

MEMBRANES

&

EDGES

Thelma Hulbert Gallery, Honiton: 16.10 - 13.11.2004

20/21 Visual Arts Centre, Scunthorpe: 21.5 - 27.8.2005

Midlands Arts Centre (MAC), Birmingham: 5.11.2005 - 2.1.2006

Red Gallery, Hull: 28.4 - 27.5.2006

MEMBRANES

I believe that artists, when working at the optimum, inhabit a post verbal world connecting them with their pre verbal progenitors who roamed the plains and inhabited the caves of pre-history. So it is with a hint of Post Modernist irony that I endeavour to write on membranes and the work of Michael Shaw.

The sensuous luminosity of the latest inflated PVC organic geometries with their gentle assertiveness and lack of eco-design and architectonic pneumatics so reminiscent of the 60's and 70's, has attracted and engaged my sensibilities. I am impressed that he has managed to liberate, from the vast software archive, something more than the sum of the parts and is forming a language other than the linear, graphic tradition of English sculpture, post Moore.

These structures are biomorphic, and removed from our normal perception of solid geometry based thinking, from Vantongerloo to Rachel Whiteread, or Lipchitz to John Maine. In Shaw's work the references are as manifold as ectoplasm and the endless permutations of optical conundrum, as light both falls on, through, and is reflected by, tense curvatures of pressurised translucency.

Given that one of the major challenges for contemporary abstract sculpture is the issue of 'identification' and 'interpretation', it is no more eccentric to imagine Shaw's *INF3*, 2005, as a vast droplet of blood, any more than it would be to think of Whiteread's Turbine Hall installation as a critique on the arcades of capitalist excess. The work of both artists is contingent on geometry and sometimes informed by digital manipulation, and both would appear to be 'driven' by the will to form in that they are compelled to exert enormous mental and physical resources to exercise this impulse.

More to the point, there is a strong sense of transcendentalism, activating the void and celebrating ambiguity rather than to neutralising it, so that in a time of technological egotism, politico cultural exhaustion and social intolerance, it is both challenging and rewarding to discover such reflectiveness in the work of two very different artists.

If this opportunity for reflection has led me to transgress to discursiveness and conceptualisation I make no excuse. Effective art always deconstructs the self, in order that we rebuild whatever that is, in a different way.

A new kind of interdisciplinary thinking has revitalized the old synergy, art, science and technology to such a degree it has become difficult to distinguish the work of artists who mimic aspects of the quantum revolution, from those who genuinely seek to connect with the real inventors of the future, scientists. It might be that an aesthetic gene was factored in long before humans became sentient, but it would appear that taste and sensibility do not pass easily back and forth between the disciplines. It could be that the degree of specialization required to appreciate notions of superconductivity or the beauty inherent in the model of a mathematical equation, is too intense to allow for a smooth transfer of understanding.

I have a strong sense, from looking at these membranous inventions of Michael Shaw that he has indeed found a methodology and a creative attitude which transcends these barriers.

