

# CORPUS

Jason Ellis

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# CORPUS

Jason Ellis

OliverSearsGallery



## FOREWORD

*“What spirit is so empty and blind, that it cannot recognize the fact that the foot is more noble than the shoe, and skin more beautiful than the garment with which it is clothed?!”*

Michelangelo

That is, of course, idealistic. The reality is that in many cases the opposite is true. One of the motivations for Jason Ellis in making *Corpus*, a series of a thirteen carved stone sculptures of body parts, is exposing the tension that exists when an individual observes another's physical nakedness. The complexities of observing human flesh expand past titillation and voyeurism, attracting and repelling in equal measure. That said, the works that comprise *Corpus* are undeniably beautiful objects, expertly carved and finished to a painstaking standard. In this case the dislocation, dissection and abstraction of the whole causes the unease. A single finger on a block, an arm modelled on the French revolutionary's draped limb in David's *Death of Marat*, a quartered shoulder joint resembling a butcher's cut, a neighbour's athletic and footless crossed legs, a forearm with digits sliced off the hand.

Figuration in stone conjures the mythological, the biblical, the memorial. Unusually, Ellis' objects maintain a decidedly contemporary feel while referencing masters of the Renaissance and Greco-Roman antiquity. Through the pull of such alluring workmanship and push of a context that disturbs, Ellis succeeds in making the viewer step out of the stasis of denial that permits us to live through the day with the certainty of death and confront our own mortality for a moment.

*Oliver Sears  
July 2013*



## I just make stone sculptures and try to avoid ‘artistry’.<sup>1</sup>

The main thing that separates artists from the rest of us is not some special god-given talent, but that everything that defines them in their work is the result of their personal choices. Every day, the artist has to motivate himself or herself to do what they do, and once in the studio, every track of the chisel, every stroke of the brush is the result of a decision, sometimes conscious, sometimes not, the outcomes of which become the artwork. This emphasis on choice takes on an altogether new meaning when the artwork we are considering was made by someone who forged a living for twenty years as a highly-valued conservator, working for all of the national cultural institutions in Ireland and many local authorities. Far from asserting his personal preferences or defining a personal style, that role required him to do exactly the opposite; to submerge all traces of his own style in the work and to intuit his way into the mind and hand of the original maker. In conservation you cannot reveal yourself. The drama, for Jason Ellis the artist, then, is in that revelation. Since he has said that he only wants his work to reflect ‘the Daoist principle of working towards purity and efficiency of action, without effort, encumbrance or ego’, that sets up a particular challenge, not just for the artist, but for the viewer.

Nowadays sculptors are introduced to the dominant discourse relating to their medium at art colleges, which for Ellis, at Chichester College in England, was led by his teacher Alan Saunders, and by direct line from Anthony Caro, Saunders’ tutor. In the past, training in sculpture was offered through apprenticeships to a particular master, again re-enforcing a strong tradition. For Ellis, the years of conservation work, which meant treating antique Greek and Roman marble statuary and Far-Eastern sandstone Buddhas alongside Bathstone reliefs by Eric Gill and deer droppings by Josef Beuys, the training was considerably more varied. As he puts it “Because of my twenty years in conservation, where I learned more about stone and carving than at art school, my aesthetic sense and manual dexterity stem more from an artisan tradition rather than the skill set taught somewhere like Goldsmith’s”. If art is about personal choice, the role of the artist is to remind us of the importance of the individual. What does the latest body of work from Jason Ellis tell us that is singular and why should we value it?

Having worked with artefacts from several continents and five millennia, including the present day, Ellis is clear about a number of things; he knows why he makes the objects he does and he knows what approach he needs to take to get there. He said recently, ‘My approach to art and my own practise is not intellectually driven, it’s more primordial, fuelled by a devotion to stone and to form. I am wary of contemporary trends and pseudo-intellectualism and would rather be aligned to an ancient tradition like stone working than to the latest conceptual movement. The work doesn’t need to be over-analysed, it exists to be enjoyed and because I have chosen to make it’. He is well-aware that the wars of the ‘isms’ of the twentieth century from Greenberg and

<sup>1</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are taken from conversations and email correspondence between the artist and the author in June and July 2013.

Brancusi on the one hand to Duchamp and Beuys on the other mean that ‘contemporary art can literally be anything.’ If art can be anything, then the burden of choice is all the greater, because it is not supported by a movement or tradition. When Ellis is alone in his studio with a block of stone he occupies a domain that is intuitive rather than conceptualist, where he delights in letting his instincts lead, but where his grounding in artisanship means that the forms he finds beautiful in that stone must be well made, capable of lasting far into the future.

