

Catalogue Essay

Sculpture at Goodwood 1998/9 by Ann Elliott

Nellie the Elephant, who packed her trunk and set off for the circus, only to return to the jungle after her adventures, had an independence of mind which seems also to be reflected in these creatures that have recently made their way into Jim Unsworth's sculptural repertoire.

Pyrrhus, The King of Epirus, took it upon himself to terrify a prisoner of equal rank by hiding an elephant in a tent and letting the animal burst out in front of the frightened warrior. Fabricius, however stood his ground. This episode is recorded in Plutarch and came to Jim Unsworth's notice after he made his first elephant sculpture where the beast is seen emerging from a striped circus tent. The application of story to existing sculpture denies an illustrative motive, indicating that Unsworth's approach to making the work was fresh and unfettered. He began the series as a natural development from earlier pieces in which the Indian Deity, Ganesh, was concealed in abstract form.

Like many contemporary sculptors since Henry Moore, Unsworth is not concerned with particular differences between abstract and figurative sculpture. Formal considerations of the one may equally be applied to the other. The way the box container almost gives birth to the emerging elephant, that bursting forth of energy, may be seen from one point of view as particularly elephant-like, but from another angle as a craggy lumpen form escaping containment. The carefully constructed head and trunk, made from fresh sheet steel, cut and welded, characterises elephant skin to a fine degree and contrasts with the colourfully striped box which is reminiscent of the circus. The drum which precariously supports the whole structure is not a real elephant stand but a form which Unsworth has reinvented from the kind of innocent interpretations that may be found in children's drawings, and the elephant emerges like the proverbial rabbit out of a hat.

Ann Elliott 1998