jan Birmingham later produced the anti-nuclear war installation that toured five capital cities.

The solo show *A Quick Trip to Central Australia* at Australian Craftworks in 1986 was followed by collaborative, largescale composite works by twelve printmakers for Footprints 88. Tanya explored changes in the cityscape using old images of Sydney in a solo exhibition *Then and Now* at the Rocks Visitor Centre, Sydney in 1987 and a two-person show *Urban Transformations* at Australian Craftworks in 1993.

Around this time she returned to fulltime work as an architect with Conybeare Morrison, a consultancy of architects and urban designers established in 1980. As members of the Conybeare Morrison team, Tanya and her husband Jon worked on a large redevelopment of the Kuching waterfront in Sarawak, Malaysia, living on and off in Kuching over two years.

'I was given a lot of leeway with the selection of artworks [for the project] using local artists where possible,' says Tanya who designed a fountain, made in Sarawak in stainless steel, as well as floor mosaics with tiles assembled in Ravenna. She found time to travel and sketch,

resulting in a solo exhibition *Sarawak To Singapore*, shown in both cities. It was the start of a new phase, framed by travel and partnered with her husband.

In 1995 Tanya and Jon travelled to India, their first trip of many, with Darani and a printmaker friend, Mirabel Fitzgerald. The party of artists travelled and sketched together and on their return, Tanya and Jon held a two-person exhibition *Travelling with a Sketchbook* in 1996 at the James Harvey Gallery for which they both wrote and illustrated the text for a limited edition book written by Tanya. Five more joint exhibitions with Jon have followed.

'If your husband's interested in doing the same thing as you are, it makes it so much easier to do it,' says Tanya about their growing artistic partnership. 'And exhibiting together, you don't have to do as much work as for a solo exhibition but there's still a good representation of each person's work.'

Born in 1939, Jon grew up with his twin sister Jill in Canowindra, near Cowra, in NSW. When Jon's father died in 1955, his mother relocated to Sydney where Jon went to university and graduated in 1963. While Jon's professional life has centred on his work as an architect for many years, he has also become a skilled printmaker and 3-D metal worker with a distinct and often humorous vision focused on landscape and buildings. His unique small metal cut-outs of silhouettes are created by hand using a jeweller's saw while his more recent larger works are laser cut in steel.

'I think our interest in place [in our art] has a lot to do with the architecture,' says Tanya. 'The buildings and the environment are so closely related. Darani



is interested in place in her jewellery as well. Tanya admires the liveliness of the mixed perspectives and painted narratives of Indian art such as Mogul miniatures. 'That inspired me to try combining a number of different views in one image: elevations of buildings with plans and aerial views.'

As well as her joint exhibitions with Jon, Tanya has continued to exhibit in group shows. Despite her modesty, Tanya's works are widely admired; they are represented in private collections in the UK, Germany, France, Malaysia and Australia and in public collections in the Parliament Houses in Canberra and NSW, the Powerhouse Museum, the Queensland University of Technology, Deakin University and Artbank.

With a desire to experiment with other media, reminiscent of her mother's excursions into a range of disciplines, Tanya turned to writing. She began publishing her own books in July 1996 with *Sleeping in Palaces*. In August 2001 she was awarded Winner of Australian Best Self-Published Book with an illustrated account of the life and work of fellow printmaker Barbara Davidson.

She also began to take an interest in family history. *Scratching the Dust* (2003) recounts the life of her aunt,

**Tanya and Darani have both had to negotiate the tricky path of finding their own creative identities away from the shadow of their parents' achievements and reputations.**

an accomplished weaver, Lalla Steed and her husband (rechristened Gerald as she liked the name!) in colonial India from the 1920s to the 1940s. *We talked of other things* (2011) looks at the life and letters of her father's brother-in-law, Arthur Wheen: a decorated WWI hero, a brilliant arts mentor to Gerald, Margo and Carl Plate [See Issue 3 of Oz Arts], and celebrated linguist and translator of Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. To capture Jon's childhood memories of life in a small country town, *Canowindra Scrapbook* (2012) was illustrated with prints and sketches by Jon and Tanya.

