

CLAY HEADS: I love clay, says artist Helga Prosser, but always go back to steel

White-hot flame of artistic talent

At 70, Gwent's best-known sculptor regularly dons a welding mask and steel toe-capped boots to create works of great beauty. MIKE BUCKINGHAM reports

ALCHEMISM is in the blood of Helga Prosser, the sculptor who, as did the medieval experimenters, turns base metal into artistic gold.

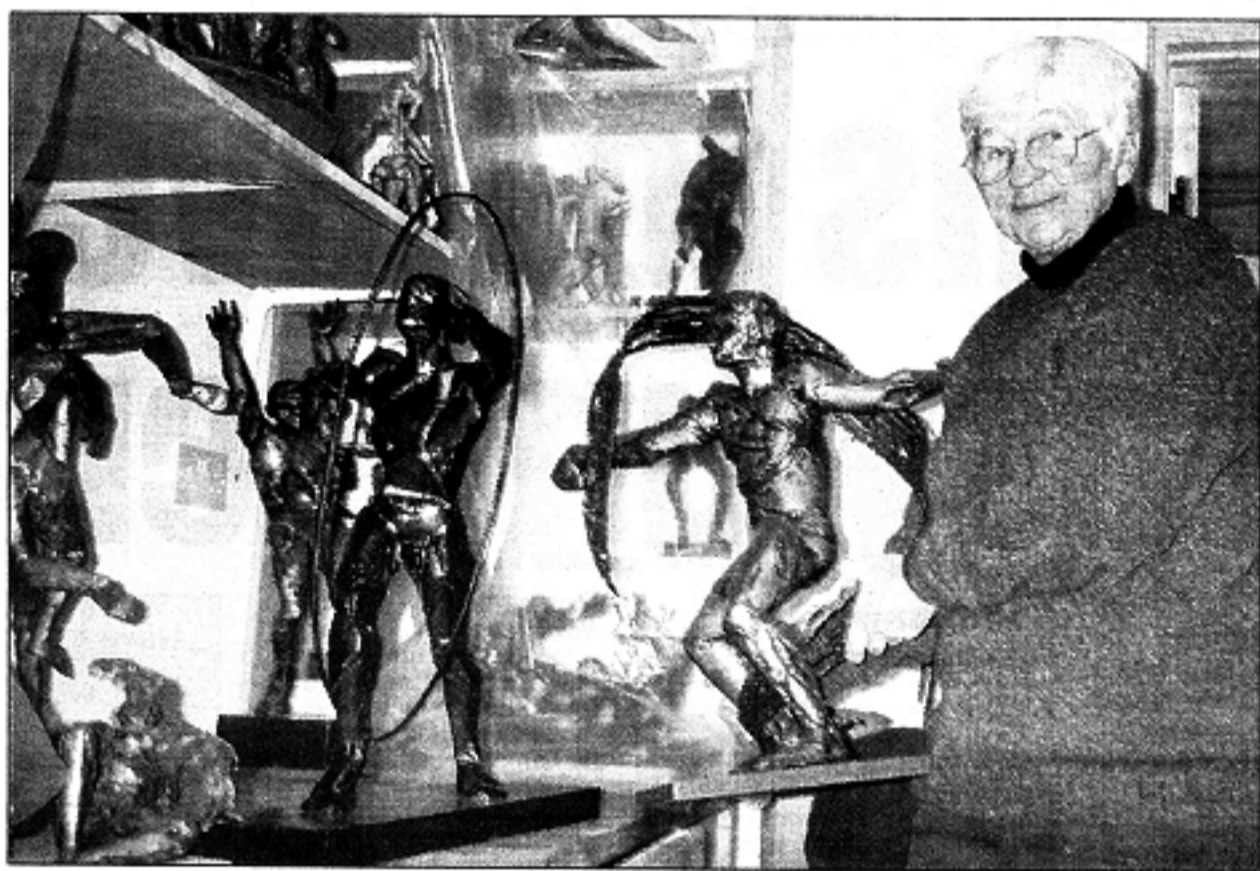
When she sets about creating one her sculptures, of which there are many examples in public places in Gwent, Helga Prosser dons a leather apron, steel toe-capped boots and a welder's mask.

"I love working in steel. I have worked in other materials, including wood and clay, but sooner or later I feel the urge to light up my welding torch," she says.

"The lightness and incredible strength of steel and its toughness have a great appeal to me. I make art through an essentially industrial process."

Helga Prosser was born Helga Van der Riet in South Africa in 1932 and won her BA degree at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town. Despite the Afrikaner name her upbringing (her father was an hotelier) and education was anglicised, and when she married it was to the bright young doctor Bob Prosser, a South African of Welsh origin.

Bob died three years ago, but Helga, by now deeply rooted in Welsh cultural life, remains in her husband's racial homeland. She's not far from



SHEET MUSIC: Helga Prosser, the South African who sought artistic expression in Gwent. Her work from sheet steel has balletic grace

Crickhowell and next-door to her daughter and son-in-law, with her flock of Neolithic sheep.

"If you were an aspiring artist in South Africa all your models were European in those days, so it was inevitable that in order to develop, you came back to your roots," she says.

"We were living in Cambridge and I was commuting to the Central School of Art where I saw people welding and wanted to do it myself.

"It was an inexpensive means of working directly without having to consider the difficulties of casting complex shapes and, more importantly, I could make large shapes or figures seem to fly through the air, balanced on a single point.

"Actually, women have a light touch and can make

fine welders. That was proved in the aircraft factories during the war."

The apparently cold surfaces of metal are worked up into fantastical human figures, their poise and musculature perfect, and usually caught at the point of dynamic action by Helga's hand or torch.

Most people watch rugby for the score or for the thrill of the game. Helga (don't ask her whether she supports Wales or the Springboks, you won't be told) watches it for the human figures.

"I observe these superb specimens of humanity stretched to the limit in all sorts of poises, but it's afterwards that I get the ideas.

"I tear up the sports pages if I see a particular picture that inspires me."

Gas welding allows for a smoother seam, which is then ground smooth. When the pieces are finished, great care is taken to insulate them against the Welsh weather.

"Every so often I have a clay period. For instance, I am working on a model of the head of my grandson at the moment. It's nice to work in clay in the summer because working with a welding torch is very hot.

"Ultimately though, I come back to the metal. It is the most expressive of forms and allows me to create large works which, because they are hollow, are not terribly heavy."

Helga Prosser's commissions include a cement frieze and a Madonna carving in South Africa, the steel footballers in Cwmbran, the small

abstract sculpture in front of Llantarnam Grange Arts Centre in Cwmbran, the large 'leap frog' statue at Ebbw Vale Garden Festival, to mark Ebbw Vale Garden Festival, and the five-foot-tall Battle of Camlan at the Pwrrm gallery at Caerleon.

A piece of her work will be at the Art for Mercy gala charity exhibition at the Washington Gallery in Penarth from Friday, November 22 to Sunday, November 24.

Sir Kyffin Williams has also put work up for auction, as have other leading painters and sculptors.

One thing is for sure, Gwent's Helga Prosser, with her superbly poised steel figure, conceived in her fertile imaginative mind and executed in a white-hot flame of creativity, will be the hottest item in the show.