Nigel Slight

October, 2005





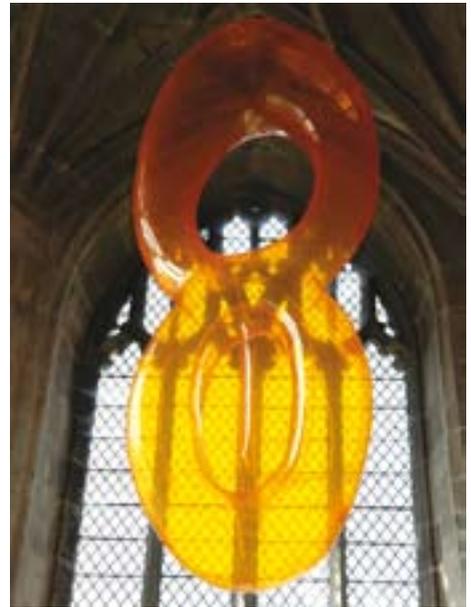
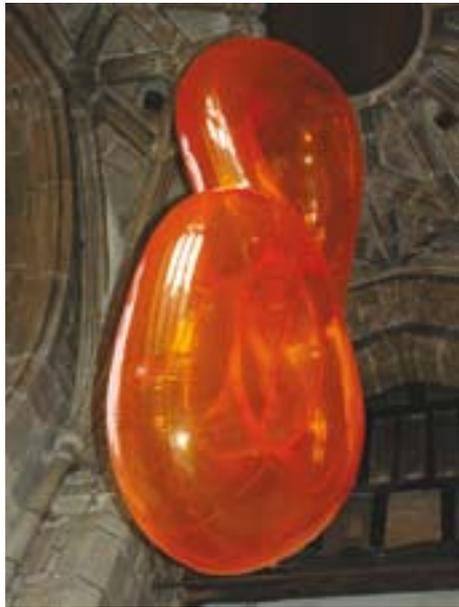
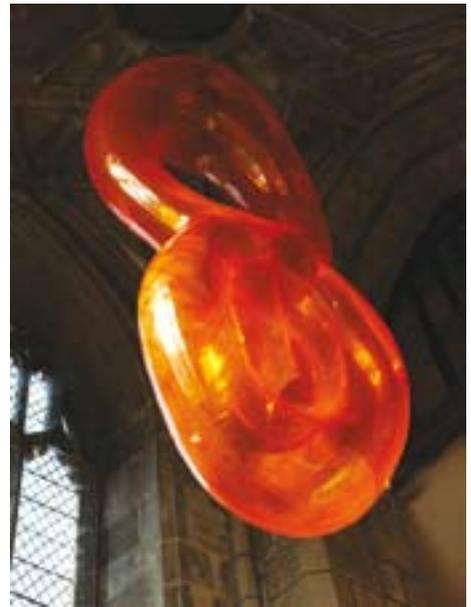
INF1, 2004
Inflated PVC
290 x 290 x 80 cm





INF2, 2005
Inflated PVC
240 x 240 x 285 cm





INF3, 2005
Inflated PVC
375 x 150 x 90 cm





INF4, 2005
Inflated PVC
350 x 350 x 260 cm

Unity and variation in the sculpture of Michael Shaw

The predominant concern in Michael Shaw's sculpture is the concept of 'singular sculptural form' and how this can be extended through the language of sculpture. Singular sculptural form owes its existence to Minimalism and to the theories of Donald Judd, who was one of its leading proponents. The essential characteristic of the concept of singular sculptural form requires that the sculpture is not made up of parts, but is instead, a single enveloping form. The whole is therefore not greater than the sum of its parts; the part is indeed the whole. Judd saw singular sculptural form as the antidote to what he termed 'relational composition', meaning a sculpture that is created through the juxtaposition of one component with another. The degree to which Judd's sculpture attains singular sculptural form, is however questionable, as indeed is the concept itself. For instance, merely positioning the configuration of a sculpture according to a mathematical progression, such as the Fibonacci series, is no guarantee that singular sculptural form will be achieved. Further to this, even the change in the direction of a plane, through the consequence of a corner, can suggest the coincidence of two planes and therefore two elements that are 'related' to one another. Judd was also opposed to notions of illusion and perceptual ambiguity in sculpture. Given these restrictions, the inevitable question arises – can sculptures that are faithful to the concept of singular form be aesthetically significant? In Judd's case, and despite his protestations to the contrary, the success of his work really does rely on illusion in for instance his use of Perspex and steel in his box constructions of around 1964, or relational composition in his wall reliefs.

