

My Story: Symbols – and Other Influences on my Work

Symbolic forms that matter to me evolve and are repeated in different ways in my work; they are my personal language. Usually there is some form or object attaching a figure to its world, giving it a sense of belonging. I know the origins of each of these symbolic forms; I know the moment of discovery and I can chart their gradual evolution.

My early sculptures in particular have an affinity with African art. It was during an interview with Susan Loppert for an article in the Contemporary Art Magazine that she suggested Baselitz, who owns an important collection of African art, might have been a stepping stone back to memories and impressions I had from a childhood period spent in Nigeria with my family.

Certainly during my study with Prof Baselitz the important initial advice he gave was that I should *draw draw draw* fifty or sixty drawings a day to clarify my ideas! Though this was an exaggeration, to this day I make incessant small drawings and sketches, expressions of free imagination and inventive mark making. The small drawing ideas come first, my visual thinking and these give birth to my larger paintings and sculptures.

Coming from the small coastal village of Fairlie on the west coast of Scotland I was initially ill prepared for my study in West Berlin. The city's tragic history and the exciting yet edgy atmosphere gradually however became more of an influence than study with Baselitz.

West Berlin wasn't a city that you passed through; it was a bright, cosmopolitan half city which sat like an island in the middle of East Germany. I felt an identity with the divided city which mirrored my own life, split as it was between art study in Berlin with home and family in Scotland.

However experiences soon surfaced in early ideas and the barbs that sometimes surrounded a figure in my drawing were an allusion not only to the barbed wire surrounding the then divided city but also to personal borders and limitations.

As with Baselitz' own early work, I concentrate mostly on the single figure which is stylised, reduced to the vital, essential and generally in my work, female. This has been my main symbol as the carrier of meaning and I have often been asked why. The answer is that the

most important life experiences I have had were as a woman, married, two children, divorced, and widowed when my German husband died relatively young. Furthermore it was the women in my family who played a major role in my life. My strong Scottish, widowed grandmother. My generous-hearted English mother who encouraged my father to work in Nigeria and supported my study in Berlin. I have three sisters and we siblings stretch across an age difference of nineteen years from the same parents. Despite different personalities and generations, we are close and supportive.

However, the figures themselves are inventions, not drawn from life. As a student at the Glasgow School of Art we had life drawing every day so the academic basis for this work was already there.



Figure with Snail, 1994
charcoal on paper, 14.8 x 21cm



Dreamings, 1999/2000
steel plate etching and chine collé

Animal symbols appear in some of my earlier work, painted soon after my arrival in Berlin when I couldn't express myself adequately in the German language. As my knowledge of German improved so the animal symbols gradually disappeared. For example the snail's spiral, as essence of its identity, surfaced in the stomach of my figures accentuating the solar plexus as the centre of feeling. This can be seen in a painting like *Figure with Snail*.

Later the extended spiral became a metaphor for continuity. The sphere becomes the world, containing a figure or the womb being contained by the figure. The sphere splits and becomes two half worlds; the half sphere becomes a shield, a leaf, then a wing such as in *Dreamings*.

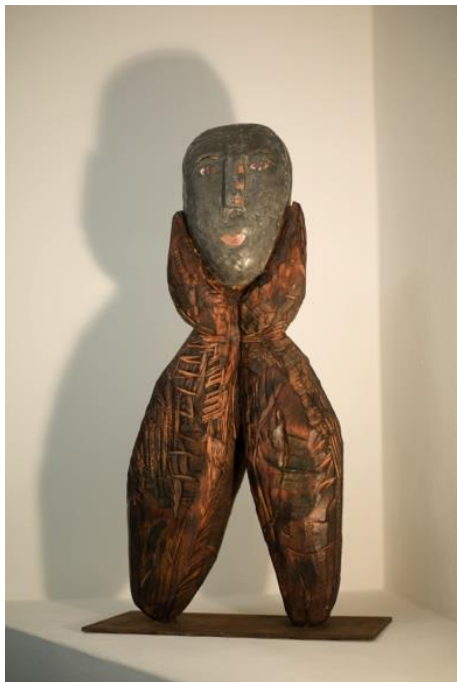
In Between illustrates two strongly coloured half worlds with a woman figure between. Her head and thoughts are being pulled towards one half world while her knee and foot is physically placed in the other.

Certain themes, like *Duality* in relationship to the human condition, are a recurring interest; the duality of the emotional and physical self; individual and collective identity. Duality is often shown in my work as two heads or two figures.



In Between, 1993
oil on canvas, 180 x120 cm

The mask (for instance in *Persona*) refers to one person, but alludes to inner life. In other works duality investigates the relationship between two people as in *Kith and Kin*.



Persona, 1997
wood, lead and copper, 71 x 38 x 19cm



Kith and Kin, 2000
acrylic and oil on wood, 140 x 100 cm

Splits or disconnections have sometimes occurred in my sculptures either deliberately or as the wood splits by itself during the drying out process, charting the life of the material. Often it is re-joined and the binding process is deliberately left apparent.



Arrangement, 2001
wood and steel, 140 x 45 x 30 cm



Nürnberger Trichter, (detail) 1992
wood, copper and rope, ht 259 cm

An example of being separate yet joined can be seen in *Arrangement* where the figures are designed like jigsaw pieces, representing two individuals who when joined become a single strong unit in the shape of an arch. They have adapted to each other and are linked physically by the energy of the metal coil almost like a conductor.

