

**DAME
ELISABETH
FRINK**

**LARGER
THAN LIFE**

**THE HEONG GALLERY
AT DOWNING COLLEGE**

I was introduced to Elisabeth Frink's work by my wife in the 1980s, and the collection has been a shared adventure since that time. We bought most of it in the 1990s, and the highlight of our quest was a family visit to Woolland, Frink's Dorset home. We were there a few years after she died and saw her studio and the collection at the house and in its lovely grounds. We were also generously entertained by Lin Jammet, her son, and that day we bought the giant *Mirage* sculptures.

I think the early sculpture of Elisabeth Frink was concerned with portraying her mixed feelings about aggression and fragility. She wanted to show both sides of those contrasting emotions, and she used a powerful technique to do so. Sometimes she invented mythical beasts to express herself. Sometimes she used human forms, and it is clear that she saw the bad things, as well as the beauty, in both animals and people. Thus the beauty and the beast live together in her work.

The early *Bird* pieces show the elegance of stalk-like long legs, supporting a body and head in an unreal and brutish combination. They belong in some primeval world, as animals carefully picking their way through an invisible, imaginary landscape.

The *Bird* series reached its fullest expression in the giant *Mirage I and II* pieces. We have arranged them as they were originally installed at Woolland, replicating their distance apart to the centimetre. The *Mirages* show ripples round their feet, as these giant creatures move carefully forward, in exploration, or in stalking some prey.

The *Warrior* pieces, such as *Assassins II*, hide behind shields, perhaps ambivalent about their mission. Likewise *Judas* – a work she claimed as one of her most important – is masked, and he stands in a partly aggressive, and partly defensive posture. There is uncertainty in him. She sees both sides.

Frink said in 1979, 'The very best I can hope to achieve is the feel of a man running or the movement of an animal in the landscape. Working in a landscape has become very important to me. I think my sculptures are about what a human being or an animal feels like, not what they necessarily look like. I use anatomy to create the essence of human and animal forms and their freedom of spirit.'

The inspiration for the *Goggled Head* series was a picture of the 1960s' Algerian politician General Oufkir – a powerful man with big dark glasses masking his expression. The *Goggled Heads* remain probably Frink's best-known work, and no collection is complete without one. They have an immediate impact, and there are many versions. Each reflects a different story of human experience. They are either aggressive, or show themselves as victims of aggression.

After many other works, the *Goggled Head* series gave way to the more-reflective, world-weary *Tribute Heads*, portraying perhaps peace at the end of a testing life – the cost of which is clear in their facial expression.

The joy of Frink's work to me is in its purity of message, and in the strength in which it is portrayed. It is classic sculpture, as exciting to touch, and to examine at close range, as it is to observe in a setting big enough to accommodate the power that the pieces generate.

We can learn from Frink. Humans have not fundamentally changed – her messages are as relevant today as when they were conceived.

It is a privilege to have been able to collect some of Elisabeth Frink's works and now to be able to share them with a wider audience.

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The Heong Gallery at Downing College
4 November 2017–6 February 2018

Editor: Prerona Prasad
Copy Editor: Claire Varley
Design: John Morgan Studio
Print: Unicum

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Published by Downing College
Cambridge CB2 1DQ

ISBN 978-1-911247-05-0

The Heong Gallery would like to thank our
Advisory Board: Louise Arnell, George Bailey,
Chris Bartram, Sophie Bowness, Gifford
Combs, Hamish Dewar, Penny Furniss, Martin
Kemp, Sir David King, Tim Knox, Anthony
Mould, Andrew Nairne, Frank Salmon,
John Tancock.

We are especially grateful to Jo Baring and
Alison Price of The Ingram Collection of
Modern British Art and Annette Ratuszniak of
the Frink Estate and Archive for their support of
the exhibition.

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30, 45 (plate 8), 64, 66
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Endowment Fund.
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Purchase with Funds Provided by the
Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest and in Honor
of Robert Lehrman, Chairman of the Board
of Trustees, 1997–2004, for his extraordinary
leadership and unstinting service to the
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.
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