WILLIAM TUCKER
UNEARTHING THE FIGURE
INTRODUCTION

From a distance, we see awkward sculptural objects, shaped by an unknown agent: perhaps natural forces, perhaps human hands. As we draw nearer, we begin to make out bodily forms: the rough shape of a head; part of a limb; an arching back and the swellings of buttocks; a hand with partially clenched fingers and thumb. And then, closer still, these forms dissolve again, as we lose ourselves in the bumps and dips of these objects’ surfaces, and take in the weight of their materials.

William Tucker’s figurative sculptures have sometimes been seen as primordial forms, fashioned from base matter, inchoate lumps of stuff provoking a visceral response. The artist’s use of titles, which often refer to figures from classical mythology, has enhanced such readings. Dore Ashton, in her essay to accompany the exhibition of five of Tucker’s bronzes shown at the Tate Gallery in 1987, elaborated upon this connection: ‘In their ancient titles, in their very shape, they tell of Tucker’s will to pull up full-bodied presences from a consecrated clay that offers timeless resistance’. In an account like this, Tucker is engaged in a struggle with natural forces, seeking to reanimate the mud beneath our feet, squeezed into solid masses which begin to resemble bits of bodies: heads, feet, torsos, hands. Their fragmentary and rough appearance suggests archaeological remains and ruins. It could even evoke the weathered residues of public statuary, like the worn and battered Roman-style heads surrounding the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford that Tucker remembered from his undergraduate days as a History student there in the 1950s, once described by Betjeman as ‘mouldering busts’.

Tucker’s early and ongoing interest in the histories and pre-histories of sculpture was implied, as has often been pointed out, by the cover he created for the magazine *First* in 1961 at St Martin’s School of Art, which used a photograph of his hand holding a cast copy of the Venus of Willendorf, a cover which was subsequently reproduced in *Studio International* in 1969. At the time, Tucker was engaged in making sculpture that was predominantly abstract and constructed, mainly in steel, wood and fibreglass. The Venus of Willendorf, then thought of as the ‘first’ sculpture, seemed to serve a talismanic purpose, gently cradled in Tucker’s palm like a tiny newborn creature, rather than being actively manipulated. As Tucker’s work shifted towards a more explicit figuration in the 1980s onwards, his earlier student presentation of this prehistoric figurine seemed prescient, a foretaste not only of the figure’s centrality to his
sculpture, but also of the archaeological metaphors it engendered. The artist has recently returned to this imagery in his yellow Monoprint of a hand gripping a small figure, which has a much more urgent and forceful feel than the earlier photograph: a figurine which is now unidentifiable is obscured by the large thumb in particular, rather than presented for show.

Tucker’s figurative sculptures, however, are both universalising and archaising, but also decidedly contemporary, reflecting the tensions and energies of sculpture-making in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The ideas and associations outlined above are not all that they seem in the artist’s work, whose reality is much more ambiguous and complex. If we think we know what Tucker’s sculptures are about, they continue to be elusive presences, deliberately challenging our preconceptions about their making and meaning and our notions of what sculpture can and should be.

In particular, Tucker’s figuration sets up a fascinating interplay between perception and touch. Many of his recent sculptures and two-dimensional works articulate and thematise the role of touch through the representation of hands, which are sometimes configured in partially clenched or cupped positions, as in Secret and Void. The artist has made a statement about the ways in which the Willendorf Venus enabled this in his work:

...the wholeness of the Venus of Willendorf is experienced internally, in the hand which holds and enfolds it...The relation of the whole object to the enclosing hand suggests a scale of relationships for sculpture from the pinch of finger and thumb through the grasp of the hand, the embrace of one or both arms, to the walked and implied embrace of the whole body around the object.3

This tactile impulse is both conceptual and literal. Tucker’s bronzes engage our senses of sight and touch in sophisticated ways. Their size is often imposing and unsettling, as body parts are enlarged to new proportions and not to scale. A sculpture like Secret references the forms of the hand, but is not hand-sized. But close to, the hand-made quality of these sculptures becomes apparent, and although their surfaces are at times rough and unforgiving, they nevertheless intrigue and attract our own touch. At the same time, their sheer visual and material presence keeps them at one remove from us. Tucker throughout his career has stressed the role of sculptural autonomy: the presence of his sculptures as discrete objects. His figurative works do not depart from this, as they are not ‘relational’ in the sense of actual bodily engagement with them, but still maintain their function as things set apart, their own internal ‘wholeness’ requiring no spectatorial intervention to animate and activate them.

