

## Catalogue Essay

### Sculpture for Winchester

Jim Unsworth, by Richard Blandford

Jim Unsworth is a sculptor who is intent on following his own personal artistic vision, creating work that is intelligent and funny, yet with enough formal qualities to endear it to Modernist art critic Clement Greenberg, who commented “It shouldn’t work, but it does”. This is perhaps surprising as Unsworth produces both abstract and figurative sculpture that make reference to historical and mythical sources, while Greenberg has made a career out of endorsing non-representational, non referential art.

Unsworth works from both new and used metal, initially working on the formal aspects of the object and, as the work progresses, investigates historical material that he feels is suggested by the work. He says “I like finding that we’re not so unique, that things have happened in the past that are relevant to us but could have happened five thousand years ago”.

The earliest work on display is *The Travelling Unicorn* (1989), which is abstract yet nevertheless somehow possesses its own character. In the same way that Phillip King suggests a living presence in *Spring-a Ling*, as does Unsworth here. The dynamics of the sculpture suggest an animal form, which is reinforced by the title. This belongs to a series of works which includes *The Travelling Trombonist* and *The Travelling Waiter*. All are seemingly balanced upon rollers in and homage to American post war sculptor David Smith, hence the Travelling theme.

The *Triumph of Aaron* (1994) is one of several works incorporating a snake motif. Unsworth took full advantage of the animal’s biblical connotations, naming one work *The Delights of Eden*, while the work on exhibition here takes its title from the Biblical story of Aaron, brother of Moses, who turned his staff into a snake before the Pharaoh of Egypt. Pharaoh’s sorcerers performed the same task by magic, but their snakes were eaten by Aaron’s. However, the sculpture cannot be read as mere illustration of the story as due to its semi-abstract nature. The story is instead implied by the juxtaposition of the snake form with the main body of the sculpture’s verticality, which suggests a human figure. As in much of his work Unsworth maintains a tantalising balance between formal requirements and representation. This allows the viewer to activate their own imagination when confronted by the work, which can often result in a surprisingly personal reaction.

*A Surprise for Fabricius Luscinus* (1996) refers to, although was not initially inspired by, Plutarch's recollection of an attempt by Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, to scare the Roman general Fabricius Luscinus by hiding an elephant in a tent, an animal the Roman general would never have encountered before. As Unsworth does not to balance abstraction with figuration, this sculpture can be seen as a significant development. It is also the first of a series of elephant sculptures which Unsworth is still working upon. These works bring to mind the gentle absurdity of much of good children's literature, coupled with the darker vision of Max Ernst's *Celebes*.

Richard Blandford 1998