

JASON ELLIS – AUTHENTIC MODERNIST

***Black Pool, White Water*, by Jason Ellis recently unveiled at the Garda Memorial Garden in Dublin Castle is An ideal example of the timeless quality of abstract sculpture, writes Riann Coulter.**

One of the advantages of working in an art gallery is the opportunity to become familiar with art works in a way that is usually the preserve of the artist or their patrons. Over the last few months I have had the luxury of spending time with nine of Jason Ellis' sculptures which are currently on display in the garden of the F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio, Banbridge. Despite the differences in style, subject matter and materials, Ellis' abstract stone sculptures sit harmoniously beside McWilliam's bronze figurative works which include *Homer* (Belfast City Hospital) and *Woman in a Bomb Blast*. The rhythmical forms of Ellis' sculptures, such as *December Sea Swimming* (fig.1), echo the sensuous lines of McWilliam's iconic work *Legs Static*, and his attention to surface texture and pattern produces tactile qualities that make it practically impossible (even for a curator) to resist defying the optimistically placed Do Not Touch signs.

Brought up on the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall and now based between Dublin and Sligo, Ellis is a relative newcomer to the gallery circuit but not to the art world, where he has worked for many years as a sculpture conservator, restoring medieval stonework and public sculptures around the country. Trained at the University of Chichester, Ellis worked under Alan Saunders, who had been a student of the celebrated British sculptor Anthony Caro. When he graduated in the mid 1980s there appeared to be little room in the art world for a sculptor creating abstract work in stone. Caro's generation had rebelled against the pervading influence of Henry Moore and rejected his monumental figurative works in stone and bronze. Ellis has spoken of the insecurities he felt as a young artist wanting to pursue stone-carving at a time when it was a deeply unfashionable path to follow. Although he continued producing work on a part-time basis, conservation became his primary pursuit and way of earning a living. After eight years in London he moved to Ireland, where he quickly established a successful conservation practice. Luckily, conservation proved to be a profession in which he could build on his knowledge and experience of the technical aspects of sculpture, as well as a fertile environment in which his artistic ideas could mature. Twenty years later, Ellis is secure in the knowledge that fashion in art is fickle and that the timeless quality of his craftsmanship and abstract iconic forms will endure.

Since he returned to his practice full time, in 2006, Ellis has established a studio in rural Sligo where he spends a large part of the year. The importance of this dedicated space to the development of his art cannot be overestimated. He recalls attending a professional workshop where the British sculptor Richard Deacon gave two pieces of advice that he has taken to heart: that it is essential to have a studio of your own and to make work for yourself rather than the market. Abiding by these dictums, Ellis has found the freedom to follow his artistic instincts to fruition.

As the reconstructions of Francis Bacon's studio in Dublin and McWilliam's studio in Banbridge reveal, visiting an artist's workplace can provide immeasurable insights into their practice. Arguably, the physical efforts involved in producing sculpture, particularly when it includes carving wood or stone, means that visiting the studio of a sculptor can reveal more about the creative process than visiting the studio of another sort of artist. Ellis recalls that a college trip to Constantin Brancusi's studio in Paris had a profound effect upon him. While Brancusi's sculptures are now housed behind glass, at that time it was still possible to walk in among them and get a sense of how they were made.

The design of Ellis' recently completed studio is determined by the making process. A former farm building, it has been divided into three sections each dedicated to a particular stage in the creation of his sculpture. The first opens onto the outside and is where the rough work of cutting and carving the stone takes place. The second room is for sanding and polishing, and the third is reserved as a relatively dust-free space where Ellis can think and consult the photographs and books that reveal many of the sources of his artistic inspiration. These include images of works by Brancusi and Arp, ethnographic objects, bleached bones and photographs of marine life that influenced some of the works on display in Banbridge, including *The Foolish Virgin* and *Velvet Crab*.

Each room looks out over a rocky, whin-strewn landscape to the sea. Northwards Ben Bulbin is visible, and closer to home a copse of recently installed wind turbines stand waiting to be activated. This landscape, where the effects of the elements are palpable, is a fertile environment for the creation of Ellis' sculptures. Often his work is inspired by the natural properties of the rock and the processes of erosion that it has endured. A recent piece, consisting of a dark, polished, disk-like form flecked with golden flashes of iron pyrite, began life on a local beach as a large flat stone out of which a concave dimple had been eroded. By simply enhancing the natural properties of the stone, Ellis has created an elegant form that evokes the Modernist simplicity of Brancusi.

