

**DAME
ELISABETH
FRINK**

**LARGER
THAN LIFE**

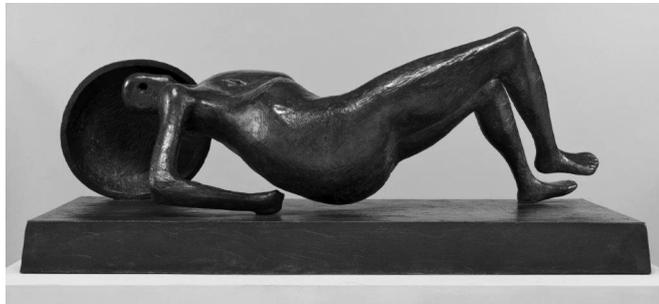
**THE HEONG GALLERY
AT DOWNING COLLEGE**

Qu'est-ce que la sculpture moderne? was the title of an authoritative exhibition held at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris in 1986.¹ A survey of modern sculpture from Picasso and Matisse to Joseph Beuys and Arte Povera, its goal was not to present a complete panorama of twentieth-century sculpture, but rather to focus on sculptors who modified our perception of space. According to the thesis of the exhibition, the turning point occurred in 1912 when Picasso's *Guitar* put an end to the traditional categories of painting and sculpture. Henceforth, sculpture 'goes beyond the notions of the block, of carving and modelling, gives priority to new materials, every kind of material, from objects to cast-offs, from metal to resins, from textiles to electricity, to the 'immaterial'... Modern sculpture seizes space and place as lived experience and consequently removes the work from its traditional role as an object that one observes.'² In the advanced sculpture of the twentieth century, modelling in clay or plaster and subsequent casting in bronze no longer had a privileged position.

With the exception of Alberto Giacometti, none of the figurative sculptors who continued to play a significant role in the history of twentieth-century sculpture, albeit outside the mainstream of its development, were included in the exhibition. During this period Aristide Maillol in France, Marino Marini and Giacomo Manzù in Italy, and Jacob Epstein and Elisabeth Frink in England were all widely respected domestically although the extent of their international recognition varied a great deal.

There were few British sculptors in the 1986 exhibition. Jacob Epstein and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska were included in the Primitivism/Expressionism category, while Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth were part of the Archaic Figuration and Organic Abstraction section.³ Anthony Caro's abstract *Carriage* (1966) was exhibited with sculptures that were indebted to painting with an emphasis on surface, space and colour.

Moore and Hepworth had already achieved considerable international success and Caro was assisting Moore at Much Hadham (1951–1953) when several works by Elisabeth Frink were included in an exhibition at Beaux Arts Gallery in 1952. Her talent was immediately recognised, as a cast of *Bird* (1952) was purchased by the Tate Gallery and the following year her *Man with Bird* was awarded a prize in the *Unknown Political Prisoner International Sculpture Competition* organised by the Institute of Contemporary Art. The few works listed in the catalogue raisonné before the 1952 *Bird* (FCR 11) give little indication of the distinctive style that characterised Frink's work for the next decade.⁴ Working directly in wet plaster of Paris that she subsequently chiselled and carved, she was able to achieve distressed surfaces that perfectly conveyed the menacing characteristics of the predatory birds, dying animals, warriors and hybrid figures that were her primary motifs during the 1950s and that ultimately derived from childhood memories of the effects of World War II and life spent in the countryside.



Frink was not alone in favouring such subject matter. In very different ways, the eight sculptors included in the *New Aspects of British Sculpture* exhibition in the British Pavilion at the 1952 Venice Biennale conveyed the angst that characterised so much of the art produced in the unsettled period after the end of World War II.⁵ Even Henry Moore was affected by this mood as can be seen from his *Helmet Heads* (1950) and *Falling Warrior* (1956–1957) (Fig. 1). By the end of the decade Frink was confident working on a larger scale. Two sculptures dating from 1963 – *Judas* and *Dying King* – represent Frink at her best. In both cases, the expressive content of the figures emerges from her intuitive working process, the constant struggle between the building up of three-dimensional form in plaster and the drastic revisions that follow as she modifies what she has just made. The surface calls attention to itself, rather than creating the illusion of a different kind of material.