Ellis’ earlier exhibitions reveal an artist glorying in the freedom to play with the stone, to rejoice in its colour, the chance accidents of finding marks and patterns from the stone’s history of fossils laid down over millions of years, and only revealed when the sculptor gets inside the block; connecting the ghost of the idea in his mind to the best stone for that purpose. Those works, like his large public commissions were all abstract, and showed an artist exulting in the freedom to make what he wanted to make for himself, after years of submerging his own desires to the opposing rigours of conservation. In the recent work he is experimenting with figuration although his approach in creating closely observed fragments of the human body is still an abstract one. It is unnerving to look at a piece of polished marble and to realise that what you are looking at is actually an arm, bent at the elbow, in stone the colour of blood and flesh or the collarbone and shoulder of a figure propped up on her elbows on the beach, reading (Persephone). Yet it is precisely these abstractions from the complete figure that reveal the beauty of those parts of the body, so ordinary and unnoticed in quotidian experience. And there is another dimension to Ellis’ fragmentation of the body. It recalls the remains of antique sculptures that have survived over millennia, and of their vulnerability. But while there is a distinctly classical feel to the fragments presented here, there is also that Modernist consciousness of deconstruction and faceting from Cubism that says we abstract and fragment in order to reveal, not only the hidden but often the overlooked. There is also the desire to share the eloquence of particular passages from art history – Arm of Marat (2012) – taken from Jacques Louis David’s famous painting of Marat’s death (1793), or the hand of a mourner from the monument to John Bowes in Christ Church Cathedral (c 1767) by John Van Nost. When you see the beauty of the parts, you get a greater sense of the power of the whole work. Conversely when you only see the part, you are left with the imaginative project of mentally creating the whole.

So Ellis’ work for all its homage to the antique is also of its time now. What he reveals for the discerning viewer is his understanding of the history of sculpture. Nineteenth century sculpture and painting were marked by their eclecticism, and that of the twentieth by Modernism’s need to find a language for an age that differed fundamentally from its predecessors. This resulted in a conscious rejection in the visual arts of much that had gone before. Ellis’ work simply asserts that, after almost a century experimenting with Duchampian found objects and assemblages, it is now time to re-engage with the classical values of superb craftsmanship, and to examine again what the parts, not broken and ‘wounded’ or damaged, but pristine and pure, can tell us about the whole. We need that to be communicable through the object itself and through a critical discourse. Ellis, like many equally well read and articulate artists is underwhelmed by overly jargonistic critical writing. ‘No-one as yet has been able to give me a clear definition of the term ‘phenomenological’, he says jokingly, asserting his belief that the object should be able to speak directly, although the critical milieu in which it finds itself may need elucidation.

There is also a need for us to rediscover what is exciting and uplifting in the most universal of all human signifiers, our own bodies, whether it is manifested in a pair of cyclist’s legs in Selene (2013), or in the wonderfully soft finish that makes Bathstone the perfect medium for a beautiful female torso in Prophetess (2013). In a world where everything appears visible instantly, and the proliferation of images is blinding, it is important to be reminded to attend to the beauty in the things closest to us. In their precision and perfection, no matter how un-nerving they appear at first glance, they offer a healing antidote to the other daily presence in our lives, the scenes of human carnage that are nightly presented to us in our own homes on television newsreels. Perhaps for this reason, one of the most attractive pieces in the current exhibition is also the smallest; a white Carrara marble carving called The Moving Finger (2013) the title of which comes from Omar Khayyam: ‘the moving finger, having writ, moves on’. The joke here is double edged; as a clearly isolated fragment of a whole hand, it is not capable of moving, while its status as an artwork is all about teasing the appearance of life out of the dead stone.

In an effort to eliminate the separation of art from life, Caro, Carl Andre and others abandoned the use of plinths and bases, the traditional framing devices that metaphorically enclosed the sculpture, separating it from the world beyond. Ellis defiantly delights in the sculptural plinth and base, often introducing different colours and different types of stone where it adds to the beauty of the overall object. Just as his isolation of the parts makes them objects of particular scrutiny, so his re-emphasis on the rejected plinth stresses that this is an artwork and this artist is willing to take responsibility for it. Jason Ellis stands out now because he has chosen a path that is not fashionable. Yet for all his contemporary singularity, he would not have stood out among the Greeks.

