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The Curious Matter of Time and Space: a Conversation Between Michael Warren and Noel J. Brady

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and Noel J Brady

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FEATURE

the curious matter of time and space - a conversation between Michael Warren and Noel J Brady

For 35 years Michael Warren has been carving out an existence from raw material, one that has at its heart an existential quest for belonging. He is an advocate of the spiritual, seeking for his art an “existence apart from the world of everyday objects”. [1] Sculpture, he says, “is an expression of matter, the same matter that comprises the world and is subject to the strains of existence and the accidental”. At the factory where the title piece of his current retrospective Unbroken Line (at Visual, Carlow) was made and at his studio home “Letatlin”, Michael reaffirmed the tenets of his art previously published in art catalogues and publications. Beyond these, he is known by his work that occupies the contingent space of buildings by various architects in Ireland, especially those by Ronnie Tallon of Scott Tallon Walker. Michael has engaged in a form of enquiry that focuses on the condition of man, on existence and the mystery of the human body and spirit. He explained that the title Unbroken Line is partly inspired by Stanislavsky’s An Actor Prepares. “In order to be a total being, he (the actor) has first to discover a past and envisage a future for the character he is playing, to be authentic. It is an unbroken line of continuous being, about making, in my case, sculpture that heightens the sense of being wholly present, full awareness of the here-and-now”. (mw)

curiosity

Warren maintains a quiet and persistent respect for his teachers Frank Morris, Oisín Kelly and others. “They spoke

about their art as being ‘a way of life’. I liked that idea then: I like it now. I have not really diverted from that stance. There is a continuous questioning in art. In a very strange way the accumulation of questions constitutes a form of answer.” (mw) This ongoing inquiry has generated a distinct sculptural expression in a number of media, but is most expressive when made in wood. It is tempting to place the work alongside minimalists like Donald Judd but it defies such simplification. This is best illustrated in the debt he feels he owes to Simone Weil, especially her work Gravity and Grace.

“Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes. Instants when everything stands still, instants of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such instants that he is capable of the supernatural.”
Simone Weil [3]

Michael’s sculpture may be regarded as meditations on space. He seeks to engage the viewer in this mediation. Over the years the work stretches to defy gravity, floating on earth or stone bases, aspiring, like the Constructivists, to spring free of the earth and, like Weil, to escape “the laws of this world”. Progressively it has taken on a figurative quality reversing the trend of modernists like Rothko or Mondrian to seek the universal by moving away from the figurative to the abstract. The use of dramatic ideas and themes identify his sculpture with a very

human enquiry. He admits that although “the work is, on the face of it, entirely non-figurative, figuration is implied from the outset.” He adds that his study of anatomy for four years as a student has, for instance, informed the “the proportions and the interrelationships of mass and void”. Michael describes his work as a precarious balancing act: “The way my work meets the ground is very important, the way it tilts or is undercut. There is always a contrary presence. It is predominantly about weight but there are issues of levity as well. In the end what I am interested in is the paradox, weight and levity together. This I can equate with the human condition as I see it. Weight can be read as an analogy for the limits of living. That sense of uplift is a kind of hope.” (mw)

In many of his works one can see not merely one figure but two, as if choreographed around a centrifugal centre, attempting an escape – united by the same desire to fly – from their earth-bound imprisonment. Current pieces still exhibit this activity even though they are amongst his most dense, massive creations. It is somewhat ironic that the piece that has given impetus to the “Sei Personaggi” installation for the retrospective is the sarcophagus-like “Fallen Caryatid” which hides in the middle of the workshop becoming the altarpiece for testing new experiments.

matter

“I have discovered an extraordinary revelation in doing what I am doing. It is

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connected with creative attention. As you empathise with a block of timber or a piece of stone – matter in all its density and intractability – there is a precise moment of heightened awareness so directed when a contrary sense of lightness and uplift is experienced. It comes as a shock: it is never expected. This is very mysterious”. (mw) It is the material reality of the pieces that confirms the dramatic and dynamic presence. The low timber altar pieces in “Tulach a’ tSolais” remind me of turf which has been harvested and left to dry out in the sun, distorting and twisting as it releases up its moisture. We spoke about the nature of sculpture having been once part of something else, the forest, the earth, or the quarry. Many of the pieces resemble a form of quarrying, a carving of living material. The timbers are in some instances highly finished (sanded) but in others they are left raw and expressive of the technique of making with evidence of marker, pencil, dog-irons and chainsaw. Even the curved “Steles” are carved, though logic might suggest a steaming and bending process. “Sei Personaggi”, inspired by Pirandello’s play Six Characters in Search of an Author, and “Caryatids” suggest a greater appreciation for mass and density. Carved from Douglas Fir, Redwood, Monterey Cypress, Spanish Chestnut and Badi / Opepe (Bilinga Nauclea diderrichii) they exhibit the surface, density, colour and texture of corten steel. In others, like the “Fallen Caryatid”, the exposed grain is allowed to weather, creating secondary images independent of the “precise cuts and angles”. It is this interplay between the controlled and the

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“It should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places, in which, if you consider them well, you may find really marvellous ideas.” Leonardo da Vinci [4]

Michael is less circumspect than many artists about the way in which people engage with the work. “During the inaugural show in Visual, Carlow, I gave special dispensation to anyone wishing to touch and smell the large timber baulk of my “Fallen Caryatid”. Interaction with the material is a good thing.” (mw) With Unbroken Line, a choreographer is arranging a contemporary dance piece to engage directly with the installation’s five scattered elements. While these unit-forms in painted steel will not exhibit the same “ulnerability” as his beloved timber pieces, their assembly and lay-out in the context of the exhibition illustrate the need to establish a sense of place, being in a place, and engagement with the world, hallmark preoccupations and key to unlocking the cloaked sense of this and other works.