Outside the studio blocks of stone stand lined up like saplings waiting to be transplanted and take root. Columns of milky Carrara marble, imported from Italy, nudge lumps of coarse local stone. Rough boulders of Kilkenny limestone have an integrity that suggests that they will not split easily under the sculptor's chisel. Perhaps the most exotic is a block of jasper carried back from Wales in the backpack of a geologist neighbour. The red stone sits waiting for the sculptor's inspiration to transform it.

Ellis often chooses random blocks containing imperfections that can be exploited. Fossils found in limestone become hieroglyphic forms curling across the surface of a sculpture. The unpredictable nature of stone-carving demands a dialogue between the artist and material. While Ellis may start a new project with a preconceived idea in mind, the nature of the specific block of stone will often challenge him to rethink and rework his ideas. Although he uses wood for the plinth-like elements which are integral to some of his works, Ellis does not feel the need to diversify into wood-carving. The particular properties of each type of rock and the individual nature of any particular stone create great variety in both the working process and the finished object. Alternating the

colour of rock he is working on, from the inky black of polished Kilkenny limestone to the soft whiteness of marble, provides enough variety and challenge to keep him inspired.

Ellis' sympathy with his material often results in iconic forms that emerge almost instinctually from the raw stone. Like his hero Brancusi he strives for simplicity and a sense of movement and form rather than realistic detail. Brancusi reportedly said, 'When you see a fish, you do not think of its scales, do you? You think of its speed, its floating, flashing body seen through water ... Well, I've tried to express just that. If I made fins and eyes and scales, I would arrest the movement and hold you by a pattern, or a shape or reality. I want just the flash of its spirit.'ⁱ While Brancusi wanted to capture the essence of a fish gliding through water or a bird soaring into the sky, in recent works, including *Tight Skirt* (fig.2), Ellis has created engaging forms that appear to escape their solid state and twist upwards. Made from Cornish serpentine, *Tight Skirt* includes rich copper-coloured veins that run through the polished surface. As Alexandra Parigoris has pointed out, polish became an expressive sculpture feature in Brancusi's work.ⁱⁱ It also plays an important role in several of Ellis' sculptures, particularly those pieces carved from dark stone, such as *Destroying Angel* (fig.3). The polished, light-reflecting surface enables the eye to navigate the form and appreciate the elegant lines of the sculpture. The title *Destroying Angel* suggests another comparison with Brancusi. Playful, descriptive names such as *Tight Skirt* and *Ululation (Your Lying Tongue)* (fig.4) provide these abstract forms with tantalising subplots that make the viewer look again and reconsider.

While much of Ellis' work is on a domestic scale, he has completed a number of larger works particularly for public commissions. *Figurehead* (fig.5), a major commission for University College Dublin installed in February 2008, stands over seven metres high and is made from four blocks, echoing the construction of the Tall Cross at Monasterboice, which partly inspired it. His most recent commission, *Black Pool, White Water* (fig.6), features in the new Garda Memorial Garden at Dublin Castle, which opened in May this year.

Authorities that have commissioned Ellis' work should be commended on choosing abstract stone sculptures rather than the painfully literal bronze figures that so often are the first choice of selection panels throughout this island. In many ways his work, rooted in craftsmanship and possessing a timeless quality that will resist the art world's fluctuations, makes ideal public sculpture. An abstract form emanating from the landscape or the particularities of the site, carved to reveal the beauty of the stone from which it is constructed, has an attraction that will endure and find relevance throughout the generations.

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ⁱ Brancusi quoted by Malvina Hoffman *Sculpture Inside Out*, New York, 1939, p. 52 quoted by Alexandra Parigoris, 'The Road to Damascus', *Constantin Brancusi: The Essence of Things*, eds. Carmen Giménez and Matthew Gale, Tate Publishing, 2004, p.54.

ⁱⁱ Alexandra Parigoris, 'The Road to Damascus', *Constantin Brancusi: The Essence of Things*, eds. Carmen Giménez and Matthew Gale, Tate Publishing, 2004, p.54.