

THE MISSING PART.

My retrospective exhibition, which opened at the Strasbourg Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in June 2010, then toured to the Sprengel Museum in Hannover at the beginning of 2011, was titled *The Missing Part*. The original reason for suggesting this title was very straightforward – there was a body of my work from the 1970s that I had not shown and that I felt had been important in forming my attitudes towards sculpture and my sense of myself as an artist; I wanted to include this body of work in the exhibition, it was the missing part. However, as the exhibition progressed I found that there were many other ways in which this rubric might be applied to my work and to my attitudes. For example, the first sculptural experience that I can recall occurred when I was probably seven years old, in front of the rock-carved Buddhas at Polonnaruwa, in Sri Lanka. These three monumental figures, standing, sitting and lying down, are carved into the cliff face of a natural amphitheatre. They are classical representations of the Buddha, dating from the twelfth century. Large as they are, from a child's perspective they seemed even larger, and I was mystified, awestruck and disturbed. I could see that they were of the same substance as the surrounding rock and, equally, knew that they had been made. I had no inkling of what kind of process could have been followed but was aware that the cliff face had somehow been removed. The absence of the cliff and the presence of the images struck me forcibly, as did the paradox of shared materiality between the now absent cliff and the now present figure. Somehow this situation pervades much of the sculpture that I make.

Charles Baudelaire, the great French poet and art critic, never thought much of sculpture – one of his essays is, in fact, titled 'Why Sculpture is Boring' and in his critique of the Salon of 1846 he writes: "The origin of sculpture is lost in the mists of

time . . . we find, in fact, that all races bring real skill to the carving of fetishes long before they embark on the art of painting, which is an art involving profound thought and one whose very enjoyment demands a particular initiation.”(Baudelaire was writing long before the revelations of the caves at Lascaux, Altamira, Les Trois Frères, the Chauvet Cave etc., but it is nevertheless true that body decoration and object-making seem to come before image-making in the development of our social systems. The oldest, known cultural artefact is a 70,000 year-old piece of inscribed ochre, from the Blombos cave in South Africa.

And in writing of the Salon of 1859 Baudelaire describes the encounter with a statue on a city street: “Be you the most heedless of men, the most unhappy or the vilest, a beggar or a banker, the stone phantom takes possession of you for a few minutes and commands you, in the name of the past, to think of things which are not of the earth.”

For Baudelaire, whilst making due allowance for these edifying possibilities, sculpture was primitive – that is, for him, uncivilized, and therefore somehow unbefitting of the high table of Belle Epoque culture. He would have been surprised by what the future had in store. In the twentieth century it was this very outsider status that enabled sculpture and sculptors to drive the development of that vibrant phenomenon which, in the twenty-first century, we know of as contemporary art.

As a sculptor, whilst I myself have often been “commanded in the name of the past” I have very much thought of things that are “of the earth”.

This is a list of the materials I have used in making sculpture: clay, plaster, limestone, marble, serpentine, oak, ash, beech, lime, pine, teak, ebony, mahogany, bamboo,

plywood, chipboard, hardboard, MDF, Perspex, PVC, polycarbonate, polyurethane, polythene, polystyrene, polyester, epoxy, vinyl, linoleum, Formica, glass, brass, bronze, iron, mild steel, galvanised steel, stainless steel, copper, zinc, aluminium, type-metal, lead, gilding metal, gold leaf, wire, concrete, ceramic shell, satin, leather, suede, leatherette, wool, cotton, canvas, hessian, jute, jersey, tweed, felt, linen, flax, carpet, nylon, sponge, paper, cardboard, pasta, chestnuts, bread, string, starch, wax, butyl, bitumen, asphalt, grass, earth.

In early 1954 my family moved into a newly built house in Plymstock, a suburb of Plymouth in the far southwest of England. The house was in a cul-de-sac and the estate of which it was a part was far from complete. In fact the piles of earth and building materials, the half-built houses decked in scaffolding, the puddles of water and slurry and the general mess provided a rich, stimulating and adventurous playground. Cement was particularly fascinating, its being mixed up in dry heaps with sand, then transformed into something like mud with the addition of water, finally setting hard as stone and bonding the disparate bits of brick, door and window together to form a house such as I now lived in. Enjoyable sessions were passed dabbling the soles of my shoes in the puddles and piles of half-set cement that I found dotted around, trying fruitlessly to clad them in such a resistant material, to make them somehow everlasting – or perhaps just weatherproof. Presumably this was at weekends or during summer evenings as I can't remember any adults complaining.

