

Fifty Years of British Sculpture

Written by Jon Wood, March 2022



Antony Gormley, *QUANTUM CLOUD XIV*, 2000

*'There is no Altamira or Lascaux in the British Isles. But there is Stonehenge, Avebury and Silbury Hill and maybe it is that which has determined the course of modern art in this country.'*¹

With over thirty works by more than twenty artists indoors and out, this exhibition is another demonstration of what a creative activity sculpture has been in this country over the last sixty years, reminding us that 'British Sculpture' was a powerful brand and works associated with it by many artists were exported around the world.

Sculpture across these decades also underwent some dramatic developments. These are often understood as a series of generational successions in which one group of artists superseded another, while being championed by critics, galleries and institutions. This tale of rupture and continuity, of course, adds up to a highly schematic and simplified history, but is nevertheless one that has acquired considerable traction over time. In this way, the so-called Geometry of Fear sculptors of the 1950s and then the New Generation sculptors affiliated with St Martin's School of Art in the 1960s and 1970s were followed by the New British Sculptors of the 1980s and 1990s. This exhibition includes works by many of the artists associated with these groupings, but also a good number whose works live outside such contexts.

The story of British sculpture in the last half of the 20th century is also a narrative that is underpinned by changing materials, processes and technologies – carving, modelling, casting, construction, assemblage, bricolage and other diverse ways of working with found objects and pre-existent form. As such, it is additionally a story about conversations with sculptural practices abroad, notably Europe and North America, as well as ones conducted within art schools in Britain. Sculpture of this period was also made in the light of changing attitudes to landscape and to the outdoor and indoor environments in which sculpture was placed. This is something that the setting at Roche Court – parkland and gallery - is well placed to explore.

While this exhibition implicitly highlights historical trajectories and directions of travel, it also offers a valuable invitation to look and think about individual sculptures both on their own terms and in dialogue with works made by other artists. Surprising commonalities and shared concerns emerge, as do differences, both of which show art works and artists in a different light, as other less visible preoccupations can be discerned. 'British Sculpture' did not evolve in any clear-cut, developmental way and in this exhibition a more complex picture emerges in which the indeterminacies of sculpture can be better grasped. Paths were followed and not followed, and we are invited to ruminate upon those tendencies that inhabit the spaces outside more established, movement-orientated understandings of the subject and to enjoy the creative connections between different art works and practices.

Hubert Dalwood (1924-1976) and Edward Allington (1951-2017) were born over a quarter of a century apart and Dalwood died when Allington was 25. Looking at *Double Bowl* (1962) and *Curved Pediment* (1990) together, however, we find two artists fascinated with history. Whether inspired by a piece of classical architectural salvage or a dug-up artefact, both are interested in the form and materiality of the past. Allington turns stone into zinc steel and MDF, and Dalwood transforms ancient iron into state-of-the-art aluminium. For both artists, the art of today was always the art of the day after yesterday – sculpture's past (whether ancient or modern) always breathing down its neck. Through this, ruminations on time are always built and baked in as active and poetic components of their work.



Edward Allington, *From the Sex of Metals II*, 1989



William Turnbull, *Large Paddle Venus*, 1986 and Gertrude Hermes, *The Seed*, 1962

Gertrude Hermes (1901-1983) and William Turnbull (1922-2012) were also of different generations. Hermes' *The Seed* (1962) is an enchanting piece of hortisculpture and one of the most ambitious sculptures she made. It was made the year Turnbull celebrated his fortieth birthday and turned his back on clay, plaster and bronze in favour of the cool geometries of stainless steel and acrylic. Twenty-six years later, when he made *Large Paddle Venus* (1986), the questions that Hermes' 1962 sculpture were quietly raising – such as, how can you make enchanting hybrid forms that look both made and grown, as if simultaneously free-standing and emerging from the ground like a tree? – were playing on his mind again. Though for Turnbull's anthropomorphic hybrids what was important was age-old functional form (the shape of tools such as paddles, spades and blades) and how these might demonstrate ideas of universality and timelessness.



Bill Woodrow, *Endeavour*, 1994

Nicholas Pope (b. 1949) and Bill Woodrow (b. 1948) are two of the most talented sculptors of their generation. Both have very different attitudes to materials and come from different art educational backgrounds. Pope started off as a wood carver, informed by the work of Brancusi and by his time at Corsham where he enjoyed the company of sculptors like Michael Pennie (1936-2019), who was an expert in African sculpture. Woodrow attended St Martin's School of Art, after which his cut-out sculptures made from salvaged domestic white goods soon became one of the readily identifiable images of the New British Sculpture in the 1980s. Both artists' works, however, share a contemplative sense of humour and a serious playfulness in which their sculptures are animated by an absurdist object-energy.