Tanya and Darani have both had to negotiate the tricky path of finding their own creative identities away from the shadow of their parents' achievements and reputations. It is a fine balancing act for each generation of an artist family and a challenge in a radically altered art world for the fourth Lewers' generation. 'It's important for her to strike out and do her own thing,' says Darani when we discuss her

daughter Pia's career, and adds the telling observation, 'It's difficult for the children of artist-parents.'

#### **The Fourth Generation: life in a brave new world**

Pia Larsen was twelve when Margo Lewers died. 'There are times when I really wish she was alive,' says Pia, who loved to look through her grandmother's wardrobe of self-designed and hand-dyed clothes, some of which she and Darani inherited. She also enjoyed sitting on her grandmother's bed and having her nails painted by Margo.

'Our whole lives, our whole world was in the arts,' says Pia about her upbringing with brother Tor by two hardworking professional artists. Just as her mother had, growing up with Margo and Gerald, Pia took this world for granted. She recalls time spent drawing in their parents' workshop and Darani teaching craft to them and the neighbours' children after school. Pilgrimages to museums and galleries in Europe were an experience she came to value later as forming her outlook and sensibility as an artist.

Largely due to Darani's views on education, Pia and Tor attended alternative schools in the 1970s, Kinma Primary in Terrey Hills and the Australian International Independent School in North Ryde. Tanya and Darani mentored all five of their children who did print and jewellery for HSC Art and Pia enjoyed working on printmaking with her aunt.

Despite all this, Pia did not nurture a burning ambition to be an artist. Like her mother, she was—and remains—engaged with feminist and social justice issues. At high school, she had even done work experience in a women's refuge. But there were also artistic impulses: in the heady days of the mid-1980s, Pia made art out of her own body, dressing up in Tanya's and Darani's clothes from the 1960s and experimenting with hair and image. She also worked briefly as an assistant to designer and jeweller Lyn Tune.

In 1986 Pia took the plunge and enrolled in a Bachelor of Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA). She enjoyed her time there but also felt constrained by the insular world of the print studio as she became aware of theory-based and interdisciplinary approaches in other studios. Seeking an intellectual context for her work and wanting to broaden her skills into sculpture and metalwork, she took a summer school in sculpture in Austria in 1989 and completed a Graduate Diploma in Visual Arts at SCA in 1991.