One of my earliest and most potent symbols of great resonance is the Trichter or Funnel.

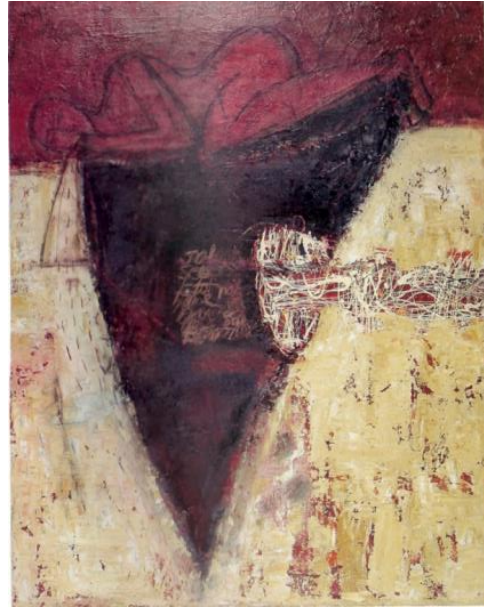
This inspiration has its origin in the title of the German 17th century poetic textbook *Nürnberger Trichter*, a jocular expression for an external teaching method, a poetic funnel through which knowledge is simply 'poured' into the head of the student.

This directly inspired the sculpture *Nürnberger Trichter* which depicts a large copper funnel inserted into a carved wood head dominating the body, a bundle of wood roped together and bound to hear.



Network, 2012

wood and copper, 93 x 33 x 31 cm



Distant Intimations, 1999/2000

oil on wood, 120 x 95 cm

I believe that integrating old and new within the confines of a fixed concept develops our understanding of information and process. So, in *Network*, I reinvent and reassemble the elements of the *Trichter* concept by bringing together contrasting material and patterns that are innovative for me.

The inverted *Nürnberger Trichter*, also has an educational reference, though less jocular, with its counterpart, the *Dunce's Cap*. The name is attributed to one of the great thinkers of the Middle Ages, the medieval philosopher and Franciscan theologian John Duns Scotus, also known as the Doctor Subtilis. It seems tragic that today his name is more synonymous with an offensive symbol of derision. My painting *Distant Intimations* is homage to the life of John Duns Scotus.

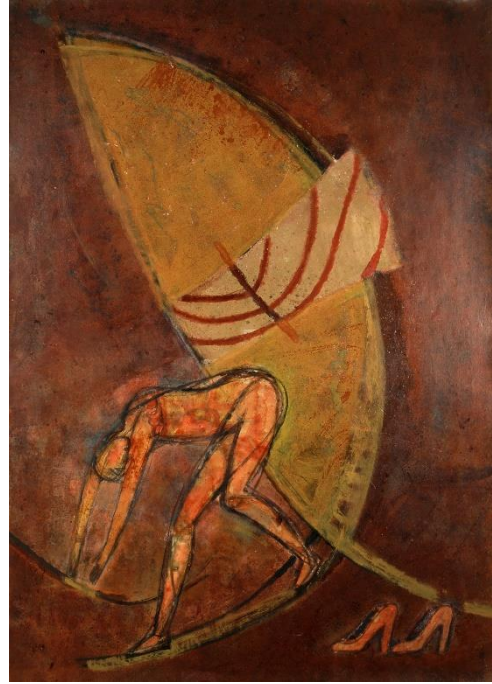
Throughout my work the triangular funnel shape became a recurrent symbol evolving in meaning; in a series of large wood sculptures it became a metal arrow indicating direction and in various drawings and paintings, an element with individual interpretations. The meaning will change depending on what I want to say in a particular work.

For example, the figure in the painting *Still Moving II* is fixed in place by two dominating triangular forms which relate to balance with the opposing force of the yellow horizontal line suggesting movement and direction accentuated by the figure's hair spiralling forward.



Still Moving II, 2014

acrylic on handmade paper, 68 x 102 cm



Leaf, 2001

acrylic on wood 200 x 140 cm

My paintings are generally made up of complex layers of paint. The history of making them is often left visible and the work documents the process of its making. The German word for history is *Geschichte* where *Schicht* means layer so by the process of over-painting I invest the work with a history. The other function is to allow me to scratch back into the painting, to build up in order to physically uncover, often revealing part of the painting's other life beneath the surface.

In the large work *Leaf* there was a great struggle with the painting. The original colour of the background was ochre, it became black then blue then red. I was sure that it was the colour that would determine the success of the painting. Eventually I realised with every new layer the leaf form had become bigger and actually this was the problem that I was too blind to see. I cut into the form, worked over the surface again and was satisfied. However, I left traces of the changes that I had made to the leaf, which is part of the painting's other life underneath the surface.

This probing beneath the surface also parallels my method of allowing subconscious material to surface, transforming earlier experiences and impressions into tangible ideas. The tension between the two ways of working and thinking, intuitive and intellectual, are embedded in the work.

I have endeavoured here to articulate the origins and significance of symbols and a processes I use in my work. However, it is better *felt* than understood and at the end of the day when my work leaves me it must stand alone for itself with no stories or explanations. It is important for me that certain elements of the work are left open, ambiguous, allowing space for the painting or sculpture to take on another life through a dialogue with the onlooker.

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