

Catalogue Essay

Sculpture in the Close

Metamorphosis: Three Ways of Visualising, Jim Unsworth, by Colin Renfrew

If traditionally there have been two approaches to sculpture, in terms of technique, the present century has brought several more, one of which is construction: the bringing together of separate components into a single form. The Spanish sculptor Julio Gonzalez was among the first in the western tradition to use iron, where welding was the important new technical process. In the 1960's Anthony Caro and the American sculptor David Smith both began welding steel girders and sheets to make a whole range of forms which were constructed, not carved or cast, and most of them entirely non-figurative. Jim Unsworth uses the same techniques, but his sculptures have a presence and a nature that is all their own. Moreover they deploy a quality which is rather rare in contemporary sculpture: humour.

In Jim Unsworth's case the raw material is scrap metal, and the constructions which he creates have in consequence the slightly battered appearance of sculptures that have been around for a while. They suggest a life history. In this respect they contrast markedly with the pristine elegance of Caro's work much of which is painted in pleasing bold monochrome. Elegance is not a word which you would first associate with Unsworth and although many of his pieces are painted, the brown steel surface shows through and different colours are applied. In *A Heart Twins and some Snakes* there is even a strong mottled effect. These are structures, but structures of a very different kind.

At first sight these appear entirely non figurative works. They are constructions of welded scrap metal, sometimes partially painted. But to leave it at that is to miss half the fun, half the point. For the titles give important clues. If one takes the two earliest pieces here, *Soprano* and *Tenor*, the title at once changes the mental picture. For these can be seen as human sized representations. Indeed suddenly we can see them as 'statues' (if that term can be used for constructed human figures as well as bronzes and carved stone ones). *Knees Up* is a colourful, boisterous piece, and encouraged by the title we can recognise the party spirit, and perhaps even visualise Mother Brown herself. There is thus a jokey quality about some of these pieces.

Visual jokes, however, can profitably be taken seriously, and what is notable here is that the titles do guide the viewer to recognise more quickly the artist's underlying intentions. In this respect Jim Unsworth's work resembles that of Paul Klee, where the titles nearly always invite one into a new imaginative realm. *Incey Mincey Spider* could well be the title of a Klee painting, and here it helps us to see more clearly the skill with each of these sculptures suggests a figurative image (without actually providing a well defined one), and a mood. The masterpiece here is undoubtedly the magisterial (and massive) *Judgement of Solomon*. It is left to the viewer's imagination to work out whether we are contemplating the judgement seat, or the wise king himself, or merely an evocation of wisdom in this unexpectedly dignified form. Ambiguity is one of the salient qualities of art: what some visitors will regard as an unexpected heap of rusting scrap metal, others will see as a notable evocation of wisdom, justice and power.

Colin Renfrew 1994