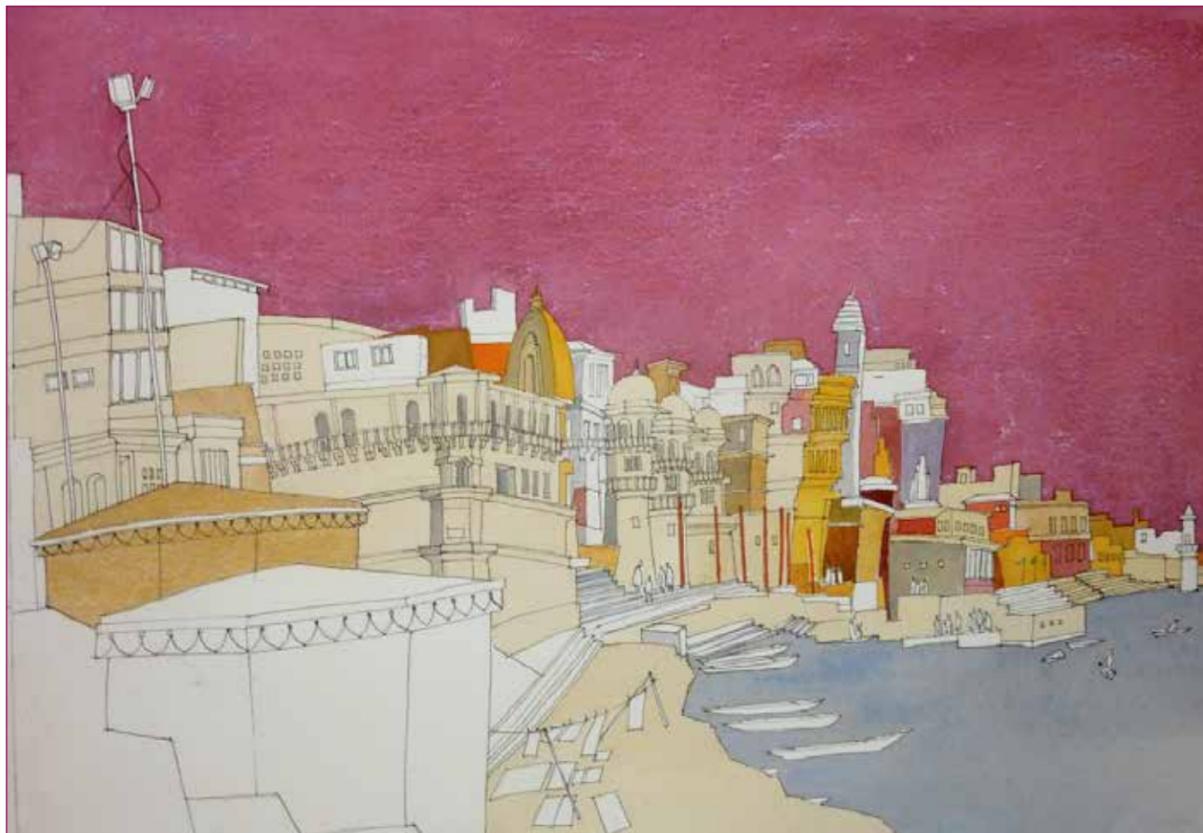
By the late 1980s, early 1990s the shift in thinking to post-modern practice defined a generational divide and a new orthodoxy in the art world in Australia. 'There came a time when I really wanted to get some

distance from mum and dad and find my own way,' says Pia who rejected the modernist credo of pure self-expression that had characterised Margo's and Gerald's generation and, to a certain extent, that of her parents.

Pia deeply appreciates her parents' open-mindedness towards this brave new world of theory as well as their unwavering interest in and support of her practice: 'Only other artists know what you're going through... [they] get excited by the little developments whereas other people are waiting for the solution.'

On graduation from SCA, Pia exhibited her print works in Sydney and Fremantle, winning the Lloyd Rees Memorial Youth Art Award in 1992 and being shortlisted for other awards including the Blake Prize.

*Opposite page:*  
*Tanya Crothers*  
*Varanasi, watercolour, ink and*  
*crayon, 2002*  
*Below: After Louise, portrait of*  
*Pia Larsen*





Pia Larsen  
Top: *Untitled, zinc and turntable, 2007*

Below: *Makes 'em think, (Arthur Stace) zinc 2003*

She studied a Diploma of Education (Art) at Sydney University in 1993 and has had a career as a teacher in print media for twenty years, starting at high schools. Her tertiary teaching began in 1993 as a lecturer at the University of Western Sydney and since then she has taught at the College of Fine Arts (COFA) at the University of NSW, the SCA and the National Art School.

Pia's installations of sculpture, printmaking and wearable art have consistently investigated representations and perceptions of the human body.

*There came a time when I really wanted to get some distance from mum and dad and find my own way*  
(Pia)

Her work has used digital imagery and castings of body parts as the basis for works that explore 'the real body' from the inside and outside, revealing signature shapes, textures and hidden structures. She pushes the boundaries of different media, blurring the lines between the disciplines of printmaking, wearable art, sculpture and installation art.

