

Clare O'Dowd on 'Seeing Things' a survey show of works by Lee Grandjean, scheduled for April 2020 at the Gibberd Gallery, Harlow

## Lee Grandjean: Seeing Things

Over the last forty-five years, Lee Grandjean has produced a body of work that is startling in its diversity and innovative in its approach. Grandjean remains to this day an important outlier in British sculpture: eschewing the prevailing tendencies of British abstraction and the 'Age of Iron'; instead embracing a way of working that develops in tandem with painting, and foregrounds both subject and subjectivity.

Whilst Grandjean's work has changed and developed over the years, this survey exhibition demonstrates the longevity of many of his key concerns. The chronology begins in 1975, with one of the first large pieces of work Grandjean was able to produce after graduating from Winchester School of Art. *Dancer* is a substantial work, which began its life as a painting. Even in those early years, the links between painting and sculpture, as distinct but closely related practices, begin to emerge, in a work which blurs the boundaries between the two.

*Dancer* is the result of an open, improvised process, which paved the way for much of what was to come. The dynamic, expressive qualities of paint allow for a sustained engagement with the visual as well as the spatial, and a focus on the notion of *subject* in art, something that Grandjean considered to be seriously lacking during the 1970s and 80s. The idea of creating a work which engages with its subject necessarily requires an engagement with the experience of that subject, and *Dancer* is as much about a visual representation as it is about the artist's own subjectivity: what the body in motion looks like to the artist; what it feels like to look at it, and to remember the experience of looking at it. Grandjean's sculpture is about the world, and what it feels like to be in it.

The fusion of the pictorial and the painterly with the sculptural remains a crucial aspect of Grandjean's work, but *Dancer* also highlights a further theme that runs throughout: the transformative capacity of sculptural practice. The materiality of *Dancer*, the transformation of paint and paper into a three-dimensional object, is a kind of alchemy. Similarly, the transformation of timber offcuts into the highly imaginative *Crab* (1979) is equally resistant to the prevailing abstract formalism of the time. Grandjean rejected welded steel sculpture, because rearranging the standard parts available to artists from scrapyards was simply an exercise in composition. As far as he was concerned, the use of steel scrap that already had an identity or purpose allowed no room for imaginative engagement, either with the material or with the world, and he questioned what could emerge from that process that was truly expressive. What could be invented? It could not be truly transformed.

Grandjean has worked with wood one way or another ever since, because for him the transformative potential of wood surpasses that of metal. The notion of transformation is crucial throughout Grandjean's work, even extending to his public commissions. The 1980s saw Grandjean undertake a number of large-scale public works, including a large carved oak sculpture *Resurrection* for the newly-built St Mary's Church in Peterborough. Other public commissions, such as those for Lloyds Bank in Angel Islington and RBS in Birmingham, again reflected the idea of transformation, as the carved wood was cast into bronze.

Casting bronze from wood was a particularly appealing process, given that one of its most obvious effects is to render the highly naturalistic surface of carved wood into cold, hard metal. Grandjean continued to explore this process in work such as *Figure*, *Bush* and *Through*, which were all produced during 1991. This was a period characterised by a certain amount of conflict, during which Grandjean continued to reject much of the prevailing wisdom surrounding sculptural practices, especially in terms of what he describes as the 'literalist' tendency which was prominent in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Where, he asks, was the imagination? Where was the force of illusion or narrative, the visual power inherent in sculptural objects? Swimming against the tide, Grandjean made further strides towards a visual language that incorporated narrative alongside process, materiality and image.

This conjunction of different facets of sculpture is expressed with particular nuance in Grandjean's *Road* series, made between 1993 and 1995. Both a literal and a metaphorical journey, the *Road* sculptures compress fleeting images seen from trains and motorways into distinctly solid objects. In these sculptures, the process (carving), materiality (solid wood) and image (fences, trees, walls, buildings, or hedges) are consolidated into a visual narrative which can be read, like a comic strip. The related series of paintings, created much later in 2011, is a more literal evocation of visual narrative: conveying the distorted and truncated view through the car windscreen at night, the paintings take the same compressed visual elements and render them in two dimensions. Both the paintings and the sculptures evoke the same sense of transitory passages through a landscape, which are seen and experienced as compressed fragments, to be pieced together by the viewer.

