

My Story: My Sculptures – and Lorbottle Hall

Creating Sculptures

During an early working spell in Fairlie, Scotland, I started overpainting, scraping off colour or scratching into the surface to the extent that canvas couldn't take this handling. So I began to make my oil paintings on wooden boards. Working on the concrete floor of my studio allowed more vehement treatment as I sometimes hacked into the wood surface then afterwards filled the scrapes and hacks with wax and oil paint in what was a kind of healing process.

As a natural next step, I welcomed a long weekend course as an introduction to sculpting under the guidance of two young women, students from the Glasgow School of Art.

To work in three dimension was invigorating and the women encouraged me. They introduced me to a friend of theirs, Alan Cairns at the Glasgow Sculpture Studios who became a close friend and later assisted me with larger sculptures. I rented a space in the Sculpture Studios and, compared to painters, I found the sculptors were very generous in offering me information and advice about technique.

However my first attempt with a motor chainsaw was a disaster. Kitted out in helmet, goggles and ear defenders, then into the special protective overalls. Being a different shape from the men, the necessary safety clothing was so tight I could scarcely walk and had difficulty moving the very heavy motor chainsaw as I'd been instructed. I feared the saw would lead me!

When I spotted a group of sculptors obviously very amused at my efforts I decided the motor chainsaw was not for me. However I resolutely persevered carving bite size pieces out of my large trunk of wood, with wooden mallet and chisel. Friend Alan took pity and suggested if I exactly marked a large part that had to be cut out he would do this for me with the motor chain saw. This was the start of a working relationship that took us on sculpture projects in the UK and Germany. Alan would make the initial rough cut-outs from a tree trunk with the motor chain saw and I would then carve with my smaller electric chainsaw. Sometimes I would deliberately take time by using chisel and mallet and slow down to a more 'thinking' pace.

Use of Symbols in my Sculptures



Figure with Bronze Cones (The Receiver)
Wood & Bronze 1992

One of my first sculptures was made at the Glasgow Sculpture Studios, a small squat figure. I used some small bronze cones normally left over from the bronze making process, fitted screws into them and inserted these around the body of the figure so they emulated the nails that are inserted into some African sculptures.

Speaking later to a German friend, I mentioned I would really like to make a sculpture with a large cone inserted into the head. She told me this was the idea of the 'Nürnberger Trichter', a kind of upside-down Dunces' cap.

It intrigued me that the Nürnberger Trichter originated in a German 17th century poetic textbook of the same name where it's a jocular expression for an external teaching method, a poetic funnel through which knowledge is simply 'poured' into the head of the student.

I carved the wooden head and shaped a metal cone, heated to give iridescent colour and inserted it into the head.



Nürnberger Trichter, wood, copper, rope 1992

My husband found some long pieces of rough wood which we roped together and fixed the head on top. This suited the concept of someone 'bound' to hear something and fitted the story of the Nuremberger Trichter, which became the title of this sculpture.



Kopf und Bauch, Wood, 1992

At the time I took up my study with George Baselitz, I did not know he owned an important collection of African sculptures. However when I first saw his large single figure paintings in Amsterdam I was struck by their power and presence. Perhaps subliminally it reminded me of African sculptures and this 'presence' was what I wanted in my own art. It was suggested during an interview for an art magazine that perhaps Baselitz was a stepping stone back to latent impressions and memories of my time as a child in Nigeria and these were certainly an influence on my early artwork.

My approach to sculpture is very direct and the history of their making as in my paintings is often left visible in the finished work. When I began to make the wood sculptures with an electric chain saw, it seemed natural to leave raw patterned cuts and stutters that the blade made, a kind of scarification as well as marks of identity, my identity.

I felt well on this artistic path.

I like the living quality of wood and that it responds to its environment. Occasionally it cracks and it's possible to fit in a new piece of wood to make it look whole again. But at other times, if it fits the concept I prefer to fix a metal clamp to show that it is a figure 'being held together' suggesting inner states revealed. But for me the sculptures should never lose their feel of humanity.