Two closely related experiences created a turning point in her artistic career. The first was the life-changing reality of pregnancy, childbirth and becoming a mother—her children are Ava, now 16, and Hugo, 13. The second was the resistance she initially encountered around hosting an exhibition of her work about the female breast and motherhood at King George V Hospital in 2000. The exhibition she finally held in the birth centre there included sterling silver, brass and aluminium brooches—breast-shaped mock-military 'badges of honour'—that won genuine interest from the nursing and research staff.

The work Pia created for the King George V show was an examination of and visceral response to the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. She explains



that this is 'probably the event/experience for women that is about you as a part of something completely overloaded with notions of 'nature'. . . if you don't comply with the discourse [of motherhood], which many women struggle to do, you are made aware in no uncertain terms that you have veered off the path.'

Pia's work created a 'marginal discourse' as a critique of cultural norms of female sexuality which, in turn, became the area of investigation for her Master of Visual Arts (MVA) from 2002 to 2004. Her dissertation 'Discourse and Configurations of Gender' engaged with theorists such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler and artists Louise Bourgeois, Fiona Hall, Jo Spence and Neil Emmerson. She also submitted three artworks for examination: *Out of Order* (drypoint print media, aluminium, red paper and steel); *Mammaphone* (zinc LP and graphite on a modified turntable); and *Bullrushes* (zinc, stainless steel and steel). '[My MVA] helped me in my practice in terms of developing my thinking and how one puts one's work into some kind of context,' says Pia.

Selected solo exhibitions from 2006 have included *Frequencies Collide* at the ANU School of Art Foyer Gallery; *Pink Noise, Sine Waves and Love Rug and Other Objects* at the Damien Minton Gallery, Sydney; and *Sugar and Spice and All Things Nice* at Barometer Gallery. Recent selected group shows include *Eternity* in 2013 and *Five Bells—A Visual Ode to Sydney* in 2012. In 2010 she was shortlisted for the Woollahra Small Sculpture Award. Her work has been acquired by Sydney City Council, Artbank, UWS Macarthur permanent collection as well as national and international private collections.

Having lived in Newtown for 20 years, Pia has interviewed locals (including Natalie Gould of Gould's Bookshop) about communal history for her installation *The Portal* to be exhibited in the Art Seat in Newtown over November and December this year.

'The politics of women's bodies and women's lives' explored in Pia's work has also broadened globally. *Illuminating Manuscript*, produced for the Printmedia Studio at National Art School in 2013, used photos and a journalist's text about a specific honour killing in Afghanistan and has been shortlisted for the Silk Cut Award in Victoria. Another work from that same project about the mistreatment of women, titled *Soft Bodies, Hard Facts*, has been shortlisted for the Fremantle Arts Centre Print Award.

'It's so impressive what Margo managed to accomplish,' says Pia when asked about the challenges for her mother and grandmother as women artists juggling

the demands of a professional and personal life. 'To have Margo there and my mum as role models and to appreciate the struggles that [they] have had during their careers. You need to develop a whole lot of coping strategies.'

Pia's brother Tor took his creative heritage in a different direction. He studied Industrial Design at SCA and Production Design at the Australian Film and Television School (AFTRS). He worked in the film industry for many years in several roles including art director and later producer and has now returned to study philosophy, political economy and anthropology at Sydney University. His technical problem-solving skills have proved a huge help to Pia over the course of her career.

**Aaron Crothers** visited his grandmother's house often when he was a small child and remembers playing in his long-dead grandfather's sculpture workshop full of tools at Emu Plains. There was another formative influence early on. Gina Plate, one of Carl's daughters, was married to Rob Ricketson, a construction manager and production designer on feature films such as *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*. 'We used to go to their house at Woronora—Carl's old house—at Christmas and I remember looking at the film books there and photos of Rob on set and thinking 'this is pretty cool!'

'My parents [Tanya and Jon] were both passionate about the arts,' says Aaron about his childhood in an artistic household. 'But I wouldn't say they told me what to do. [Creativity] was subconscious. . . given credence and validity by my parents. I adopted their values in a way. But only in a way.'

