

DAVID BAILEY
SCULPTURE +

I'm not saying I'm a sculptor, I just make images. I don't take photographs, I make them and now I'm making something else.

DAVID BAILEY



Dali
Bronze
Edition of ?
182 cm high inc. base

DAVID BAILEY: THE VITALITY OF MORTALITY

The principal characteristics that distinguish David Bailey's artworks in all media are their spontaneity and direct communicativeness. He consistently pares down visual data to its essence, whether he is confronted by a given object in front of his lens or physically manipulating or constructing other materials. The new sculptures reflect his personality – witty and sharp, they provoke an immediate and authentic response: moreover, despite his instinctive distrust of over-intellectualisation, they evidently share an underlying seriousness as well as a delight in their fabrication.

The remarkable, visceral objects that are the outcome of his collaboration with the foundry Pangolin Editions are the most recent testament to the restless imagination of this vibrant, quixotic image-maker. But they have a back-story, for Bailey has been incorporating passages of high relief into his paintings, often formed from common household objects, for many years. Celebrated as the doyen of British photographers, Bailey is not a familiar name as a sculptor; (in fact, since he says he does not claim to be a sculptor, perhaps he is better described here as an artist in three dimensions). Yet his involvement with sculpture is of long standing, for in a sense it stretches back to the collections of found objects – the 'cabinets of curiosities' as Bailey has called them – he began to make in the 1940s. During the last decade he has made Cornell-like boxes, dioramic narratives composed of a mixture of nostalgic items; based around his groundbreaking model-and-squirrel photographs of 1960, those in the present exhibition serve to exemplify his return to experimenting with three dimensionality. It is only surprising that this innately tactile art form has not aroused his interest more frequently.

Significantly, Bailey's greatest boyhood heroes were the ornithologist, James Fisher and the Victorian explorer, Sir Richard Burton. They were unusual enthusiasms for an East Ham youth to entertain, but Fisher's and Burton's writing on taxonomy, ethnography and sexuality has suffused much of Bailey's creative output: its continued potency for him is especially evident in the objects in the present exhibition. It should be remembered, too, that the initial trigger for the young Bailey's aspiration to a career in the arts was not a photographer but Picasso, who, since the mid-1950s, has remained his profoundest inspiration. Bailey's principal debt to the artist probably depended less on the specifics of paintings and sculptures (although the juxtaposition of disparate elements in *Elephant* is redolent of Picasso's three-dimensional assemblages of the mid-1930s) than on the encouragement provided by Picasso's example to follow his own instincts, not least the openness to investigating different media. Undoubtedly, though, the frames of reference in Bailey's sculptures have almost entirely eschewed contemporary British traditions, from Moore to Caro or Flanagan to Gormley. Instead they are informed by tribal art and various forms of 'primitivism', and by the European rather than the British response to these stimuli that so powerfully influenced early-twentieth century Modernism. On his travels since the 1960s Bailey has formed an extensive collection of tribal masks and other cultural artefacts from across the world; he is also a frequent visitor to the vast ethnographical inventories of the British Museum, and the relevance of both sources is apparent in the imagery he has explored in these

sculptures.

The objects in the present exhibition fall into two distinct but overlapping categories. The animal skulls that Bailey has collected for more than forty years fold in to the vanitas preoccupations manifested in his recent paintings and photographs. However, the skulls that Bailey photographed for this exhibition are from the collection of Rungwe Kingdon. No interventions have been made on the forms of these objets-trouvés, and their recontextualisation in Bailey's photographs is comparable with Duchamp's 'ready-mades': Giraffe Skull, for example, takes on a quasi-human form in Bailey's upturned arrangement, an anthropomorphism that is intensified in the photographic image. Turtle Skull, another example of the 'nature sculptures', as Bailey terms them, simultaneously evokes a notional extra-terrestrial being, the animated expressions of Lega ivory figurines, and the pinheaded figures of Picasso's 'bone period'. In the photograph of the Gorilla Skull, low viewpoint and narrowed focus are deployed to incisive effect in order to heighten its inherent macabre drama as well as its plasticity.

