

# Catalogue Essay

## Kunst Europa, Jim Unsworth, by Tim Marlow

“Humour undiluted is the most depressing of all phenomena” wrote Max Beerbohm. “Humour”, he continued, “must have its background of seriousness. Without this there comes none of that incongruity which is the main-spring of laughter”

Jim Unsworth works within a sculptural tradition, that of welded steel assemblage, not noted for its openness to wit and humour. He tempers the often over serious concerns of abstract formalism with a quirkiness both of method and content, a combination of gravitas (if seemingly defying gravity on occasion) and light-heartedness which has resulted in distinctive and increasingly accomplished sculpture.

The physical process of making and the dialogue between the sculptor and his material, between body and steel, which begins in the scrapyard and ends in the studio constitutes a fundamentally important part of his art. Unsworth is hands-on man of steel and a masterful technician not a detached illustrator of ideas.

Distantly but essentially allied to this physical engagement is the idea of corporality which has been the central concern in much of Unsworth’s sculpture over the past decade. On the most basic level this has been evident in work in which scale, appearance and indeed title alludes to the human figure. Most recently, however, Unsworth has moved away from the essentially anthropomorphic in favour of the biomorphic, creating almost elephantine structures whose steel appendages have the unmistakable appearance of trunks, tusks, and the giant limbs of the noble if slightly comical mammals. Titles like SAY GOODBYE TO THE CIRCUS, AN APPLE IN MY POCKET and ROGUE compound the allusion. Whatever the allusion, however, Unsworth is never literal. In what is tantamount to a two-way metamorphosis, animal or human form becomes sculptural gesture and animal gesture becomes sculptural form.

This recent work has also explored the physical engagement between viewer and sculpture in various ways. The invitation to step onto the platform in the exuberant SAY GOODBYE TO THE CIRCUS is plain and gentle, but in AN APPLE IN MY POCKET the viewer almost feels cajoled into the frame-like

structure via the lunging steel protuberances. The space between viewer and sculpture and within the constructed steel forms themselves are thereby activated.

Back in the summer of 1988, at the Triangle Workshop in New York State, the American critic Clement Greenberg said of one of Unsworth's pieces 'It shouldn't work, but it does'. Two years later with work like Rogue, similar sentiments could be expressed. Here is sculpture which seems to defy both its method of construction and its material, a teetering mass of steel which threatens to buckle at any moment. Here is Unsworth at his best: expressive, wayward; producing sculpture charged with menace and not without that incongruity which Beerbohm cited as the mainspring of laughter.

As Unsworth's work becomes gradually more complex, both in terms of its formal structure and its visual impact, his approach remains instinctive rather than cerebral and utterly without pretence. Consequently there is little danger of art for artiness' sake.

Tim Marlow 1991