The following year we left for Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), by boat, boarding at Southampton and sailing via Gibraltar, Port Said, the Suez Canal and Aden (now Yemen) to Colombo. The house we were supposed to occupy was not quite ready – or perhaps our shipped household goods had yet to clear customs and be transported there

– in any case we spent the first few days in lodgings in nearby Negombo, a single-storey hotel with a veranda that gave out onto a market square. On perhaps our second morning there, I was walking with my sister and, presumably, my mother through this market, gazing at the colourful profusion of unknown fruits, fish and vegetables and the crowds of brightly clad Sinhalese, when we came across a snake charmer. He did indeed have two cobras in baskets that he enticed to rise out of their baskets and spread their hoods, by playing a flute. Having safely returned the snakes to their baskets and replaced their lids and after doing a couple of tricks producing strings of coloured handkerchiefs from his nose and ears, he then produced a mango stone. A mango stone is quite large, though would have been a familiar thing in the area, and he showed it to the gathering audience to demonstrate its ordinariness and familiarity before placing it on the ground and carefully raking up the sandy earth into a conical pile over it. This he covered with a large square of patterned silk and recommenced playing on his flute. Slowly the silk square rose into the air. The magician then stopped playing and swiftly removed the cover, revealing a small tree, its green leaves fluttering in the breeze. This seemed altogether remarkable to a six-year-old boy, and substantial proof that I had arrived somewhere special.

In the late 1980s, as my own children were growing, Transformers, shape shifting humanoid/machine hybrids, became the cult toy of choice. Their marketing, supported by an ongoing cartoon soap opera on television and a set of esoteric names (Optimus Prime, etc.), pitched good against evil, humans and their machine allies against others of more sinister intent. Their motto was *Illusion is the ultimate weapon* and their catch phrase: *More than meets the eye*. The continuing success of this series, latched as it is onto the concept of transformation, can be attributed to something very basic in the human psyche, a belief in the fluidity of things and the capacity of one thing to

transform, via appropriate manipulation, into another – as I had seen in that Negombo market-place and on that Plymstock housing estate.

It was not long after the encounter with the snake charmer that I had the experience of looking at the carved Buddhas that I have already mentioned.

The first sculpture that I myself remember making was a pig's head. At secondary school we were fortunate in having a teacher who gave up his free time to run an art club after school hours, where it was possible to make three-dimensional objects. When I first arrived at the school this was located in a basement beneath the library annex and, one day, I went along. It was rather dusty and dirty but not inappropriately or neglectfully so. There I found plaster, presumably also clay and probably wire netting and jute scrim for direct plaster work. There was also a pile of logs that could be used for wood carving. This pile attracted my attentions and as I searched through it one of the logs struck me as being rather like a pig's head. I happily set about modifying it to increase the resemblance. This was what I assumed you did, saw something in something else. Resemblance was the key, and your role was to make that more apparent. It's a much debased version of Michelangelo's seeing the figure in the block.

I initially went to art school in September 1968 as a foundation student at Somerset College of Art in Taunton, a small provincial art school in the south of England. I already knew that I wanted to make sculpture and, after a year in Taunton, I moved on to Saint Martin's School of Art in London – at the time enjoying a very high profile for its Sculpture Department. As a foundation student I quickly discovered that my certainties dissolved – in Taunton various of the younger faculty were critical of object-making, whether for ideological or other reasons. It was 1968, the Establishment was

under attack, object-making seemed negatively tainted by the market. The temporary, the provisional and the subversive seemed attractive (I don't want . . .). At Saint Martin's I questioned the boundaries of the activity and the role of the artist (Manifesto 1, Manifesto 2) before coming to the conclusion that whatever it was that one did, it was made of something by somebody, somewhere. Material was a fundamental element. I was strongly influenced in this by some aspects of American Minimalism – Frank Stella's "paint as good as it was in the can" (1961), Donald Judd's "like counting, 1, 2, 3 . . ." (1967), by the example of Carl Andre's plates (1969), Robert Morris's 'Notes on Sculpture' (1971) and by Robert Smithson's *Displacements* (1968). Incapable of deciding the identity of that fundamental material, I set about making my own, to be used as a starter for performed activities, to be tended and cared for, to be exchanged and so on. Documented in various ways (often in letters), these actions progressively developed into a model for studio activity, then for performances in public places. As a form, this was a bit of a dead end, so I stopped the performances but, as I subsequently realised, what was being rehearsed or learnt was a method, a way of using the studio. It was this learnt habit that I began to apply.