Sometimes Pope and Woodrow's works can be animated by deliberate misprision (making works that frustrate anyone wanting 'truth to material' or the durable certainties of bronze) or by mischievously putting two and two together to make five. At other times, it can be about anticipation and suspense – more latently dramatic and theatrical, as if something in these things might be about to happen. Pope's *Small Arch* (1973) is held in a taut and tense balance: a tight rope act which traps us into feeling the predicament of this hand-made sculptural device. While Woodrow's *Endeavour* (1994) looks like it might go off at any minute or soon be melted down to make a sculpture.

Kenneth Martin (1905-1984) and Michael Bolus (1934-2013) both made constructed sculpture in the 1960s and 1970s, but were associated with very different artistic groups. Martin, thirty years Bolus' senior, was showing his work as part of the Constructivist / Constructionist movement of the 1950s, alongside his wife Mary Martin, Robert Adams, Stephen Gilbert, Anthony Hill, Victor Pasmore and Gillian Wise. Such artists interestingly fall outside the schematic history just outlined, forming a 'neglected avant-garde' of its own in these years.² The cross fertilisations between so-called 'British Constructivism' and 'New Generation Sculpture', and the comparable and contemporaneous ways that abstract sculpture was explored by these groups, is a fascinating subject and still relatively under-researched.



Michael Bolus, *Untitled sculpture No.3*, 1974

Bolus, who was born in South Africa, attended St Martin's School of Art between 1958 and 1962, where he studied under Anthony Caro. Bolus' sculpture is marked by an ongoing exploration of colour, repetition and diagonality, with works that are often poised carefully and edgily on their corners. Such qualities are found in his *Untitled Sculpture No. 3* (1974), in which boldly painted red triangular forms emerge at an angle and in a developing modular manner, almost flower-like from the ground.



Kenneth Martin, *Construction*, 1972

Martin's *Construction* (1971-72) was created as part of the nationwide 'City Sculpture Project' in which Major cities [outside London] saw two works installed in their centres.³ Martin's *Construction* was placed in Sheffield at Arundel Gate and a large red painted gate-like sculpture, made in welded steel by Bernard Schottlander, was installed on the lawns outside the Crucible Theatre. Again, we can see a similar sculptural sensibility here: a fascination with an 'industrial nature' in which the mechanical and the organic coincide. Like Bolus' sculpture, Martin's *Construction* might also read as planted and rooted: its verticality suggestive of the directional and developmental energy of organic growth. At the same time, within columnar composition, we find formal geometries deployed in rotation to articulate its growing/climbing (or lowering/cascading) movement.

Construction is evocative of calculation as well as cultivation, as was the case a few decades earlier with Brancusi's large *Endless Column* (1938) installed in a park in the mining town of Tîrgu Jiu, Romania. Indeed, the extraordinary power of this monumental abstract sculpture haunts many of the works in the exhibition too, including Clive Barker's *Vase (Column)* (1975) and Phillip King's *Diamond Maquette* (1972). Indeed, many of the exhibiting artists have travelled especially to Romania to see this sculpture. Pope even lived there for a while.

Set today in the grounds of Roche Court, rather than in an urban setting, Martin and Bolus' sculptures spark up different conversations with their environments. The recurring power of the monolith as symbolised so famously by the ancient stone formations nearby, with which I began this short text, might return here. Neither Martin nor Bolus' works were made in the light of such prehistories, at least not consciously or explicitly so, nor are they charged by the idea of 'landscape into sculpture' as the works of artists like Dalwood and King were.



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The kinds of sculptural conversations their works instigate transport us elsewhere, out of place and into a dialogue with the art and architecture of international modernism. Yet it is striking how good and 'at home' such large, metal and metropolitan-looking sculpture looks in a rural setting. And once again we are reminded of the complex ways in which modern sculpture takes shape and the fascinating real and imaginary journeys it can make.

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Footnotes

1 Nena Dimitrijevic, 'Sculpture and its double: towards a definition of post-evolutionary sculpture', *The Sculpture Show*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1983, p. 137.

2 Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde*, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

3 Jon Wood, 'City Sculpture Projects 1972', *Henry Moore Institute Essays on Sculpture*, No. 76, Leeds: Henry Moore Foundation, 2016