Fig. 1 Henry Moore, *Falling Warrior*, 1956–1957, bronze, 67 × 154 × 85 cm. Tate Britain.

Not surprisingly, the rather suffocating ethos of the 1950s was soon to be challenged. Sculptor William Tucker referred to the post-war period in sculpture as 'a time when the idea of construction was revived to give life

to a dying tradition of modelling, when form was sacrificed to texture and autonomy of structure to a cheap and melodramatic imagery.¹⁶ At the same time as Frink was continuing to develop her personal manner of figurative sculpture, some of her contemporaries were moving in other directions. A great admirer of Brancusi, William Turnbull stopped modelling around 1958 in favour of simplified, abstract forms. (Fig. 2) Eduardo Paolozzi continued working in bronze, but incorporated a wide variety of found objects into the surface of his bronzes. The most extreme break occurred after 1960, when Anthony Caro began using steel, sheet metal, welded and bolted together, rather than modelling in clay and casting in bronze (Fig. 3).



It is in this greatly changed environment that Frink continued to deepen her understanding of the figurative tradition in sculpture in the privacy of her studio, while becoming an increasingly public figure, accepting numerous commissions not only for portraits and incidental works, but also for public sculptures. Her more personal works varied greatly in style, depending to a degree on the nature of the experience that provided the original inspiration for realization in three dimensions. The flatness and apparent fragility of the monumental *Mirage Birds* of 1967 and 1969 responded to the 'strange, stalking shapes, floating, broken up by the distance' of flamingos seen while she was living in the Cévennes in France.⁷ In contrast, the volumetric forms of the brutal *Goggle Heads* convey the horror of the Algerian War personified in photographs she had seen of politicians and generals wearing dark glasses.⁸ Not surprisingly, works such as the *Horse* commissioned by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation in 1978 (FCR 270) or the *Miner's Head* commissioned by The National Union of Mineworkers in 1976 (FCR 257) left little room for the imagination or stylistic innovation.

Fig. 2 William Turnbull, *Head*, 1960, bronze, wood and limestone, bronze, 32 × 54 × 27 cm, block, 25.5 × 37 cm diameter, rosewood stand, 59.5 × 30 cm diameter. Tate Britain.

In his thoughtful comments on Frink's relationship to the tradition of figurative sculpture and its contemporary relevance, Arie Hartog argues that the history of sculpture in the twentieth century is more complex than the

widely accepted view that 'the [medium] of sculpture consistently developed in the direction of abstraction – only to be dissipated at the end of the 1960s in a boundless expansion of conceptual art. Taking this a step further, a notion evolved that figurative art belonged outside of art history, it being a conservative art form that had supposedly failed to keep up with, or deliberately distanced itself from its 'times'... The task for art history is to discover and describe a non-conservative strand of figurative sculpture which critically questions its own conditions, or which uses apparently old means to come up with new answers. Elizabeth Frink fits this description of a non-conservative figurative sculptor.'⁹



Fig.3 Anthony Caro, *Midday*, 1960, painted steel, 235.6 × 96.2 × 378.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Although not conventionally religious, throughout her life Frink made works on religious themes that command respect. A head of *Christ* (1983), commissioned by All Saint's Church, Basingstoke, with eyes closed and deprived of any identifying attributes, is moving in its restraint. *Walking Madonna* (1981), beautifully sited outside Salisbury Cathedral, is similarly subdued, managing to convey deep emotion without any obvious signs of grief beyond the downcast eyes. Like all the best religious art of the twentieth century – Henry Moore's *Madonna and Child* (1943) and Giacomo Manzù's *Door of Death* (1948–1963) (Fig. 4) to the left of the main entrance of St Peter's Basilica, Rome, Frink's sculptures are uncompromising statements of her individuality as a sculptor at the same time as they convey an understanding of the profound significance of the subject matter.¹⁰