Over the last eight years Michael has been persistent in the pursuit of those sculptural qualities that signify singular sculptural form, and how they might attain aesthetic significance. Early on he was quick to realise the importance of Gestalt psychology in this, and how it defines and interprets what might be the predominant visual qualities of an object in terms of, for instance, roundness or triangularity. Helpful though this might be, it is dangerous ground for the sculptor because Gestalt theory is based on two-dimensional recognition, whereas, sculpture is essentially three-dimensional. Therefore if it is to be of any use to a sculptor, it must be continually transposed from the two-dimensional to the three-dimensional. Michael has recognised this and therefore a triangle becomes a cone or a pyramid, a circle a sphere and a square a cube etc. According to Gestalt psychology, the circle is the most complete form because there is no perceptual joining in its configuration and its contour is consistent. It is this very completeness that has resulted in the pervasive roundness that is so essential to Michael's sculptural language. This in itself however, may not necessarily lead to the creation of sculpture that is aesthetically significant. Whilst nevertheless respecting the strict tenets of singular sculptural form, Michael has been exploring the contribution that surface and particularly 'edge' might make to his work; how it can be subtly deflected so that instead of subverting its geometry, it almost paradoxically reinforces it. Explorations such as these are becoming increasingly important to his sculpture, as he

seeks to establish qualities of unity and variation, as central themes in his work. In consequence surface has become both transparent and opaque, in the resin sculptures such as *Untitled (c)*, 2004, light almost appears to radiate from inside the actual surface. In some views this surface is allowed to become transient, almost indistinct, only to have the nature of its contour visually reinforced when the actual 'end' of the sculpture becomes visible, and the subtle deflection from the geometry of the circle towards the ellipse is evident.

More recently, Michael has become interested in the possibilities of inflatables, this can be seen in *INF1*, 2004, and *INF4*, 2005, where the actual surface is transparent or at least translucent. In so being the sculpture becomes defined by a what might be described as a spatial envelope in which reflections on the surfaces of the sculptures play a major role. Thus the sculpture literally reflects the surroundings in which it is located. This engagement of the sculpture with the surroundings heightens the notion of variation and unity. As in a recent installation of *INF3*, 2005, in St Nicholas's Church in Gloucester, the myriad reflections in the sculpture resulted in it possessing a compelling unity with its surroundings, whilst at the same time suggesting variation as the reflections that helped define its contours constantly changed. This might suggest a further engagement with the surroundings, which is both tactile and visual, resulting in the sculpture responding through movement to air currents etc. Consequently, movement could become real, instead of implied and make apparent to us the patterns of movement that are hidden in the most delicate air currents.

In Michael's work I am increasingly aware of its capacity to acknowledge the language of sculpture, its distinctive history, and how it can be articulated in a contemporary context. Although Michael continues to be interested in the possibilities that singular sculptural form has to offer sculpture, his work strikes up a resonance with that of Gabo as well as with Brancusi, sculptors who treated space very differently, the former more as a continuum, the latter as something to be displaced. More recently his circular inflatables, – those that are indebted to the circle, such as *INF1*, 2004, suggest an association with Noguchi's 'Sun at noon' of 1969, or his 'Sun at midnight' of 1973. Meanwhile, his most recent inflatables could seek to extend the patterns of movement that Calder explored. This does not mean that the work lacks originality, it is quite the opposite, since it recognises the historical development of the subject and its achievements. To paraphrase Greenberg and to take a timely lesson from his seminal essay of 1960 entitled 'Modernist painting', Michael's work could be said to recognise the 'use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself - not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence'.