In the period after I stopped making performances, I searched for ways to make sculpture with the same open-ended and improvised approach that I had used before. Donald Judd remained an important reference because of the liberating role material played in his work and Bruce Nauman was of increasing interest, because he seemed to value the studio in ways that I could relate to. My studio became like a beach, with quantities of material sometimes washed into its centre and accumulating there, sometimes dispersed again by the tide of my own activities. At some point this very accumulation and disaggregation began to seem, in negative ways, to be the work and I made the decision that I needed a starting point. I wanted not only a material, but also

a quantity and a shape. Marking out as big a circle as I could on the floor of my studio at the Royal College of Art (where I was now a postgraduate student), I stretched polythene over the floor and raised a waxed hardboard rim around the circumference of the circle. Within this perimeter I laid down a mat of polyester resin and glass fibre, tinting the polyester a utilitarian grey. Trimming the mat and removing the rim, this disc then became the material that I would work with, cutting and folding parts together as if I was slicing a pizza, and applying new resin to make the joints, the aim being to always maintain the consistency of a single piece, whilst making its identity or image multiple (incomprehensible even!). There are some things that I can say about this initial decision that I “needed a starting point” and about the ebb and flow of materials within the studio. Certainly I had begun to conceive of the studio as an action space (the displaced performance space) and the laying-down of a mat of glass fibre and polyester – a material that agglomerates – is paralleled in another, earlier, creation of a material as a mat/ground/initial premise and the floor had been a territory I’d used. In this third manifestation, the accumulation is reduced to the spreading of a grey goo that hardens and, metaphorically, contains within it the contents of the studio walls – or that the work itself folds up the studio.

At the beginning of my final year at the Royal College of Art I had begun to think seriously about how I would continue to work after graduating and was convinced that (a) I wanted a studio and (b) that I should already have moved in before the end of my studies. In part this was bitter experience – although not just because of studio difficulties. The two-year period between my finishing at Saint Martin’s in 1972 and my starting at the Royal College in 1974 had been personally problematic. In part it was also opportunistic, I was living in Brixton, South London, at the time and very regularly passed an abandoned factory – Knightsbridge Meat Pies – adjacent to the local primary

school. Sneaking through the gates I had discovered that the buildings were mainly single storey and extended some way back from the main street, with a service road running alongside. It occurred to me that a sub-division into individual studio spaces would be relatively straightforward and I began to explore the possibility of renting a part as a studio. It turned out that the owner was the Education Authority and that the site, after the relocation of the business, had been earmarked for potential use by the school. Falling school rolls had put that plan on hold and the valuer that I spoke to was very open to the idea of putting the buildings to use on a short term basis. He couldn't, however, consider partitioning up the site and suggested that if a whole group of artists approached the Authority, he would support it and they might have some chance of success. This was too much for me to take on, although two other friends, Peter Venn and Bill Woodrow, were keen to take part. There was one building on the site that particularly interested me, a truck garage near the main entrance, with a glass roof and a sliding door making up the entire front wall. With the proviso that this would become my studio, I approached an artists' group – the Acme Housing Association – with the suggestion that they take on the lease and form a multiple-occupation studio block (housing some thirty artists) at the address 52 Acre Lane, inevitably now also known as the Meat Pie Factory.

Whilst at the Royal College, I worked long hours in a windowless space devoid of external stimulus. It was probably the result of this prolonged enclosure that prompted me to choose the glass-roofed space at 52 Acre Lane as my preferred studio – that and its permeability to the outdoors with one sliding door/wall. Later, however, I began to reflect on other, less evident features. The building, as I have said, was a garage, built by roofing over the space between buildings and bricking across the end wall. On one side, the front, was a mid-nineteenth century town house and at back a range of low,

1930s factory buildings. Because of this situation, the outside walls of the two framing buildings were the inside walls of my studio – windows that should have looked out from next door, with external lintels and windowsills, were on my inside walls, the gutter ran inside my building and so on. In addition to the sliding door/wall, there was a curious melange of inside and outside (the concrete floor even extended under the brick rear wall, continuing another meter or so to the property boundary), which I believe changed the way I thought about space and volume. Or perhaps, in the funny way that artists have of fantasizing about things, I came to see this space as somehow like the Gothic cathedrals that, throughout the 1970s, I toured the country to see, spaces that are also inside out, where the interior seems to be contained yet free of support.