The surfaces of Tucker’s sculptures are one of their most compelling and perplexing features. If we imagine ancient forms of object-making, we might think of the working of a stone or stick to bring out its anthropomorphic or zoomorphic qualities, using any fortuitous protuberances to suggest features or limbs, in a gradual process of smoothing or streamlining the natural material. When bronze is used in different ancient contexts it provides smooth surfaces – for weapons or bells – and crisp detailing to suggest refinement. Tucker’s works challenge these ideas, presenting us with deliberately rough, lumpy and pitted surfaces. We have the overwhelming impression that these sculptures have no skin: that the natural barrier that separates (and protects) one body from another is missing. The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an important inspiration for Tucker, uses precisely this imagery of the absent skin to evoke an encounter between subject and object which takes into account their physical presence and interrelationship.

The artist often points to the crucial inspiration for him of the Riace bronzes, pulled from the Calabrian sea in the 1970s, two bronze statues of naked bearded warriors,
which are striking for the elaborate configuration of their hair and facial hair, and for the precision of their details: calcite eyes, silver teeth, copper lips. Any extraneous detail of hair, facial features or clothing is kept vague in Tucker’s ‘portrait’ heads. He eschews such references, preferring to keep his heads and work in general at the threshold of legibility: what he once called ‘a familiarity that resists recognition’. The origins of the Riace bronzes do, however, suggest another intriguing set of associations to which Tucker’s sculptures could be related: their appearance as encrusted, underwater relics, whose once recognisable features have been obscured with layers of sand (an effect of the graininess of the plaster used for the sculptures’ models) and marine accretions. In this reading, his bronzes are pulled not from the earth, but from the sea.

Tucker has revealed some of the hidden layers of meaning inherent in his series of sculptures based on heads. Some of these are hinted at by the works’ titles, such as Sleeping Musician, which refers to Brancusi’s Sleeping Muse (1909-10). Where Brancusi’s sculpture presents a smooth, highly polished and reflective bronze ovoid ‘head’ lying on its side, its features reduced to a couple of elegant, schematic lines, and its proportions roughly those of the human head, Tucker’s Sleeping Musician is an over-sized, craggy and roughly wrought mass of solid bronze. In Brancusi’s sculpture, the muse/musician is evoked through the purity and implied resonance of the hollow skin of the work: Tucker challenges and rejects this lightness and brightness, absorbing and internalising light and weight. Bibi is named after a male model used by Rodin for his Man with the Broken Nose (1885), a man living in poverty with a
battered face. Rodin’s sculpture, made of raw clay, split apart during a cold winter and survived only as a mask, a fragment. This gives an added poignancy to the squashed and dislocated appearance of Tucker’s rendering of Bibi, barely readable as a face at all, and bearing all the marks of the artist’s ‘acceptance of the awkward, the ugly and disfigured’ in Rodin’s work.5

These art historical references in Tucker's heads have been overlaid additionally with more personal recollections, as they have connected in his own mind with memories from his own experience. Bibi, then, carries for the artist associations of a friend from the past who died tragically:

...the head that had first caught my attention in its resemblance to the ‘Man with the Broken Nose’, was also becoming H.R., a friend from student days at Oxford, who stayed on for years trying to pass his final exams, unable to concentrate because he could not sleep; and who in a few years was to die of an undiagnosed brain disease.6

Tucker’s layering of memories of a death that touched him onto his sculpture’s bodily presences is inevitably reminiscent of Giacometti’s accounts of the ways in which experiences of dead bodies of friends and acquaintances, and particularly their heads, informed his sculpture. For Giacometti, the terrifying moment of the human head becoming an object, a ‘black box’, was particularly significant, and would continue to have a bearing on his perception and sculptural articulation of the human figure.

