

Parallel worlds

Sculpture means creating surface and form in space. Michael Ball's work as a sculptor over the past ten years shows how diverse and complex this can be.

In his most recent work he places wood pulp board cut-outs in the space, thus creating both a dialogue between shadowy figurative outlines and also between line, surface and space. Here he may be stressing the interaction of linearity, positive two dimensional forms and negative, empty space between them, but he is also enhancing the spatial quality of his silhouetted forms in board with a figurative cut-out placed in front of a fragmented stage set. His work combines the graphic and the plastic, and reveals an oscillation between graphics via collage to three-dimensional quality and back again.

Even when the works are fully three-dimensional - and here too the forms and images are frequently arrived at via drawing and collage - there are some that still emphasize two-dimensional qualities. Take for example the "Sonnenmann" (Sun Man), a fully three-dimensional body topped with a fan instead of a head, or the "Relieffigur", in which the relief, which is actually a three-dimensional image, is combined with others to form a cube standing upright, and placed in the space.

Michael Ball does not smooth the surfaces of his three-dimensional creations, but enlivens them with incisions, fluting, ridges, dents and fissures. In this way he is not just formulating a language of the surface, on which form is combined with light and shade, but also accentuating the creative act. He describes the process himself by saying that he is shaping, breaking down what is shaped, putting it back together again, bringing a lot of things together and fusing them into a work. Wax models are combined with found items, silicone moulds for existing figures used to make partial casts in wax, so that they can be combined with other partial shapes to create a new overall appearance. In this way his sculpture is similar to collage.

Many of his figures acquire their form from wax, which is easy to shape and mis-shape, and some from terracotta; the latter are then cast in bronze. Here it is important to him that their cast quality remains visible. Traditional bronze figures' ridges are polished, their surfaces smoothed and polished, but Michael Ball does not sublimate the rough and raw material quality of his cast figures. Fire-clay residue is also not removed from full, three-dimensional casts, and casting errors, like holes, for example, are accepted. And he also deliberately retains the casting scale, the thin layer that forms between the mould and the casting. Actually their colour quality tends to be created at random by the bases of the different material elements, and yet Michael Ball's intensive work on handling casting techniques freely has enabled him to create a special shade of red for the bronze figures that functions as the externally visible equivalent of the inner completeness of this group of works.

His world of figures is enlivened by dancers, gnomes, warriors, grouse, boars, watchmen, players, but also standing, looking, feeling, speaking figures, and also a series of heads. But contrary to what their names suggest, they are not likenesses or typical forms of people, but hybrid creatures created by the sculptural process, like monster frog, fish and horse-fish, often a mixture of human being and animal, that seem to have emerged from a dream world rather than from the everyday reality of our lives.

Faced with them, one could feel reminded of pictorial figures by the primitive people of Africa and Oceania, which European artists were already using as a model or source of inspiration for their own work in the early 20th century.

It was not their functions and meanings as idols of cult objects that were perceived, but rather their iconic and aesthetic qualities. They were valued for their naturalness and simplicity, and for the immediacy of their instantly comprehensible forms.

But unlike the Classical Modernist artists, Michael Ball is not adopting the formal language of "primitivism", nor is he quoting it. It is more that a parallel quality can be discerned in the creative process. In neither case does the work owe anything to working from nature, to imitation, nor are images or likenesses being created. There are not even any models for Michael Ball's work. His beings are created in and by the shaping process. His sculptor colleague Bernhard Dominik sums it up succinctly by saying that Ball sees the artistic process a "drifting into a space of inner relaxation - while at the same time concentrating on the moments at which forms rise up from the depths like shadowy figures".

So there is no concept being realized here, no design. This working process and its results are not driven by rationality, but by artistic experience in handling the material and the mood and state of mind prevailing while the creative work is being done. The figures are quite clearly not of this world, but from an inner world, and one that is profoundly subjective and individual.

But shorthand and abbreviations do come into play during the shaping process, all abstractions of human gestures and body language, and these give the figures objective expression despite the subjectivity of the shaping process. This expression is archetypal and essential. It means that the figures are not tied to any linguistic circle in their effectiveness, and thus become universally comprehensible.

Irrationality and psychological automatism thus create a degree of abstraction that can be considered a creative and visual world language. And so the figures, which do not come from this world, but from a parallel one, are relating to the world after all. With them, Michael Ball achieves the aim he shares with his former teacher Eduardo Paolozzi, which is to penetrate sculpture and make it into a presence over and above the thing.

Finkeldey, January 2006

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