Bailey's rejection of theoretical constraints and his improvisational *modus operandi* are reflected in the wide range of techniques, media and ideas on which he has drawn to produce the maquettes for the constructed objects: their translation into patinated bronze is a *tour-de-force*, the result of the intimate workshop collaboration between Bailey and Rungwe Kingdon. It is clear that the process of transforming his ideas into different substances has, as the series of sculptures expanded and gathered momentum, generated fresh possibilities for Bailey. Catherine is direct, simplified and totemic, part-Cycladic figurine, part-Kewpie doll, a fetish object (it can be held in the hand) and goddess to which Bailey has added incised, African-inspired markings. The Catherine in question is Bailey's wife, and Claude, named for Kingdon's wife, Claude Koenig, might be considered a kind of pair to it. Claude, though, is a more Daumier-like 'portrait', strikingly caricatural in the mutation of the face into an animal jaw and the abstracted hair.

The problem of the plinth in sculpture, which has exercised many modernists, is one that Bailey appears, in the majority of these examples, to have intuitively bypassed. Thus in the drolly-titled *Comfortable Skull* the miniature dining chair provides the physical support for the silver humanoid skull and also intriguingly references animal forms in the 'shoulders' of the high-backed chair and the claw-feet of the curving cabriole legs. Similarly, the variants of the tongue sculptures, or *Goat's Head* – Bailey's focus is mainly on heads – rest on a bronze disc that doubles as a kind of collar. *Extinct Bird's Legs*, with its watering-can body, is self-supporting, despite, along with *Adam* and *X-Man*, being conspicuously frontal and hieratic, as though commanding attention from a niche in a shrine. The exaggerated tongues were originally developed from the metal reinforcement in an abandoned, part-burned farmer's shoe that Bailey found while photographing on Dartmoor; a chance encounter that facilitated a sexualised double entendre he has exploited to singular effect.

There is great play in these sculptures with limbs and body parts. In the geometricised *Adam*, whose semi-industrial components recall Eduardo Paolozzi's detritus assemblages of the 1950s, a snake (an etiolated 'arm') reaches down to grasp a rudimentary penis: the vaunted phallicism of the 'shooting' camera lens is also smartly invoked here. Horns appear either to represent themselves (as in *Reedbuck Figure*) or to double as ciphers for ears (the skull beneath *Goat's Head*).



Self-portrait
1957



Giraffe Skull
Archival Pigment Print
Edition of ?
182 cm high inc. base

The diminutive heads in sockets evoke Medardo Rosso's fugitive heads or Rodin's writhing, under-scaled figures in *Gates of Hell*. Sheela is the largest and graphically the most complex of the bronzes. It refers to the tradition of surrealism that Bailey comments on and deconstructs, but also partakes in – a crucified Christ hangs from an 'arm' with an oil lamp attached, – while the expected head is replaced by a truncated, seated figure. The title it briefly held, *I Hate Dali*, was based on Bailey's response to a comparison it raised in the mind of a viewer; the triangular body borrows from the African cipher for a woman, while the exaggerated vulva, which was in line with Dali's ambiguous sexuality, is in fact a reference to ancient Celtic Sheela na Gig carvings. The surface is decorated with ferns (camouflage): if this is a spirit-of-the-woods it is appropriately clad in wellington boots, albeit they might belong to a feral Paddington Bear. With both Adam and Sheela one is uncertain whether the horizontal elements are arms or armature: in Adam the ambiguity extends to the biblical allusions in the serpent (is it holding or biting the penis?) and the cruciform shape of the whole – is this a comment on the male predicament or an improbably arcane piece of post-modern typology?

The most recent sculpture, *Dead Andy*, is an apposite coda to this body of work. Not only was Bailey friendly with Andy Warhol, with hindsight it can be appreciated that his emergence during the formative period of British Pop Art was crucial to the development of his iconography. Bailey began to document the environment of his native East End in 1960, the signs of a rapidly-changing urban scene, and elements of the folk art roots of Pop, are present, if only vestigially, in the new bronzes. *Dead Andy* takes Warhol's quotidian tin can, spewing forth beans rather than soup to form the skull. Like *Comfortable Skull*, this construction seems to be inflected by Mexican 'Day of the Dead' art, at once humorous and nightmarish – a voodoo idol crossed with a cartoon character; topped with a signature wig resembling pineapple leaves it symbolises the artist with brilliant economy. While pre-eminently Bailey's, the bronzes also suggest an erotic dream that Lewis Carroll might have had in Oxford after visiting the Pitt-Rivers Museum: they stand out of time, as though they have sleepwalked from a vitrine into a gallery of contemporary art.

AMANDA & MARTIN HARRISON,
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