The most important observation in Hartog's analysis of Frink's oeuvre is that sculpture of this type can only become meaningful when it 'critically questions its own conditions, or which uses apparently old means to come up with new answers.' To an impartial observer, it cannot be said that these criteria were always met, particularly in the later work and many of the

commissions. A lover of horses, familiar with them since her childhood, Frink produced numerous sculptures of horses with and without riders from 1969 until her death. From the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius on the Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome by way of Donatello and Verrocchio to Edgar Degas, the horse has played a pre-eminent role in Western art. Frink took on the challenge with *Horse and Rider* (1969 – FCR 215) and *Horse and Rider* (1974 – FCR 242) commissioned by Trafalgar House for Dover Street, London. The former has been declared ‘a masterpiece’, but has also been criticised for its lack of symbolic power.^{11, 12}



Fig.4 Giacomo Manzù, *The Door of Death*, 1948–1963, bronze, Saint Peter’s Basilica, Rome.

Working within a narrowly defined definition of figurative sculpture, Frink’s oeuvre nonetheless needs to be considered in a much broader context, of her contemporaries as well as younger sculptors whose work she did not live long enough to see. Although the Italian sculptor Marino Marini (1901–1980) made sculptures of female nudes and portraits, he is best known for his numerous works on the motif of Horse and Rider. Like Frink, he turned to subjects that had been the primary focus of Western sculptors for over two millennia. For over thirty years he produced variations on the motif, beginning with a *Rider* (1936) and concluding with *Forms in an Idea* (Fig.5). The process has been described as a ‘transformation of the motif, from the triumphant horse and rider to the stiffened fossils of the early Sixties... involving a series of metamorphoses. Each subsequent stage incorporated the preceding ones, using them as the raw material for new artistic languages that were linked together and dynamically interactive, with an insistent crescendo of emotional assurance and expressionistic values.’¹³

In recent years, it has also become apparent that figurative sculpture is not necessarily associated with modelling in clay or plaster and casting in bronze. Stephan Balkenhol (b. 1957) works in wood, creating roughly hewn, painted forms that derive ultimately from German sculptural traditions and Expressionism, although they are transformed by a distinctly modern sensibility (Fig. 6). Before becoming a sculptor, Ron Mueck (b. 1958) made models and special effects for film, television and advertising. Using the traditional methods of sculpting in clay, he employs a wide variety of modern materials to create works which have an attention to detail and understanding of form that are utterly convincing. Distortions of scale add to the sculpture's ability to encourage an intimate contemplation of the human condition. Well known for his meticulous recreation of familiar objects, in recent years Charles Ray (b. 1953) has created a number of figurative sculptures that reference classical Greek sculpture and other sculptural traditions. Although many of these achieve a distancing effect through transformations of scale, *Horse and Rider* (2014), a ten-ton equestrian statue made from solid stainless steel, is a life-size self-portrait of the weary-looking and inappropriately shod artist on horseback (Fig. 8).



Fig. 5 Stephan Balkenhol, *4 Figures*, 2000, painted wood, four figures each 65 x 19 x 14 inches. Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

The exhibition of sculptures by Elisabeth Frink from the collection of Chris Bartram provides an excellent opportunity to assess where exactly she stands in the history of twentieth-century sculpture. Through the works that he has collected with such evident passion, and with the addition of the loan of *Walking Madonna*, it is possible to see her sculpture at its best. Like any good exhibition, it also inadvertently provokes questions, some of which have been raised in this essay.