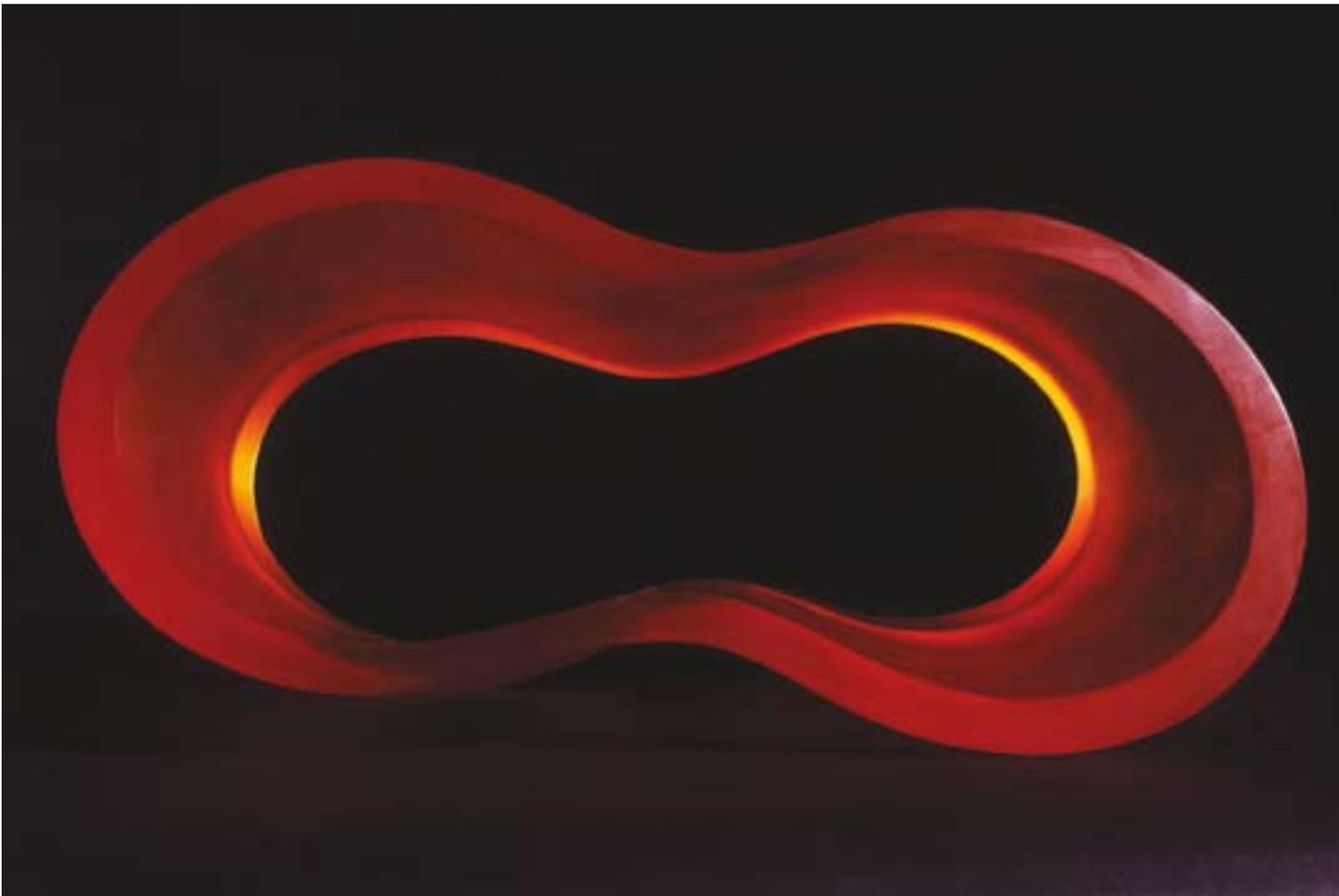
EDGES



Untitled, 2002

Resin

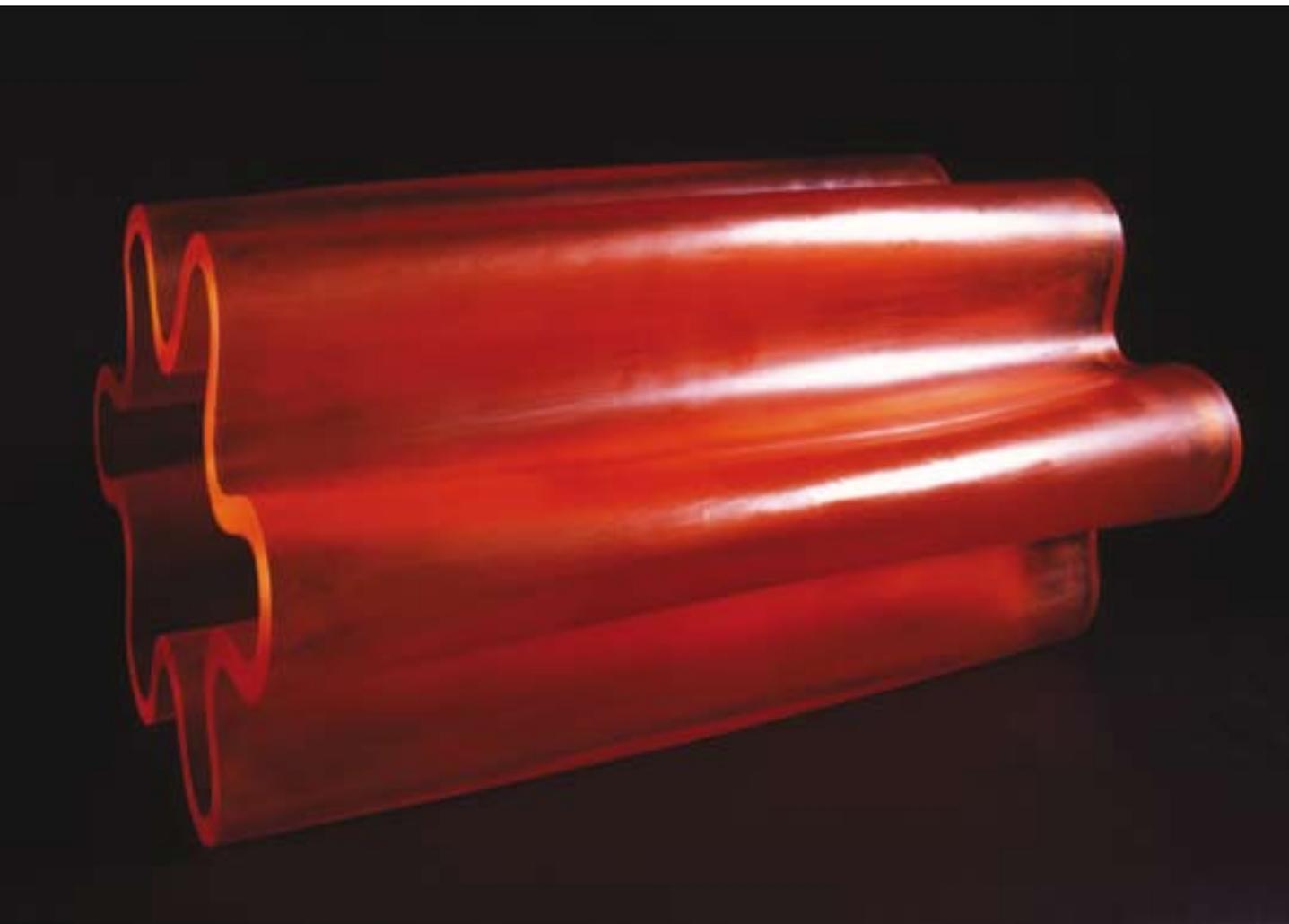
58 x 36 x 28 cm



Untitled (a), 2004

Resin

44 x 18 x 18 cm



Untitled (b), 2004

Resin

58 x 36 x 28 cm



Untitled (c), 2004
Resin
20 x 16 x 16 cm



Untitled (f), 2004

Resin

18 x 10 x 12 cm

Untitled (a), 2005
Resin
24 x 16 x 18 cm



Untitled (e), 2004
Resin
15 x 9 x 11 cm



Untitled (g), 2004
Resin
16 x 10 x 12 cm





Untitled (b), 2005

Resin

20 x 16 x 14 cm



Untitled (c), 2005

Resin

20 x 20 x 32 cm

EDUCATION

- 1992-93 Foundation Certificate in Art and Design, Isle College, Wisbech
1993-96 BA (Hons) Fine Art, Leeds Metropolitan University
2001-05 PhD in Sculpture, University of Gloucestershire