I remember the first time I decided to deliberately take out part of a sculptures and why. My art had been described by several Germans as "*aus dem Bauch heraus*" ("*expressed from the gut or belly*"); that the work came from the centre of feeling. In one sculpture, I

decided to emphasise this concept by leaving a space where the neck of the figure should be. In so doing I differentiated between the thinking head and the feeling body. I raised one arm of the figure to attach the head, leaving a space where the neck would have been. I intended that the onlooker might subconsciously imagine a neck and therefore the figure seemed relatively normal. It surprised me that in exhibitions this sculpture particularly appealed to the visitors; they sometimes posed for photos holding the sculpture and leaning their head into the missing part.

Sculptures Produced at Lorbottle Hall

After the period working at the Glasgow Sculpture Studios, I made several sculptures in my Atelier in the Panzerhalle on the outskirts of Berlin where I had adequate space in the huge working hall. But my sculptures developed again following a chance, but enduring and fulfilling, encounter.

It was June Redfern the well-known Scottish artist whom I knew, who suggested I get in contact with Ingrid and Harry Leuchert who had opened a new gallery in Bremen, Germany. I sent them an invitation to a solo exhibition I was having in Nürnberg in 1994. I was amazed that they made the journey specially to see my exhibition and they offered me an exhibition in their own Portal Gallery in Bremen for the following year.

They lived in Germany and also in Northumberland, England, at Lorbottle Hall, situated on their large country estate. They invited me to work there, provided me with a studio and living space and gave me the wood (from wind fallen trees) for my sculptures. They became collectors of my art and good friends. There were short visits and extended periods when I worked at Lorbottle producing groups of sculptures.

It was an idyllic working environment and during those concentrated periods the size and number of the pieces carved were generally dependent on specific exhibitions and the size of the gallery space.



Working at Lorbottle Hall

When Alan and Joachim assisted, it allowed me to work in a more ambitious way, involving for example welding, inserting or joining parts with metal. Sometimes the work was over life size and the weight of the wood also played a roll. For example my major sculpture *Wayfarer* shown in the three-person exhibition *Bodies of Substance* at the Talbot Rice Gallery Edinburgh University in 2001.

During an associated Symposium in the University, Dr Rachel Jones, Senior Lecturer of Philosophy at Dundee University made the following analysis of *Wayfarer* in her lecture.

"The play of forces often seems to hold the figures in a precarious balance. In The Wayfarer, we seem to have caught a body in motion, indeed the entire apparatus seems to be being driven along by the forces represented in the arrow piercing the lower part of the structure from the right. The body of the figure holding onto the top of the structure seems poised as a kind of counterweight, its balance secured by the interplay of its own forces with and against those working on the structure from without. For me, this figure maintaining its balance whilst being swept along by greater forces also recalls Walter Benjamin's reflections on an image by Klee, the Angelus Novus, which for Benjamin conjures up the image of the 'angel of history'. Written in Germany in 1940, in Benjamin's timely description, the angel of history is turned to the past, which he sees as 'one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage'; yet the angel cannot linger in this past for he is caught up in a violent storm which blows him into a future to which his back remains turned. Hunter's figure, on the other hand, is turned towards the direction of the movement in which it is borne along; rather than the angel of history, a precarious angel of the future, perhaps."



Wayfarer, wood, steel & copper, 2001

However from the dynamism of *Wayfarer* the style and symbolism of my sculptures changed to some extent. In particular, not long after Joachim, my husband, died I made a group of sculptures for an Art First exhibition. Later with hindsight it was noticeable that

they were more 'contained', and less dynamic; with smoother surfaces and kept mainly light in colour.



Integration of My Ideas in Different Media

During these residencies at Lorbottle Hall I worked almost exclusively on sculptures. However in my working practice whether painting or making sculptures there are no real gaps and at any stage I return to my drawings. The drawings are my linchpin, my visual thinking and it is the small idea drawings which come first. For example, idea drawings made in Mallorca were the basis of the sculptures carved later in Northumberland with some additional ideas from drawings made there.

In their making, the sculptures take on a persona; they have a real presence and I enjoy having them around me. I have invested them with my thoughts, my time, especially physically and before an exhibition I take time to add layers of wax and polish, which

creates a depth to the patina. My sculptures are often eye level with the viewer who can identify with them and although the figures are stylised I am careful that the connecting thread of humanity is not overstretched.

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