*Catherine Marshall,*

*July 2013*

## Supplicant

*Portland limestone*  
*14 x 42 x 12cm*  
*Unique*  
*2011*



## Lake Balaton

*Butler's Grove limestone*  
20 x 45 x 30cm  
Unique  
2011



## Recidivist

*Indian sandstone*  
*10 x 65 x 23cm*  
*Unique*  
*2012*





## Persephone

*Shelly black limestone*  
*25 x 28 x 18cm*  
*Unique*  
*2012*



## Arm of Marat

*Shelly black limestone*  
15 x 85 x 23cm  
Unique  
2012



## Pomponius Mela

*Carrara marble*  
*62 x 47 x 24cm*  
*Unique*  
*2012*



## Luxembourg Rose

*Italian limestone*  
*23 x 46 x 15cm*  
*Unique*  
*2013*



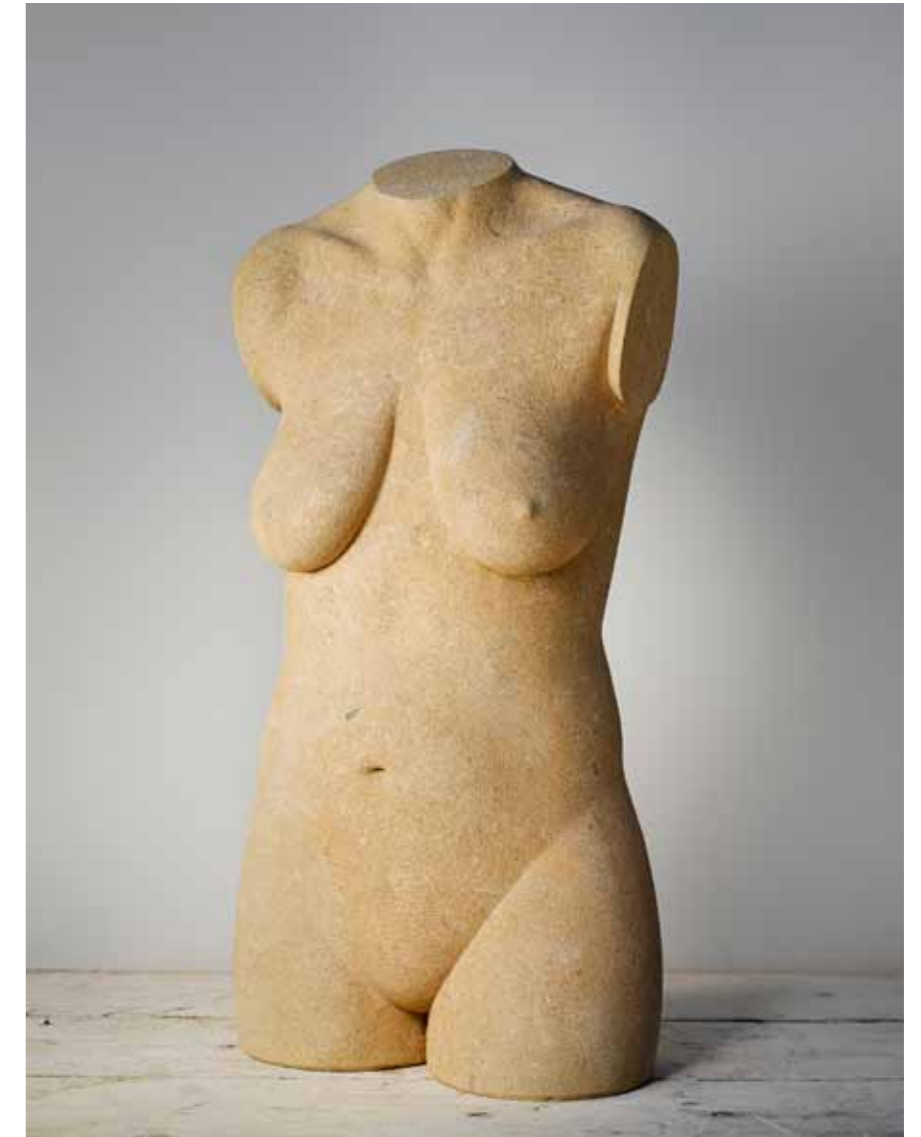
## Flying Horse

*Butler's Grove limestone*  
22 x 67 x 36cm  
*Unique*  
2012



## Prophetess

*Bath stone*  
*76 x 37 x 28cm*  
*Unique*  
*2013*



## Bend sinister

*Cork Red limestone on Kilkenny limestone*  
*14 x 23 x 23cm (inc. plinth)*  
*Unique*  
*2013*



## The moving finger

*Carrara marble*  
*24 x 13 x 13cm*  
*Unique*  
*2013*





## Selene

*Carrara marble*  
42 x 68 x 36cm  
*Unique*  
2013



## One of two sisters

*Carrara marble*  
*8 x 35 x 18cm*  
*Unique*  
*2013*



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Jason Ellis, born in Cornwall in 1965, studied sculpture at the University of Chichester under Alan Saunders, a former student of Anthony Caro's. Following his degree, he trained then worked as a sculpture conservator in London for eight years and Ireland for a further twelve, having moved to Dublin in 1994. During this period he began to fall under the spell of stone and he carved to private commission on a part-time basis.