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1997 Leeds City Art Gallery
2000 Palazzo Pretorio, Sala Espositiva, Sansepolcro, Italy
2002-04 *Sculpture in 2D: Object as Artist* - RBS Gallery, London – touring to:
Stamford Arts Centre; Otter Gallery, Chichester; Babylon Gallery, Ely;
Hans Price Gallery, Weston-Super-Mare*
2003 Alternatives Gallery, Rome
Il Gianicolo, Perugia, Italy
2004-06 *Membranes and Edges*, Thelma Hulbert Gallery, Honiton – touring to:
20/21 Visual Arts Centre, Scunthorpe, MAC, Birmingham, & Red Gallery, Hull*

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *Vetrina del Premio Arezzo*, Galleria Comunale d'Arte Contemporanea,
Arezzo, Italy*
Galleria le Arti Orafe, Florence, Italy
Fili d'oro, Il Gianicolo, Perugia, Italy
Hilde Leiss Gallery, Hamburg, Germany
2001 Burghley Sculpture Garden + *Inside-Outside*, Stamford Arts Centre*
Made Flesh, Francis Close Hall Chapel, Cheltenham
L'Immagine del Gioiello, Alternatives Gallery, Rome*
Royal West of England Academy, (RWA) Bristol
Bursary 2000-01, RBS Gallery, London
2003 *Itinerari*, Il Gianicolo, Perugia, Italy
Open Sculpture, Royal West of England Academy, (RWA) Bristol*
Jerwood Sculpture Prize, Jerwood Space, London + MAC, Birmingham*
2004 *Jurassic Challenge*, Honiton Festival*
Omaggio a "Umbria Jazz" 2004, Il Gianicolo, Perugia, Italy
Fantastic Plastics, 20/21 Visual Arts Centre, Scunthorpe
Drawing the Line, Orleans House Gallery, Twickenham
2005 *Sculptors Drawing*, Burghley Sculpture Garden + Stamford Arts Centre*
Through Time and Process, The Study Gallery, Poole
6 X 6, Fermynwoods Contemporary Art, Brigstock
Encantas, St Nicholas's Church, Gloucester
Sculpture in the Planning, Sculpture in the Making, Atkinson Gallery, Street
Watch Out For The Small Print Too, City Gallery, Leicester
Prototype, NewMuseum of Contemporary Art, Norwich
2006 *Heavenly Bodies: Astronomical and Anatomical*, Burghley Sculpture Garden*
Drawing with Light, Shire Hall Gallery, Stafford

* catalogue

PRIZES/AWARDS

- 2001 Membership Bursary, Royal British Society of Sculptors
Bursary, Royal West of England Academy (RWA)

- 2001 Bursary, Gilbert Bayes Charitable Trust
 2002 Kensington & Chelsea Arts Council
 2002 AHRB Postgraduate Award
 2003 Jerwood Sculpture Prize - short listed
 2004 Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation
 Arts Council of England
 Curator, Burghley Sculpture Garden
 2005-08 AHRC Research Fellowship, Loughborough University

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books and Catalogues

- 2000 *Michael Shaw*. Il Gianicolo, Perugia, Italy Shaw, M & de Albentis, A.
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 2001 *Michael Shaw: Sculptures, Drawings and Monoprints*. Il Gianicolo, Perugia, Italy
 2002 *L'Immagine del Gioiello*. Alternatives Gallery, Rome, Italy
Faccia a Faccia: Artisti Italiani e Stranieri in Vetrina.
 Associazione Romana Gallerie D'Arte Moderna, Rome. p34.
 2003 *Michael Shaw: Sculpture in 2D - Object as Artist*. RBS Gallery, London.
 Bailey, C. & Stonyer, A.
Jerwood Sculpture Prize. Jerwood Foundation, London
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Drawing. Cassell Illustrated, London. Thomas, P & Taylor, A. p71.
 2004 *Jurassic Challenge*, Thelma Hulbert Gallery, Honiton. Doyle, M. p10, 11, 26.
 2005 *Michael Shaw: Membranes and Edges*. MAC, Birmingham. Slight, N. & Stonyer, A.
Sculptor's Bible. Quarto Publishing Plc, London. Plowman, J. p29, 30, 221.

