

Catalogue Essay

Jim Unsworth, by Sheila McGregor

Jim Unsworth's sculptures are like people, each one with its own pronounced peculiarities of demeanour and character, a distinctive persona, yet sharing with its fellows certain common physical traits. The analogy with human beings is one the sculptor himself endorses. He points out that his sculptures have a front and back: all the critical features, the colours and configurations which give each piece its individuality are located on the front, but the back has a vital visual and structural role to play in the overall dynamic of each piece. Look for example, at the strong and simple rectangle of steel which serves as a 'back' to *Mr Noser*, with a spine-like ridge running from top to bottom. Moreover, virtually all Unsworth's sculptures evolve in the making process to a consistent height, a height somewhat larger than the average person, but not so large as to become overpowering, for it is important to the sculptor that sculpture which alludes in a general relaxed and tolerant vein to aspects of human behaviour should remain more or less human in its dimensions.

The titles of Unsworth's sculpture give clear clues to the meaning-if that isn't too prescriptive a word-of each piece. Music, for instance, has been a major theme (*Soprano, Tenor etc*); and yet another series of sculptures were given names of Anglo Saxon princes and princesses. The more recent pieces on show here resemble a cavalcade of larger than life comic characters *Mr Noser*, tall and thin, its tubular protuberances inquisitively exploring surrounding space, seems emblematic of our impulse to enquire into and meddle in others' affairs. *Knees Up*, a chaotic, loudly coloured assemblage of limb-like forms, looks scarcely steady enough to stand unsupported, like a friend whose high spirits have got the better of him. It is, of course, perfectly balanced, thanks to the insertion of a small tubular 'foot', a final stabilising touch which is essential to the visual integrity of the whole. Feelings and actions of a very different kind are evoked in *The Travelling Waiter*: it appears ponderous, top heavy, and a little bit out of control (though again, in a physical sense it is not). The rollers on which the sculpture stands poised suggest the possibility of movement, as if a sideways lurch might suddenly throw the whole structure off balance and bring everything tumbling down.

The base, which so often consists of parallel cylindrical 'rollers', is in fact crucial to Unsworth's sculpture, for it creates an illusion of lightness and animation in sculpture which one would expect the opposite. Steel is, after all,

tough, load bearing material, used and prized for its durability; yet in Unsworth's hands it becomes flexible, expressive, jokey, positively wayward in character.

This brings us to the question of materials and the tradition of abstract steel 'assemblage' out of which Unsworth emerges. The path which he has followed to reach his present position has not been entirely straight forward. He has always enjoyed making things, and the example of his father, a carpenter of great skill, has been extremely important in that respect; but he is the first and only member of his family to pursue an artistic career. Indeed he only embarked on a degree in Fine Art at Reading University on the basis that it offered academic as well as practical course of study; sculpture at this stage held no particular attractions for him. However, in the course of a training which proved very much more practical than expected, he discovered an affinity with sculpture; and although he received a thorough grounding in a variety of sculptural techniques, he soon discovered too, that steel was his preferred material.

Unsworth loves steel for its own sake. He does not like many a contemporary sculptor, use steel and other metals to comment on the shallow and wasteful nature of our highly mechanised, consumer orientated culture; nor does he, like Caro, focus on the strength and purity of steel, its tensile properties. Unsworth loves steel as he finds it in the scrapyards: smooth and pristine or rusty and weathered; clean edged or jagged and fragmented. Already in the scrapyards he begins the process of artistic composition, as he selects a vocabulary of forms, textures and colours out of which a finished sculptural statement can eventually be formulated.

The Scrap metal thus appropriated remains largely as the sculptor found it. He rarely fashions the steel in any way; except, occasionally, in the interests of a necessary formal adjustment—a slight thickening of a surface here, or an additional projection there. But the steel is, of course, subject to very considerable visual and associative modifications in the course of the constructive process, as forms in unexpected juxtaposition begin to take on new meanings and take on a new life. The example of Picasso, the master of metamorphosis and the visual pun is one Unsworth gladly quotes; and the sheer wit of Picasso's assemblages doubtless has something to do with the spirit of indulgent good humour which infuses Unsworth's own work.

There was a time, admittedly, when Unsworth did indeed deliberately change the essential appearance of his materials. In 1986-87, inspired partly by the example of the American sculptor David Smith and in an attempt also to defy

the expectations of an audience well versed in the Caro tradition of steel sculpture, he began to paint his work in clear strident colours. His sculpture at the time was considerably flatter and more linear in conception than it is now, and the colour easily legible as a consequence. The graphic and colouristic impulse which underpinned this phase of his work is something which by inclination and training Unsworth feels a constant need to express. Although the deployment of colour is no longer entirely compatible with the more thoroughly three dimensional nature of the pieces he is producing at present (the reds and yellows which characterise recent work are largely 'found'), his love of colour is currently finding an outlet in a steady flow of small-scale gouaches. He is continually working ideas out on paper; not in a specific preparatory sense, but rather as a means of exploratory, speculative note making. Such practice is, for Unsworth, an indispensable compliment to the business of making sculpture: one activity draws inspiration and sanction from the other.

Unsworth has been working in his London studio for the best part of ten years now, steadily building up a body of work which in its sheer size and variety says a great deal about his dedication and determination never to stagnate artistically. Opportunities to experiment have always been gratefully seized and exploited: his commission for Worcester City Council in 1987, carried out in a firmly non artistic environment (a disused garage beneath a railway bridge) and for a non specialist audience, he sees in retrospect as having given his work a new vivacity and directness; similarly, his scholarship to the Triangle Workshop in New York State in the summer of 1988 gave him confidence to launch out in new directions, providing him as it did with the chance to measure his own work against that of others and to respond to constructive critical analysis. Out of these experiences has come a sculpture that is both more elaborate in its articulation of form and more spacious in construction than what had gone before. It is a sculpture which is rich in cultural reference too. Echoes of African Masks, though not necessarily intended, may certainly be seen in the tubular projections which have become a hallmark of his style; and one can detect an almost baroque sensibility in the movement and asymmetry of recent work. Allusive, witty and formally complex, these are sculptures with which one cannot fail to enter into dialogue; like particularly authoritative human personalities, they demand and retain the attention of their interlocutor-viewer.

Sheila McGregor 1989