

THE PERFORMANCE OF SCULPTURE

by Henrietta Robinson

written to accompany the exhibition 'Weights And Measures', Gresham School, Holt, 2013

Lee Grandjean's exhibition 'Weights and Measures' brings together a body of sculptures to an unusual open air site. The sculptures have escaped the studio and gallery and stand in the world. The site is a clearing for a theatre in woodland, the trees overhang the space and serve to heighten the sensation of making a remarkable discovery by stumbling upon this scene and the actors therein. The differences in level between the stepped tiers and stage sets up a dynamic in the sculptures' interaction. These are characters in a performance and we are invited to walk amongst them.

Grandjean is a bricoleur, he uses up discarded things, makes something new. The sculptures are made from debris, an accumulation of junk at hand in the studio, some of it is organic (tree branches) whilst most is manufactured (plastic pipe and plywood). But in every case the found objects are not the point of the work, nor are they usually visible. Instead the skeleton construction of wood and plastic is unified by a carapace of scrim and cement. Cement has a rough granular texture which is workmanlike and un-pretty. The disparate elements are firmly bound together. He says: 'It is all construction and cladding, a kind of upholstery method with cement added. I love the stuff. It's like city mud.'

Grandjean then paints the sculptures, it is an additional layer to further unify the form. In pieces such as Lucky Red, Blue Legs and Bunny the colour seals the surface of the work and intensifies its form, distinguishing the figure from its surroundings. You cannot see the shape without the colour, the two are synonymous. In other pieces the colour looks weathered, it has been washed or rubbed off so that only a residue remains. The passing of time is evoked more literally in pieces where the colour and pitted surface suggest rusting metal, algae or ancient dust.

The subject or narrative that has influenced the construction of these figures is powerfully visual. Grandjean regards his sculptures as inhabiting a post apocalyptic world, these are the 'survivors' of a lost or destroyed civilisation. Unearthed, they totter up from the debris, some encumbered with the luggage of a past life, to take their place in the world. As they inhabit the theatre they become actors – Kluk Kluk could be the master of ceremonies. The red, yellow, green and blue Posts are ushers who wait near the entrances to receive the audience. There is a chorus of From/To figures who gaggle together on one side, their arched shapes endlessly repeating a theme of upward-downward movement. Bone is a focal point, like a prima ballerina in pink-white, she reaches skywards with elegance and grace. There is beauty in its isolation against the dark greens of the trees which form a sacred grove around the figure. Grandjean has created a modern version of ancient myth and the themes are disaster, destruction, and eventual rebirth. The sculptures are united by this myth, it is the source of their creation both in terms of the initial idea and the composition.

Meeting these sculptures we encounter different personae. The character is expressed by the quirks of Grandjean's distortions and is deepened by tension in the overall arrangement. The poses, colour and surface quality of the work suggest different feelings. We meet a range of moods, veering from humour to menace. Take for example Sweat, a heavy black monolith teetering on stick-like supports, it seems strangely disabled by its monumental weight and bandaged oozing surfaces. It threatens by the suggestion of its immanent fall. Kluk Kluk has the tortured movement of a Francis Bacon figure, straining from its podium forever weighted by a ball and chain. But it is humour rather than horror that is expressed: with its puffed out chest it has all the pride of a cockerel.

Grandjean is concerned with metamorphosis and the creation of hybrids. This is evident in the biomorphic shapes of his sculptures which suggest many different elements in succession – the human body, architecture and nature. The triad of three structures on the stage; Feeler, Dirty, Sticky, Pink and Lucky Red look like basic huts under which you could shelter, they are variations on a kind of boxy entablature that sits on column-like legs. Dirty, Sticky has a piece of corrugated roofing and the patterned surfaces of Lucky Red look like brick courses. But they are enchanted like the hut of Babba Yagga the witch in Russian folk tales, Feeler is particularly ominous with a probing electric yellow feeler that brings drama and a quality of movement.

On first impression the Figure from the Desert II (in the gallery) looks like a hunched anchorite walking with a staff, this is then displaced by another image, the leonine head of a sphinx, or then a Cubist composition of faceted buildings which grow out of an inchoate mass of mud.

In each of the series: the Trophies and the Worldly Goods one's first impression is of hefty containers and luggage, the baggage that litters platforms and airports. Yet the handles seem too fleshy and prominent, on further inspection they take the form of human anatomy; a nose, neck or arm, weird growths which animate the luggage and make them a human hybrid.

Swan Neck Woman begins with a simple upright shape reminiscent of a milk churn, this shifts to the form of tree stump with its rooted relationship to the ground and bark-like textures. A final transformation occurs with the elongated neck drooping down to become both arm and neck, and now we are presented a beautiful image of a long necked Italian Madonna.

The sculptures refer to the human body and certain parts are magnified or exaggerated. Feet are a key feature in all the works and their use is varied. There are grandiose stamping feet with the crushing power of a steel girder. There are clawed poultry feet whilst others wear boots with the swagger of a cowboy. Bone elegantly stretches up from one giant mollusc foot. What occurs is an unfolding metamorphosis of the sculpture because they suggest multiple images, they 'become' different things as you look at them.

These are not speaking sculptures, there is no face in which to read an expression, nor mouth to make a sound. However the distribution of mass and form makes the figures expressive and full of humanity. It is easy to be amused by the clownish quality, taken along by the cartoonish imagery, upset perhaps by their deformities. A longer look

engenders a feeling of 'rightness:' that in the handling of their mass and shape Grandjean has achieved something with presence that touches the profound.

Henrietta Robinson

Text to accompany an exhibition of drawings and sculpture by Lee Grandjean called 'Weights and Measures', Nicholson Gallery and Theatre In The Woods, Gresham's School, Holt, Norfolk, from 8 to 29 November 2013.