Selected Newspapers/Journals/TV

- 1998 *Bamford Mill Sculpture*. Gleeson New Homes News. Spring/Summer.
 2000 *Telegiornale*. (TV report on solo show in Sansepolcro, Italy) Teletruria, Tuscany.16/12/2000
Zoom. Argento. (Italy) December, Macri, G. p7-9.
 2003 *Michael's in Shape*. Gloucestershire Echo. 10/02/03, p23.
Easy On The Public Eye. Big Issue. February, 10-16. Sumptier, H. p31.
Price is Right. Art Review. February, p18.
Shortlist Announced. A-N Magazine. February, p19.
Showing Room For Growth. Metro London. 26/02/03, Güner, F. p22.
Jerwood Sculpture Prize. Time Out London. 12/03/03, Geldard, R. p49.
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Gioielli Alternativi. Next Exit. (Rome, Italy) September, Laurenti, C. p33.
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 (Italy) 11/10/03, IV:Arte. Durati, M.
Alternativas: Roberta Bernabei Y Michael Shaw. Arte Y Joya. (Spain) no. 156, p144-147.
 2004 *Experimental Art is a Shaw thing*. Ely Weekly News. 08/01/04.
Exhibition Choice. Eastern Daily Press. 09/01/04, p16.
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Hanging Screens of Babylon. Cambridgeshire Journal. February, Whittaker, A. p76.
Sculptor Has High Hopes. Gloucestershire Echo. 5/03/04, p7.
Inflation Hits Council Run Gallery. Connect. Issue 27, Oct/Nov, Arts and Events, p19.
The Shape of Things to Come at Art Exhibition. Exeter Express and Echo. 22.10.04, p8.
Membranes and Edges. Devon Today. November, p85.
 2005 *New Sculptures at Burghley*. Stamford Living. June, p13.
Flog It. (interviewed as curator/exhibitor Burghley Sculpture Garden) BBC2. 28/09/05 6pm
Cannon Hill: Park Gallery Blows Up Exhibition, Birmingham Evening Mail. 8/11/05, p10.
Top Five Galleries. The Times. (Knowledge - Wales/West) 12/11/05, Russel-Taylor, J. p38.

STATEMENT

My practice seems increasingly driven by the accommodation of perceived paradoxes including: the singular form with both unity and variation, the invisible object, and explicit perceptual ambiguities. This has resulted in a shift from weight, mass, and opacity to space, light, transparency, and translucency.

Light and the ability of translucent and transparent form to capture it have become crucial: with edge and membrane equally significant for the definition of geometry and the creation of illusion and ambiguity. Recent sculptures respond to light in unexpected ways; the inflatables project ephemeral shadows and reflections, whereas the resin forms appear to glow mysteriously from within, sometimes casting luminously colourful hues over their surroundings. Form as a vehicle for light and colour. Sculpture that draws.

My primary aim: the creation of singular forms with variation and unity, is made manifest by subtly deflecting the geometries of elemental forms including ellipses, cones, derivatives of the figure of eight, and the torus. Singular external geometry, defined by the circle or ellipse, often restrains internal geometry that implies the emergence of a duality, oscillation, and endless continuity. Additionally, the inflatable sculptures are accelerating an ongoing exploration of the relationships between internal and external space. In particular, they question what is the true interior – the space trapped within the PVC skins or the holes and chambers passing right through them? Intriguingly, they have also introduced an unforeseen and hitherto absent element of the site specific to my practice through the containment of a location's air, responding to its ambient air currents, and by drawing reflections of the surroundings onto their surfaces.

Overall, I hope that the sculptural combination of materials and geometry provokes the emergence of a dynamic, rich, and complex experience from what appears, on first inspection, to be utterly simple.

Michael Shaw

www.michaelshaw.org



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