Giacometti is clearly an important sculptor for Tucker’s figurative work, having made a similar shift from constructed and frame-based earlier objects to sculptures based primarily on human figures, and working also with ideas of touch and perception. His techniques are significant too, as Giacometti, like Tucker, often used plaster as a modelling medium. For Tucker this material is crucial, and distances him once again from myths of the primordial maker, whose matter would normally be clay. Tucker prefers the speed and transformative properties of plaster as a working material. Moving from a liquid to a solid state, plaster, for the artist, is a bit like bronze, and working in it ‘is the closest you can get to working directly in bronze, while keeping a flexibility and control that would be impossible with the hot metal’.7

By using plaster as the modelling material for his bronzes, Tucker also exploits the associations of fragility and vulnerability that are written into his sculptures, which often have a deliberate provisionality about their rough and quickly-worked surfaces, held in a striking tension with their ‘finished’ bronze volumes.

Contradictions like these are central to Tucker’s oeuvre, and situate his work firmly in a vein of contemporary sculptural exploration and inquiry. His sculptures lie stubbornly at a point where figurative meanings and mute objects meet. In a little-known piece of writing from 1957 about the differences between sculpture and...
industrial objects, Giacometti provided an interesting gloss on the sculptural fragment which can shed light on Tucker’s ambivalent works. For Giacometti, a broken Egyptian or Chaldean sculpture always remains a sculpture, its fragments creating a series of new sculptures in themselves, while a broken car reverts to scrap metal. What can become, he asks, of a Brancusi sculpture or any other so-called abstract sculptures that are rusty, dented, broken...? Do they belong to the same world as Chaldean sculpture, as Rodin... or to a separate world of machines and objects? Perhaps we could also imagine what would become of a Brancusi head lost beneath the waves of the sea, its once-smooth forms now lumpy, encrusted, closer to the imperfections of human flesh than before, closer to Tucker’s world of ambiguous figuration.

Tucker’s body parts are both subject and object simultaneously, with neither position prevailing. While inviting engagement and interpretation, they also resist this. But they are also neither found things nor objects, neither industrial forms nor hand-crafted commodities. Their fragmentary nature does create a proliferation, as Giacometti would have it, of further sculptures, a sense of continuing and unending sculptural endeavour. In this regard, their layers of allusions and references to sculptural tradition and personal memory come together to point to the future, as well as the past, and their figurative impulses, there to be revealed and uncovered, also drive a process of reconfiguration and reinvention.

JULIA KELLY

FOOTNOTES

5 The phrase was originally Phillip King’s.
7 Sleeman, p. 22.
10 (Julia Kelly’s translation).
Leonidas was enlarged from a more recently unearthed studio fragment, more of a sliver than a lump... many viewers have seen it as an immense foot, but for me it suggested rather the torso and thighs of a wounded male figure, perhaps a memory of 'The Dying Gaul' (the title comes from the betrayed sculptor Leonidas Allori in Isak Dinesen’s story The Cloak).

WILLIAM TUCKER
The Sculpture of William Tucker, Joy Sleeman, 2007
The Sculptor 4
2011, Monotype
Unique
38 x 28 cm
Secret
2010, Bronze
Edition of 3
133 x 183 x 117 cm
The Good Soldier
1997, Bronze
Edition of 6
25 x 52 x 23 cm
(LEFT)
Void
2005, Bronze
Edition of 4
68 x 68 x 102 cm

(RIGHT)
Study for Void
2004, Bronze
Edition of 6
10 x 16.5 x 11 cm
The Sculptor 14
2011, Monotype
Unique
38 x 28 cm