Aaron did two major artworks for the HSC: a sculptural found-object work with Darani and an etching with an ex-school teacher and friend of Tanya's, printmaker Sandy de Beyer. Both Aaron's works were accepted into Art Express and featured on the promotional poster. In 1988 Aaron started his working life after school building theatrical props for Stage Fright, a company in Ultimo next to the Powerhouse Museum. He later made architectural models for Philip Cox after an introduction from his parents.

In 1993 Aaron undertook a Diploma in Fine Art, majoring in sculpture, and then a Postgraduate Technician Certificate in 1994, both at the National Art School at East Sydney Technical College. 'It's a much more hands-on course than anywhere else in Sydney,' comments his mother, 'so he was carving in timber, casting and fabricating.' Aaron appreciated this skills-based approach and was not interested in art theory at all.



In 1994, he collaborated with his mother on the design for a public artwork in the Conybeare Morrison waterfront development in Kuching, sculpting the bronze figure of a traditional boatman while his mother designed and made a mosaic. Aaron was also commissioned for a large sculpture cut out of plate steel that went on the roof of the Star City Casino outside the high-rollers' room when the casino opened in 1997.

After art school in 1995, he started down the road of a gallery artist: he was shown in a couple of group exhibitions, represented by Robin Gibson Gallery briefly, and with fellow sculptor Dion Horstman had a sculpture studio in Gosbell Street and a shop on Oxford Street in Sydney's art precinct of Paddington for a couple of years.

But in 1996 he changed course. He began working full-time in the film industry, starting in props-making and sculpting in the art department. He went on to make concept models of sets for the production designer on feature films including *Oscar and Lucinda*, *Dark City*, *The Matrix*, *Mission Impossible 2* and *Red Planet*. With credit for his industry experience, Aaron finished a Masters in Production Design at AFTRS in 2000.

He has had a busy career since, production designing on two features, *Black Water* and Bryan Brown's *Cactus*, as well as art directing and production designing some 400 TV commercials. 'It's pretty hard to make it as an artist,' says Aaron about his decision to choose the commercial over the artistic path, 'In the film industry, I'm a technician not an actor. There's not many actors in Australia who make enough to make a living full time. It's the same for artists. It's a hard road to travel.'

'What I do is vaguely creative but it pays pretty well,' says Aaron. 'It strikes the mean of the two. I like process and problem-solving and it always varies. I might be screwing lids on a toothpaste jar one day but the next day you're designing a Byzantine monastery. Basically I'm in charge of anything that doesn't move: signage, props, vehicles, sets. It's a creative triangle between the DOP [Director of Photography], the director and myself.'

Aaron's showreel includes a NSW Rural Fire Services' Bush Survival Plan campaign with a married couple inside their burning house putting off the decision to prepare a plan. 'We found a termite infested house and spray-painted it black to look burnt. I aged everything and quick-burnt a lot of stuff and dressed it into [the set]. I enjoyed that job.' <http://www.aaroncrothers.com/#/nsw-rural-fire-service-computer/>

*We spent \$75,000 making this environment to drive a car through with lights. You're not going to get that much money [as an artist] to make an installation unless you're in the Biennale (Aaron)*

Aaron won a Best Art Director Award 2014 for his work on a German TVC *Now It's Your Turn* for Hornbach Gardening and DIY Stores. A lone 'pioneer' gardener labours hard to plant and water a small planet-like garden that comes to life and soars into the sky. 'I enjoyed doing that because we built miniature models. Everything was straight compositing so it wasn't post and digital effects. It was all in-camera pretty much. It was a tough shoot and challenging but it delivered a reasonable look' <http://www.aaroncrothers.com/#/hornbach-now-its-your-turn/>

'Some of the works he does for props are pretty amazing,' says his mother Tanya. 'They're better than a lot of works that get exhibited in galleries in my opinion.' She is an enthusiastic fan of the giant Duchamp-like ball of household items and designer label names Aaron created for a Myer ad. (<http://www.aaroncrothers.com/history/#/myer-here-comes-the-sun/>). Tanya and Aaron also mention a Holden Z Cruze ad featuring a car moving along a race track of 350 red and white Kino tubes; the camera finally pulls back to reveal the track is a false-perspective 'Z'. <http://www.aaroncrothers.com/#/gm-holden2/>

'That was a kind of modern art sculpture built environment that we physically had to drive through,' says Aaron. 'We spent \$75,000 making this environment to drive a car through with lights. You're not going to get that much money [as an artist] to make an installation unless you're in the Biennale. What we had to do with that was an incredible challenge. It does give you those opportunities.'

