

Conversation

Showcase, 'Elephants as metaphor' a conversation with Gareth Dent,

Elephants feature heavily in your work, what draws you to them as a subject?

Essentially it is mans relationship to animals, in particular to elephants that inspires me to want to express my ideas through them. I use the elephant as motif or vehicle to express complex ideas about the world we live in. I see them as a metaphor both for mans relationship to animals and for mans relationship to himself: the nature of wild, captive or tame; the nature of freedom and control; the nature of partnership and individuality.

My personal relationship to elephants is particular: childhood memories, early experiences of the circus, of seeing an elephant for the first time and re-living the wonderment that something so visually awkward yet ultimately so sophisticated could exist in the world.

The form and spirit of elephants are fascinating-prehensile trunks that often become serpent-like; large, padded, silent feet; folds of skin; a beady eye. They possess a great sincerity and humility often tinged with humour. They have immense strength yet are very gentle. They have both male and female attributes and can be aggressive or placid. They engage with us as equals, and they relate to us with a closeness which is always awe-inspiring and often acutely disarming.

Elephants are a great challenge to make.

You work at both an intimate and massive scale. Could you describe how you go about planning one of the large pieces?

There is little difference in how I approach making large sculptures or small ones. The intention is the same. I try to create work with a sense of life and movement, and with a response to the material being used which enhances the idea being expressed. The inventive use of material is crucial in giving the objects that I make vitality and spirit.

Is the use of recycled materials driven by economic necessity or is it a statement?

Recycled material, scrap steel, does have quite a different feel from steel bought straight from the factory. It has usually been through the manufacturing process and, more often than not, is crushed and misshaped in some unpredictable way. This gives me great opportunities to find more natural and rhythmic forms to make use of as I make my work. Steel that I find in the scrap yard is appropriated, cut, welded and sometimes forged to construct my sculptures. The materials' original properties are part of the sculptures formulation as it would be with clay, wax, wood or whatever. New steel is better for representing more architectural forms such as the circus podiums which act as foils for the movement above.

Who would you say have been the biggest influences on your work?

Initially the sculptors who influenced both my work and my approach to making were Davis Smith, Anthony Caro and Phillip King, painters such as Terry Frost, Clyde Hopkins and Mali Morris, all of which, except Smith taught me at Reading University. I have always looked at and gained so much insight from Matisse, Picasso, Rembrandt, Rodin and Michelangelo especially in their use of material and expression of ideas. How one is formed as an artist is rich and complex and is not always readily understandable, nor should it be. Living one's life, likes, dislikes, prejudices, personal history all contribute to what forms you as an artist. The amount of stimulus that you get from looking at artists work, of all types, periods and cultures is incalculable and invaluable. One's precursors are influential though.

Finally what are you working on at the moment?

I have just picked up several bronzes from the foundry, some of which have places to go, others don't.

I am continuing to work on a large seated elephant holding a ball in steel. It is about three metres tall. I like to have at least one large piece on the go in the studio where it will be worked on intermittently until it is complete.

I have just begun a series of smaller sculptures, some made in wax, others in clay. I am hoping to broaden the circus theme to some extent but I don't know fully where this will lead yet. I am excited though.

Gareth Dent in conversation with Jim Unsworth 2009