The conversion and division of the Meat Pie Factory was relatively simple and, because I lived locally and since it was, in some senses, my project, I began to function as site manager, frequently on the spot. Parts of the buildings had been used as cold stores, their walls insulated with cork or polystyrene and covered with galvanised steel. Stripping these out yielded quantities of wood and of steel sheeting that I stockpiled in my nascent studio – the cork and polystyrene were just too bulky. It was the wood that first occupied my attention. This was therefore the first work that I made in my own studio. Then there was a hiatus for a year when, thanks to my then wife's having been awarded an important fellowship, we travelled to the United States and I sub-let the studio. In America I completed a set of drawings (*Orpheus*) and my ideas developed.

These drawings transferred onto paper a version of the procedure I had adopted in making sculpture – starting from a geometric figure drawn onto the paper, I progressively made modifications with a series of curves and spirals developed out of

fixed points on the original figure until a final shape emerged from the constructed welter of curved lines on the paper. The ability of these resulting shapes to suggest multivarious resemblances to things in the world provoked a sense of meaningful play between the rigorous procedure and the network of associations. The sense of the form enclosed within the constructed lines, as a nexus for this interplay, became a model for the kind of sculpture I aspired to make. That, however, was slightly in the future, for the moment, as we moved on, I lacked a studio but did have access to a potter's wheel and a ceramic workshop. I began making pots, rehearsing some of these ideas using the pulled wall of the thrown pot as an analogy for the enclosing line. Coming back to the studio in Acre Lane, the first sculpture I made used wooden strips, laminated to form a circle and then built out from that to contain a volume. For the second I turned to the stockpiled galvanised sheets, initially joining several together to form a large sheet on the floor onto which I drew the net of a giant cone, cut across in two opposed directions, with a projected overlapping tongue to join the rolled sheets. Traces of this drawing remain on the surface. Rolling up was akin to laminating a circle, in that a volume is enclosed by an action and the material is given structural strength. Comparing the sculpture with one of the drawings, the connection is obvious. It is less so in other cases, but is, nevertheless there.

I have a fondness for caves, particularly for those that contain evidence of much earlier occupation, with traces of mark-making. There is a directness to them that gives a closeness to another time and that I find incredibly powerful. In 2000 I visited the Cueva de la Pileta, near Ronda in Malaga. This beautiful cave has been looked after by the same family since its discovery, in 1905, by José Bullón Lobato and it has, by and large, not been adapted to accommodate visitors. Access is still difficult and involves a fair amount of clambering on slippery steps. Visitors are limited to groups of about

twelve, with no more than four groups being allowed entry in any one day. Unlike many other caves that I have visited, there is no supply of electricity or string of lights underground. Rather, as the group assembles, the group is asked for volunteers willing to carry hurricane lamps to light the way through the visit. Of course I volunteered – being able to carry a light into a cave was an opportunity not to be missed. As our little group descended, the darkness closing behind us, it became apparent what a privilege we had been granted. At first the guide pointed out evidence of occupation, smoke-blackened walls, some stone tools, broken pottery. Then, as we penetrated deeper he began pointing out the daubings, markings and drawings on the walls and passages. Some of these treated the wall as a blank surface, others adapted existing features, provoking or intensifying a resemblance to this or that animal. As these swung into the view of the strong light from our lamps, the figures jumped and danced in the shifting shadows, animals sprang from the walls then fell back into darkness as we passed. One could readily imagine that in the void of the cave, like in the vacuum of space, existence is continually being created.

In my second year at high school a new building opened. This had a new canteen, with clean kitchens, new classrooms and a purpose-built art room – a large bright corner room on the first floor with fine views. There were many other consequent changes and the disgusting, sordid, hole-like basement that had previously been the school canteen emerged, transformed, as an extra art room, a new home for the after-hours art club, fitted with work benches, potter's wheels, a kiln, a plaster room and even a lithographic press. All that remained of its previous incarnation was the weathered, green door at the bottom of a short flight of steps – though with a shiny new lock on it. I had hated the earlier canteen, revolted by the food, so this transformation was, for me, nothing less than magical. This cave became my home for as many hours as I could get there during

the rest of my time at the school – even to the extent that in the end I had a key that would let me in at weekends. It is perhaps a place that I am still exploring.

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