#### **The Lewers: a culture of creativity**

This story reveals how substantially the same challenges persist through four generations and over a century of Australian art history: to make a living and support a family; to discover and master the media for your vision; to seek a mentor and get the training you need; to find an audience; to reinvent that vision; to stay engaged and motivated; to stand out from the crowd; to become, in turn, a good teacher. These challenges never go away even as the landscape of the art world alters over time.

*Opposite page:  
Aaron Crothers  
Miniature Garden Planet model*



Aaron Crothers: Myer Yellow Ball on se

An artistic family offers some advantages in this challenging world. There grows up around such a family a culture of creativity that provides courage and validation. It offers a launch pad and ongoing support for an artistic career. It links to a community of like-minded friends and colleagues. It leads to interesting and fertile collaborations between members of that family.

Parents advise, make introductions, open doors. They mentor and work on projects with their children. Siblings assist and champion each other. Members of the family research, interpret, protect and curate the family's artistic legacy. Such a family is not without its potential pitfalls, of course: the burden of parental expectations and the long shadow of their celebrity, the risk of artistic disagreements or professional jealousy.

But the advantages far outweigh the downsides. If any artists emerge in a fifth generation of the Lewers family, they will have plenty of role models to choose from and a clear message to sustain and nourish them in their artistic lives. Creativity matters.