The Sculptor 2
2011, Monotype
Unique
38 x 28 cm
Study for Odalisque
2008, Bronze
Edition of 4
71 x 115 x 59 cm
Study for Bibi
1998, Charcoal on Paper
Unique
107.3 x 91.4 cm
Bibi
1997, Bronze
Edition of 6
42 x 32 x 36 cm
Study for Little Jeanne
1998, Charcoal on Paper
Unique
107.3 x 91.4 cm

Study for A Poet of Our Time
1998, Charcoal on Paper
Unique
107.3 x 91.4 cm
Sleeping Musician
1998, Bronze
Edition of 6
29 x 43 x 33 cm
Adam
1994, Bronze
Edition of 4
94 x 94 x 74 cm
The Sculptor 7
2011, Monotype
Unique
38 x 28 cm

The Sculptor 15
2011, Monotype
Unique
38 x 28 cm

The Sculptor 16
2011, Monotype
Unique
38 x 28 cm

The Sculptor 5
2011, Monotype
Unique
38 x 28 cm
Thoe
1993, Bronze
Unique
79 x 94 x 56 cm
Oedipus 1
2014, Plaster
for bronze
40 x 54 x 20 cm
Study for Dancer
2014, Terracotta
Unique
17 x 14 x 15 cm
Many of my first sculptures were made not from direct observation of the figure, but from careful drawings from the model in the life class at the Ruskin School. This gave me room to invent and imagine, and allowed me not to be intimidated by the physical, three-dimensional fact of the model’s presence. Then I realised that sculpture could be an object rather than a replication of the human figure, and for several years I virtually stopped drawing. The sculpture was to be complete in itself without reference to the outside world. But by the late 60s I knew I was missing something, that making could not be divorced from seeing. In the ‘Shuttler’ and ‘Cat’s Cradle’ sculptures I rediscovered the pleasures of looking, of exploring the endless uncertainties of near and far, of closed and open, of continuously changing configurations. In effect, the sculptures had become drawings.

Over the course of the 70s the work became more frontal, more frankly concerned with articulating the onlooker’s visual field. The size of these pieces demanded more planning before being realised in steel, and I started to draw them, actual size, in charcoal, on the wall first and then on paper which I found in New York on rolls 6 feet by 30. I found this was not just a useful and practical exercise, of making decisions on paper before committing to a permanent material (actually I often made a full-scale model in plywood before constructing in steel) --- but also the act of working on such a large scale, the feel of charcoal and the freedom to make decisions unconstrained by gravity or engineering, this opened up the possibilities of drawing as imagining that were a revelation. Drawing became something physical, related to my size and reach, and to touch. The directness of the act encouraged me to believe that sculpture itself could be more like this, that instead of the laborious process of realising an idea through planning and construction, I could be working directly and intuitively in the material itself. And so I started to work in plaster, at first over crude wooden armatures. For a while I stopped drawing, and when I resumed, drawing became an activity parallel to modeling, a way of imagining in charcoal on a scale related to my body. This has continued to the present, I go through intense periods of drawing between periods of working on sculpture, but rarely at the same time.

Modelling in plaster inevitably led me back to the human figure and to try and invent a new way of representing it. This would be impossible without a better understanding of the sculpture of the past, and to that end drawing is for me the best way of achieving that understanding. So whenever I go to a museum I try to remember to take a sketchbook, and spend some time with Rodin, Degas, or some anonymous Asian sculptor. The only real way to look at sculpture is to draw it.