By the mid-2000s, Grandjean had begun to move away from carving as his primary means of expression, and began instead to return to a much more painterly way of working. The *Worldly Goods* series of 2011 demonstrates this very clearly. Here, Grandjean creates a series of objects that look, as one visitor remarked, as though they have been dragged from the bottom of the Thames, an observation that pleased the artist a great deal. The *Worldly Goods* series is made from cement, built up around a wooden armature, and finally painted. Although not figurative, the objects have a deeply human quality, invoking not just the baggage of modern life but also its surroundings: the concrete and dust of the city. These are objects with a history, containing their own narratives and stories. Our engagement with them, as viewers, demands an acknowledgement of our own subjectivity, because the power of these objects resides in their capacity to reflect us, and to retell us our own stories.

Although the *Worldly Goods* series is a profoundly human group of works, the human figure itself is conspicuous by its absence. Departing from this self-contained sufficiency, Grandjean began to experiment with figurative sculpture as a device which could convey a whole world of meaning and experience. In works such as *Figure with Candle* and *Lips with Sticks* (both 2014), figurative elements emerge and recede, creating a vivid, shifting and restless experience. These, and later works including *The Folk* (2015), *Ohma and Ohpa* (2016), *Sisters* (2016) and *Red Fledge* (2016) are all rooted in process, and it is a process which returns to the central concerns of *Dancer*, the work that Grandjean made all the way back in 1975. The fusion of the sculptural and the pictorial, the complex relationship between drawing, painting and sculpture, is once again brought into sharp focus in these later works, which oscillate between the solidity of concrete and the cartoon-like freshness of their paint. Occasionally, one can perceive a reference to traditional figurative sculpture, which is then completely exploded, as in the reclining figures of *The Folk* (2015) and *Dutch Girl (For M)* (2019), both of which give a nod to Henry Moore, or Picasso's biomorphic beach scenes. Similarly, the beautiful profile of *Amy* (2016) dissolves from a traditional portrait bust into a jigsaw of dynamic, fragmented planes.

The process of creating the sculptures begins with drawing: two-dimensional plywood shapes are wrested from the drawings and used to create three-dimensional forms, which are built up in sections and then overlaid with layers of steel mesh, cement and paint. Often, the plywood sections are used as stencils or printing blocks in accompanying paintings, which give the emerging characters a context or background and place them within a wider narrative. As a result, the paintings are sculptural, and the sculptures are painterly. The hybridity of the work, and the constant shifting between the two modes means that both making and viewing the work is a dynamic experience, which is never settled or still.

Grandjean continues to develop this way of working, and the newest works shown here continue this trajectory of hybridity and transformation. In Grandjean's most recent works, however, the vivid, pop-art colours and recognisable figurative elements are beginning to melt away: something darker and more threatening is emerging. Forms are becoming monstrous, colours are murkier, and there is a distinct sense of menace. We move here from benign and even optimistic reflections of the human condition to something altogether more sinister: the dark imperial figure of *Toga* (2020), for example, which can be read as both a riposte to the grand narratives of history and sculpture, and a reflection of the contemporary world, in which notions of the imperial loom large. The figure of the 'emperor' becomes grotesque and ambiguous.

As its name may suggest, *Late One Night* (2020), with its air of swaggering brutishness, can indeed be seen in a kind of opposition to Anthony Caro's *Early One Morning* (1962). Caro's bright red welded steel was a beacon of post-war optimism, and marked a decisive break with traditional sculptural techniques and materials. It also heralded the 'Age of Iron' that Grandjean so insistently pushed against. It is this work that is perhaps the most revealing, both of Grandjean's imaginative transformations of material, and his instinctive grasp of the psychological impact of sculptural objects as a presence occupying our reality. Within these works, we recognise elements of these presences, of their material reality and their subject matter. We find ourselves confronted by them; we are compelled to interpret them, to create narratives and to resolve their ambiguity, based on our own frame of reference. This process is personal, contingent and highly subjective.

Once again, we return to subject and subjectivity, and the capacity of objects to answer us. Our job is to work out the questions.