

Milton Keynes Gallery

An interview between Anthony Spira, Director, and artist Andrew Lord on the occasion of his exhibition at Milton Keynes Gallery.

AS: The Milton Keynes Gallery show includes examples from many phases in your career over the last twenty-five or so years, a partial survey that presents a number of shifts in your focus and interest. On some levels, it demonstrates the way you have persistently worked through sculptural and artistic problems related to representation. At the same time, it reveals the consistency of your career. How do you articulate this selection of works?

AL: I think you've made thoughtful choices. Some of the works here seem like stepping stones, others seem to represent broader phases. It is the first time my work has been presented in this way so I'm curious if it will be interesting. Previously I've presented blocks of new work together, like the River Spodden sculptures, and in fact my recent Santa Monica show was a survey of four or so blocks of work.

AS: The earliest piece in the show, *Sixteen pieces. Angled*, 1986, was made during a period driven by close observation of the natural world. Could you describe how it came about?

AL: It came at the end of a period I'd spent working with light and it was the last step of a way of looking that began in the mid-seventies in Holland. I was aware whilst I was making *Sixteen pieces. Angled* that it was a final step and leaving this way of working I made all the variations I'd built over the previous decade; curves, outlines, geometry, circling and squaring and inside out. When I started to paint the fall of light onto objects, to use light and shade as a tool for building, I was working in a bright studio in the Netherlands, but when I built *Sixteen pieces. Angled* my studio was a dark cellar on the Lower East Side of New York, so out of necessity my work changed.

AS: The *profile vases* provide perhaps the clearest balance in your work between form and content, containing the distinct profile of an influential artist within the form of a vessel. These works also reveal other practitioners whose work you have assimilated, including Gauguin, Johns, Picasso and Duchamp. Could you explain what touched you about these artists' work in particular?

AL: The profile vases were for me self-portraits, or portraits of myself at certain moments, even if they appear to be portraits of particular artists. They are collections of thoughts and ideas from a particular time about different kinds of art, poetry or places. I hung these ideas together around the profile of an artist whose work I'd looked at a great deal and making these works became a way of confronting their influence. I chose Gauguin because of his ceramics which I saw in the early seventies in Paris which seemed to provide a way of working in clay that I'd not known before, Picasso because

he awakened me to Cubism and to looking at light. Duchamp because of his casts of the body and a dialogue about the body that he seemed to begin in American art, and Johns because I've looked so much at his work and because of his relentless concentration.

AS: The series of sculptures called *Second Avenue* represent the last throes of the vessel shape in your work. This was quite a decisive step. Did it come suddenly or do you feel you were working towards this point for a long time and that it was inevitable? The works of this period were often inspired by poetry or cast from the body. How did these come about? Poetry is clearly important to you – why Frank O'Hara in particular? Why did you start to cast your body?

AL: I used O'Hara and Whitman as references, anchors really, when I moved away from using vessels. For instance Whitman's *I sing the body electric* provided a list of the body parts I made and O'Hara's poem *Second Avenue* became a template for the *Second Avenue* works. I'd used books by both poets in the profile works, *Leaves of Grass* and *Lunch Poems*. In the late eighties I began to make casts from my body, without knowing what I would do with them and I did nothing with them until I made the Duchamp *profile vases* years later and that seemed to be the right place to use them. Sometimes I think you have an idea of something you want to make, that at first you don't know how to make and you translate it into art, pass it through art, and this can give you a way of making a thought physical, of giving it form, and when you've found a way to build it then it becomes yours again, your own mark.

In the early nineties I wanted to move on from vessel shapes but didn't know how to, so the thought preceded my ability to do it by a decade or so. But in between this I made the series *biting, breathing, listening, smelling, swallowing, tasting, watching*, the profile vases and the Gauguin works. I think it was the Gauguin works which showed me how to reach other subject matter. So this was a full circle, because this is where I'd started thirty years earlier.

AS: Your more recent work draws on your childhood memories. Again, this was quite a marked change in source material and process. How did this come about?

AL: I know one way that it came about but I think there are many. I'd looked at four paintings by Corot in the National Gallery, *The Four Times of Day*, and I wanted to make a series of landscapes like that and once, driving through Switzerland I thought this is a landscape I could use to make a work like that. And another time I was in the north of England near Hardcastle Crags and I thought I could use that landscape, but not quite. Some time later I thought of the place I grew up, and of a particular place there, Healey Dell, where I'd spent much of my childhood and I knew this was the place I could make these landscapes. And this thought opened a door that many ideas about Whitworth came through.

I could tell this story a different way. Whenever I returned to Whitworth I was struck, shocked really, by the landscape, the moors, and how much the surface and markings of my own work and the lines I make resemble the moors and it occurred to me that my own work had been a search for a first landscape, like Cavafy's poem *Ithaca*.

AS: There does seem to be a correlation in your work between the vessel, the body and the landscape. Obviously water courses through all of them but is this a correspondence that you can articulate? Is it something you are consciously working on? Could there also be some kind of philosophical interpretation related to passages or passing through, traces that are left like diaristic markings?

AL: I think these things are unconscious, or subconscious. I know that working everyday becomes like a diary. There is a title I'd wanted to use for a while, 'hand's grasp, arm's reach'. I didn't use it but it stayed with me because it described both a thought that tried to manifest itself within the ideas I was building, as well as a way of describing the physical motions of building. It became a series of works called 'arm and hand', but perhaps 'hand's grasp, arm's reach' is another way of evoking the range you are describing, the things you can touch and grasp with your hand and the things you have to stretch out for, that are at a distance.

Andrew Lord

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Admission free

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