It is also an occasion to consider her work in the light of a current phenomenon, the rediscovery of artists who have disappeared from view and movements that have been overlooked. In a review of an exhibition of the sculptor Germaine Richier at a New York gallery in 2014, Roberta Smith

began by saying that, 'We live in what might be called the era of 'no artist left behind'. It's a period of sometimes exhilarating excavation and rediscovery during which art history has become larger and more inclusive. It encompasses more kinds of people from different parts of the world and all kinds of backgrounds – as opposed to art-school educated white men from the United States and Europe.'¹⁴



Certainly, this is true of the numerous female artists who have been rescued from obscurity, as well as movements such as the long-overlooked Japanese avant-garde Gutai group and the Korean Tansaekhwa. A recent Frink exhibition at a major international gallery indicates that her work, too, is currently undergoing reassessment.¹⁵ She does not need to be rescued from oblivion as, at least in Britain and to a degree in the Anglo-Saxon world, she has always had and continues to have a wide circle of admirers. Has the time come, however, when Frink's work might elicit a positive response, not only from those who share her views on the importance of continuing the tradition of figurative sculpture and are already predisposed to admire it, but also from more-dispassionate observers? And is there a possibility that she might gain the international recognition that some of the figurative sculptors of the twentieth century and younger sculptors active today have received? The exhibition at the Heong Gallery provides a welcome opportunity to consider these questions.

Fig.6 Ron Mueck, *Untitled (Big Man)*, 2000, pigmented polyester resin on fiberglass, 203.8 x 120.7 x 204.5 cm. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

1. *Qu'est-ce que la sculpture moderne?* Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, July 3 – October 13, 1986.
2. Dominique Bozo, *Préface*, in Pompidou, 1986, p.7.
3. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Red Stone Figure* (1913); *Jacob Epstein, Female Figure* (1913), Flenite (serpentine); Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure* (1929), Hornton stone; *Barbara Hepworth, Single Form* (1937).
4. Annette Ratuszniak (ed.), with contributions by Leo A. Daly, Arie Hartog, Michael Mopurgo and Julian Spalding, *Elisabeth Frink: Catalogue Raisonné of Sculpture 1947–1993*, Lund Humphries in association with the Frink Estate and Beaux Arts, London, 2013.
5. Britain was represented by Robert Adams, Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Geoffrey Clarke, Bernard Meadows, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull.
6. William Tucker, *The Language of Sculpture*, London, 1974, p.83, quoted in John Graves-Smith, 'Sculpture in the 1940s and 1950s: the Form and the Language', Sandy Nairne and Nicholas Serota (eds.), *British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century*, Whitechapel Art gallery, 1981, p.125.
7. Ratuszniak (ed.), FCR 185, p.108.
8. *Ibid.*, FCR 207, p.116.
9. Arie Hartog, 'Towards a Modern Art History of the Figure: Observations on Elisabeth Frink,' in Ratuszniak (ed.) p.25.
10. *Madonna and Child* was commissioned by Reverend Walter Hussey for the Church of St. Matthew, Northampton, in 1943.
11. Marina Vaizey, 'Elisabeth Frink', *Arts Review*, October 21, 1972, p.647, quoted in Ratuszniak, p.118.
12. *Horse and Rider* (1969) has been described as 'meagre, insubstantial and sadly without symbolic power – inevitably the comparison is with Marino Marini's much more memorable *Horseman*, 1947, with its dreamlike tapering head.' Timothy Hyman, 'Figurative Sculpture since 1960', in Nairne and Serota (eds.), p.188.
13. Carlo Pirovano, *Marino Marini Mitografia sculture e dipinti 1939–1966*, Galleria dello Scudo, Verona, December 1994 – February 1995, p.20.
14. Roberta Smith, 'Staging a Rescue from Obscurity: The Effort to resurrect the Sculptor Germaine Richier', *Critic's Notebook*, 'The New York Times', March 20, 2014.
15. *Elisabeth Frink Transformation* (19 January – 7 May 2017), Hauser and Wirth, Somerset.

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