In 2006 he finally left conservation and turned exclusively to producing his own sculpture. His reputation has grown quickly and his work now features in numerous public and private collections. Public works are sited at Bantry House, Co. Cork, the Druid Theatre, Galway and University College Dublin. In 2010 he installed a public piece at the Garda Memorial Garden in Dublin Castle and showed at the 12th Venice Architecture Biennale.

The combination of a fine art background and twenty years spent in conservation has influenced his art practice. He realised early on that stone was his master and his immaculate carvings display a deep knowledge and an almost reverential appreciation of the medium.

His studio is a converted farm building in the Ox Mountains in Co. Sligo, where the rural setting provides space and time to think and work clearly. He spends nine months carving there each year, working with plaster of Paris during the winter months at home in Dublin.

For this show, 'Corpus', Ellis has returned to the human figure after many years. The work has taken two years to produce and has been an enormous challenge technically. He describes these dislocated portions of the body as 'abstractions of human form'.

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 Plaster of Paris: maquettes by Jason Ellis 2006 – 2011, Pearse Museum, Rathfarnham, Dublin.
- 2011 New Stone Carvings, Prospect Gallery, Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin.
- 2010 Jason Ellis – Sculptures, F.E. McWilliam Studio, Banbridge, Co. Down.  
Curated by Riann Coulter.

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2013 Form at Mount Juliet, Mount Juliet Gardens, Co. Kilkenny.  
Boyle Arts Festival, Co. Roscommon.
- 2012 Uddensulptur 2012, Hunnebostrand, Sweden.  
Hibernation, Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin.  
Hillsborough Castle, Co. Down. Joint show.  
Mor Chuid Cloch, Stone Sculpture Symposium, Clones, Co. Monaghan.  
Sketch Books, Graphic Print Studio, Dublin.  
Boyle Arts Festival, Co. Roscommon.
- 2011 RHA 181st Annual Exhibition, Ely Place, Dublin.  
Black & White, Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin.  
Studio by Formwork. Photography show, Drumcondra, Dublin.

- Land of Milk & Honey. Print show, RHA, Dublin.  
Contemporary Sculpture in Irish Gardens, Ballintubbert House, Co. Kildare.
- 2010 SEÓDA – Contemporary Irish Sculpture, Kenny Gallery, Galway and AVA Gallery, Bangor, Co. Down.  
Solomon Gallery winter show, 15, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin.
- 2009 Evolution, TileStyle, Dublin 24. Joint show.  
Summer Exhibition, Dun Laoghaire Town Hall.  
Spring Forms, Solomon Gallery, Naas, Co. Kildare.
- 2008 AWAS corporate headquarters, Docklands, Dublin.  
The Secret Garden, Solomon Gallery, Iveagh Gardens, Dublin.
- 2004 Éigse – Carlow Arts Festival.
- 1996 Fís – Irish Museum of Modern Art, with Hugh Campbell.

## COMMISSIONS

- 2012 Fergus Ahern Memorial, Boyle, Co. Roscommon.
- 2010 12th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.
- 2010 Garda Memorial Garden, Dublin Castle.
- 2009 Druid Theatre, Galway.
- 2008 Allianz/Business to Arts Awards – The Jim McNaughton Perpetual Award.
- 2007 University College Dublin, Roebuck House, Belfield Campus.
- 1997 Bantry House, Co. Cork. The Bantry House Archive Gift.

## COLLECTIONS

- State Art Collection.
- F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio.
- Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin.
- Office of Public Works.
- KBC Bank.
- Bank of Ireland.
- University College Dublin.
- University College Cork.
- Trinity College Dublin.
- AWAS.
- Gaby Smyth & Co.
- Irish Presidential Collection.
- National Union of Journalists, UK.

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'Review: Venice Architecture Biennale', Raymund Ryan, Architecture Ireland. No. 253, pg 18.

'Jason Ellis – authentic modernist', Riann Coulter, Irish Arts Review, spring 2010, pp78 – 81.

'Stone Mad', Ellen Rowley, Image Interiors, winter 2004, pp25 – 8.

## PUBLICATIONS

'From O'Connell to Parnell: the conservation of O'Connell Street's monuments' (with Donncha Ó Dúlaing and Andrew Naylor) Dublin City Council, 2006.

'Plaster Cast Collections & their conservation: some Irish examples' Journal of the Irish Museums Association, Vol. 14, 2004.

'Michael Quane – Horses & Riders' SSI Newsletter, summer 2003.

'Conservation at Clonfert: discoveries made during work on the Romanesque portal' Archaeology Ireland, winter 2003.

'Sculpture conservation: outdoor maintenance' SSI Newsletter, autumn 2002.

'The conservation of the Romanesque portal at Killaloe' (with Rachel Moss) Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, Vol. 129, 1999.

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Thank you also to the models who sat to me.

Special thanks and respect to Rachel for enduring two years of hell and high water.

*Gentle stroking of the sculptures – with clean hands – is encouraged.*