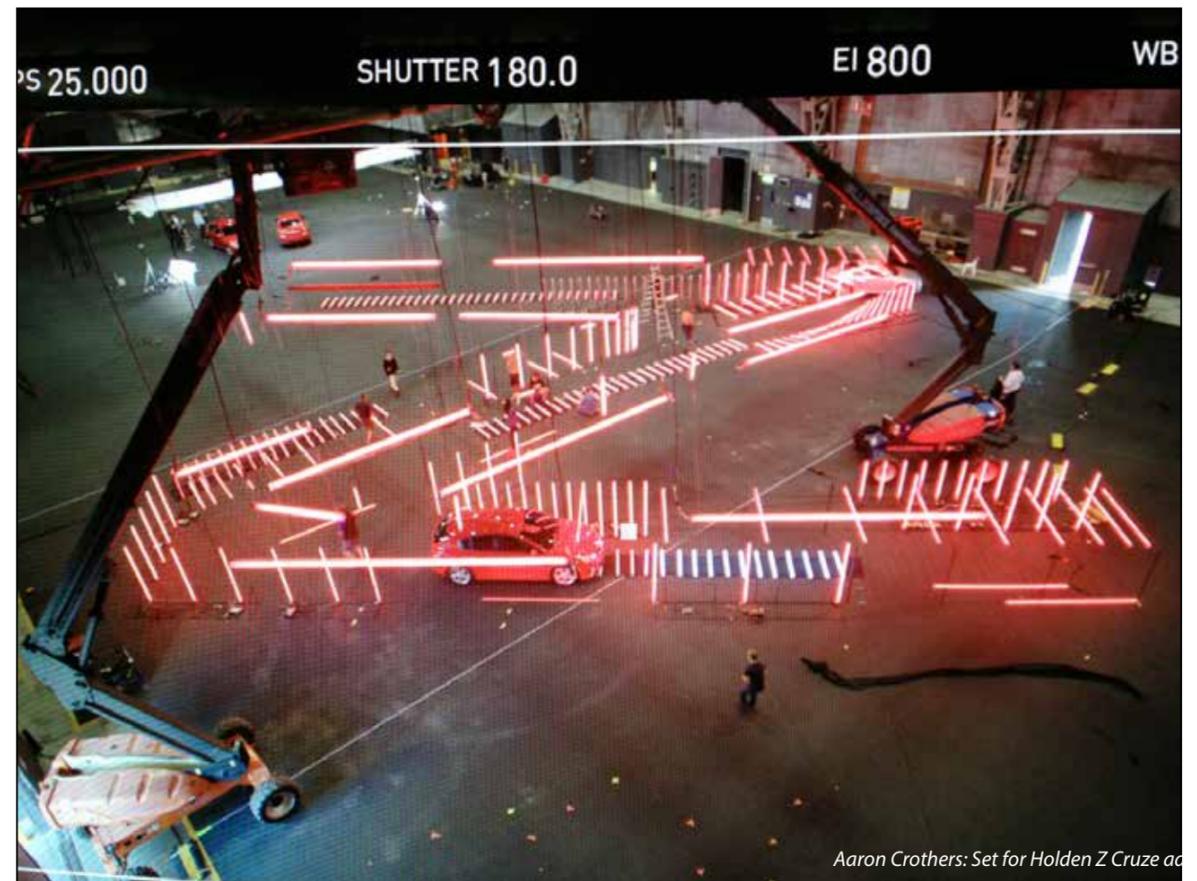
**Julian Leatherdale**

Melbourne International Film Festival TVC set



## RESOURCES

- Grace Cochrane, *Jewellery as a Messenger: Recent Work by Larsen and Lewers*, *Oz Arts*, Issue 12, Sept-Dec, 1995
- Professor David Williams, *Larsen & Lewers: Multiple Journeys*, Australian Embassy, Paris, The Applied Art Museum, Tallin; Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 1997-98
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- Grace Cochrane, catalogue, *Larsen & Lewers: Inspired by Jewellery*, April 24- May 24, 2002, The Embassy of Australia, Washington, DC
- *Tanya Crothers: Paintings—Drawings—Prints*, by Tanya Crothers, 2011
- *Canowindra: Fragments from a Country Childhood* by Jon Crothers, illustrated by Jon and Tanya Crothers, 2012
- <http://www.larsenlewers.com.au/page.htm>
- <http://www.crothers21.com/index.html>
- *Recent Works* exhibition, 24 April- 10 May, Peter Pinson Gallery: <http://www.peterpinsongallery.com/>
- Peter Pinson interviews Darani Lewers and Helge Larsen [1 hour 12 mins] on the Cultural Conversations website [http://www.cultconv.com/English/Conversations/Larsen\\_Lewers/HTML5/testimonybrowser.html](http://www.cultconv.com/English/Conversations/Larsen_Lewers/HTML5/testimonybrowser.html)
- *Installing Peace—Peace and Nuclear War in the Australian Landscape*. (1985), first published in *Tribune*, 27 March, 1985 <http://printedshadows.wordpress.com/category/exhibitions/peace-and-nuclear-war-in-the-australian-landscape/>
- Pia Larsen, Master of Visual Arts, Research Paper/Dissertation *Discourse and Configurations Of Gender* Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney, 2004 [http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/717/25/Whole\\_thesis%206.pdf](http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/717/25/Whole_thesis%206.pdf)
- Podcast of Art Talk interview with Pia Larsen about her exhibition *Sine Waves*, Damien Minton Gallery, August, 2007: [http://arttalk.podomatic.com/entry/2007-08-22T00\\_49\\_04-07\\_00](http://arttalk.podomatic.com/entry/2007-08-22T00_49_04-07_00)
- <http://damienmintongallery.com.au/exhibitions/2009/pia-larsen-interior-bodies>
- Aaron Crothers' website and TVC showreel <http://www.aaroncrothers.com/>



Aaron Crothers: Set for Holden Z Cruze ad