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1935 Born, Cairo, Egypt (to English parents)
1937 Family returns to England
1955-58 Studies at Oxford University
1959-60 Studies at Central School of Art and Design and St. Martin's School of Art, London
1962-66 Teaches at Goldsmith's College, London
1963-74 Teaches at St. Martin's School of Art, London
1968-70 Receives Gregory Fellowship in Sculpture, Leeds University
1976 Teaches at University of West Ontario, Canada
1977 Teaches at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Canada
1978-82 Teaches at Columbia University, New York
1980 Receives Guggenheim Fellowship
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1996 Receives commission for large-scale sculpture for Bilbao, Spain
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2010 Receives Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Sculpture Centre

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2014 William Tucker Sculpture and Drawing, Buchmann Gallery, Lugano, Switzerland
2013 William Tucker Sculpture, Skulpturenpark Waldfrieden, Wuppertal, Germany
2013 William Tucker: Sculpture, Buchmann Gallery, Berlin
2012 William Tucker Steel and Wood Constructions from the 1970s, The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse, Miami, FL
2008 Affinities, McKee Gallery, New York, NY
2006-7 William Tucker: Horses, DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA
2004 William Tucker, Sculpture & Drawings, Gaule Paule Anglim, San Francisco, CA
2003 William Tucker: Recent Sculpture, McKee Gallery, New York
2003 Drawings by William Tucker, Arts on the Point, Healey Library Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Boston
2001 William Tucker, Tate Gallery, Liverpool
2001 William Tucker: Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, UK
1999 William Tucker: Drawings and Sculpture, Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina
1994-99 McKee Gallery, New York
1992 New Drawings, McKee Gallery, New York
1991 David McKee Gallery, New York
1989 William Tucker, The Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, FL
Galleria Paule Anglim, San Francisco
1985 Neuberger Museum, SUNY, Purchase, NY
1984 Pamela Auchincloss Gallery, Santa Barbara
1984 David McKee Gallery, New York
1980 L'Isolea Gallery, Rome, Italy
1980 David Reids Gallery, Sydney, Australia

SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

2014 Crucible 2, Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucestershire, UK
2013 The Mythic Figure Schick Art Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga, NY
2012 Making Touch Matter, Museum Education Institute, New York, NY
2010 Crucible, Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucestershire, UK
2007 British Visions: Modern and Contemporary Sculpture and Words on Paper, Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina
2010 Small Bodies, McKee Gallery, New York, NY
2004 The 175th Annual: An Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary American Art, National Academy Museum, New York, NY
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2000-01 Sculpture at Goodwood, West Sussex
The Concealed Space, British Sculpture, Associazione Piemontese Arte, Turin


House of Sculpture, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas: travelled to Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Monterrey, Mexico

The Edward R. Broida Collection, Orlando Museum of Art, Orlando, FL

Currents of Modern Sculpture, Two Sculptors, Inc., New York

Reconfigurations, Pamela Auchincloss, New York, NY

From Figure to Object: A Century of Sculptors’ Drawings, Frith Street Gallery and Karsten Schubert, London


Critical Mass, Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT & The MAC, Dallas, TX

Contemporary British Sculpture: From Henry Moore to the 90’s, Auditoria de Galicia, Santiago, Chile

ArtPark, The Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, FL

American Academy Invitational Exhibition of Painting & Sculpture, The American Academy of Arts and Letters, NY

Steel and Wood, Philippe Staib Gallery, New York

From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c. 1940-1988, Australian Biennale, Art Gallery of New South Wales

New York Beijing: 22 American Artists / Works on Paper, Beijing Art Institute, China

Opening Exhibition, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, The Condition of Sculpture, Hayward Gallery, London, UK selected and curated by William Tucker

British Sculptors ’72, Royal Academy, London, UK

British Pavilion, XXXVI Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy


26 Young Sculptors, ICA, London, UK

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Aberdeen Art Gallery, Scotland
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Arts Council of Great Britain, London
British Council, London
British Museum, London
City of Bilbao, Spain
Contemporary Art Society, London
Florida International University, Miami, FL
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Hakone Open Air Museum, Tokyo, Japan
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark
Martin Z. Margulies Sculpture Park, Florida International University, Miami, FL
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo, Holland
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY
Peter Stuyvesant Foundation, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England
Tate Gallery, London
University of California, Los Angeles
Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

William Tucker Sculpture & Drawing, Pangolin London, 2010
The Language of Sculpture by William Tucker, Thames & Hudson, London, 1974
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