space, time and place

Michael is concerned that “one of the most unspoken aspects of contemporary culture is that our attention is being scattered over ever-greater areas largely because of modern technology, keeping us further and further from the here-and-now, diminishing our capacity to feel inevitability in any given place.” (mw) In

considering the place and placement of any of his pieces, a great deal of thought and effort is put into the platform on which the work stands and from which it gains strength. In the installation “Piazza” (RHA, 2007) the platform became the sculpture, probably his clearest invitation yet to the audience to contemplate place rather than object. He had earlier observed: “during the course of making large outdoor sculptures such as that in Andorra, I found that there was something magnificent about the platforms themselves.” In this his thinking is more closely aligned to eastern sensibilities. We are too used to Western aesthetic principles based on contrast and opposition, whereas the aesthetics of grey and graduation offer hope in resolving the inherent mysteries in life. He found the following Tadao Ando quote I have used elsewhere, as particularly resonant of his position:

“This tense relationship between inside and outside is based on the act of cutting (as with a sword), which to the Japanese is not cruel and destructive but is instead sacred; it is a ceremonial act symbolising a new disclosure. To the Japanese this act has become an end in itself. It provides a spiritual focus both in space and time.” Tadao Ando [5]

The contextual nature of his work echoes Greek thought about landscape. Like the Tholos at Delphi his work sets a datum against which the natural world is seen, compared, and brought into new relationship. In adding an observation





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about Louis Barragan's use of delineated space, he confirmed the depth of his knowledge and understanding of architectural space. His philosophical background does however demand high degrees of clarity and precision in such discussion especially where concepts of space and place are the concern.

gravity

At the heart of matter is a concern for the centre. It is this centre that generates the Boccioni and Malevich-like constructions of early years. It is the interpenetration of two or more parts explicitly, as in "Lieu de Rencontre", or implicitly in "Sei Personaggi" and "Caryatids", that requires a centre to hold the composition. Gravity is the central theme of this desired expression. Gravity is made known to us through weight, pressure and mass. "Sei Personaggi" and "Caryatids" exhibit these attributes in probably the most direct and uncompromising manner to-date. Within these masses, like the Ronandini Pietà by Michelangelo that he frequently visited when in Milan, is a form trying to escape the confines of the mass, trying to escape the bounds of the earth. Michael's dream is to find a sculptural algorithm that would establish the specific gravity of a place, drawing on the history, the culture and "genius loci". I likened this idea to that of a singularity [6] where gravity unites time and space. Even were he to be successful in achieving this nucleus, its very placement would shift the conditions creating a new relationship. Nevertheless this, he sees, is a worthwhile challenge, another avenue for investigation. Ultimately, it is a return to and "acceptance of the moral void"; an acceptance of the responsibility of all artists, of all beings to act. He likes to quote the Korean Artist, Lee Ufan,

who famously described Existence as a dot, Being as a line. Coupled with Stanislavski's preparation and Ufan's spirit, the title Unbroken Line christens the main piece for the retrospective. This new work is a departure of sorts, one that finds "really marvellous ideas" in the discarded, the forgotten or removed. This openness to the instant is what sets Michael's work apart.

"After a day of abortive effort in the studio, just as I was about to lock up, I noticed some small off-cuts on the band-saw, trimmings from something that was no longer there. A shaft of evening sunlight came through the door spotlighting the pieces of discarded wood. It was as though nothing else existed in the entire workshop. It was an epiphany! The tiny elements appeared monumental, magnificent. I quickly hand-sawed a rectangular shape of plywood cutting it in proportion to the floor area of the Link Gallery at Visual and using a method not unlike the I Ching, I threw the five tiny pieces up and let them fall wherever they wanted to fall - just so long as they fell somewhere on the rectangle. This action I repeated a couple of hundred times until I got this one." (mw)

The arrangement is chance-driven but there is a precision about the dimension, the angle, the placement and the absolute logic governing the masses. In another space, a garden or courtyard, the arrangement would be different. The five pieces contain within them the ghost of the thing removed and this now becomes the coda for the piece. What was form for one becomes the void for another. As a Symbolon [7] they are evidence of the artist's particular relationship with space and time. The courage of the artist

to open such avenues of investigation should be lauded but as Michael indicated when he paraphrased Picasso, "inspiration exists but it must find you working".

"(...) Modern art is not a denial but an affirmation. Like most of our scientists, the process of disintegration or analysis is not a wanton act of destruction but part of a process for the evolving of more comprehensive synthesis. And therefore modern artists have not left us merely with members of the body of art strewn about, but they have reassembled them and revived that body with their own breath of life." Mark Rothko [8]

Notes

- [1] Peter Murray, referencing Rainer Maria Rilke Light Gravity and Distance, Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork 2002.
- [2] Michael Warren quoted in RHA Exhibition Catalogue 2007.
- [3] Simone Weill, Gravity and Grace, Volume 1952, Part 1, P.11. Routledge, 2002.
- [4] Leonardo da Vinci, from "Trattato della Pittura", Vatican Library. Published in The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, Oxford UP, 1985.
- [5] Tadao Ando in Introduction to Tadao Ando Buildings Projects, Writings Rizzoli 1984.
- [6] A singularity is the theoretical point at the centre of a Black Hole where all matter, time and space are compressed into an indescribable mass of infinitesimal density.
- [7] A symbolon is an ancient Greek tradition where an object is broken between friends which, when reunited, demonstrated their link, their friendship.
- [8] Mark Rothko, The Artist's Reality Philosophies of Art, P.61. Yale UP, 2004.