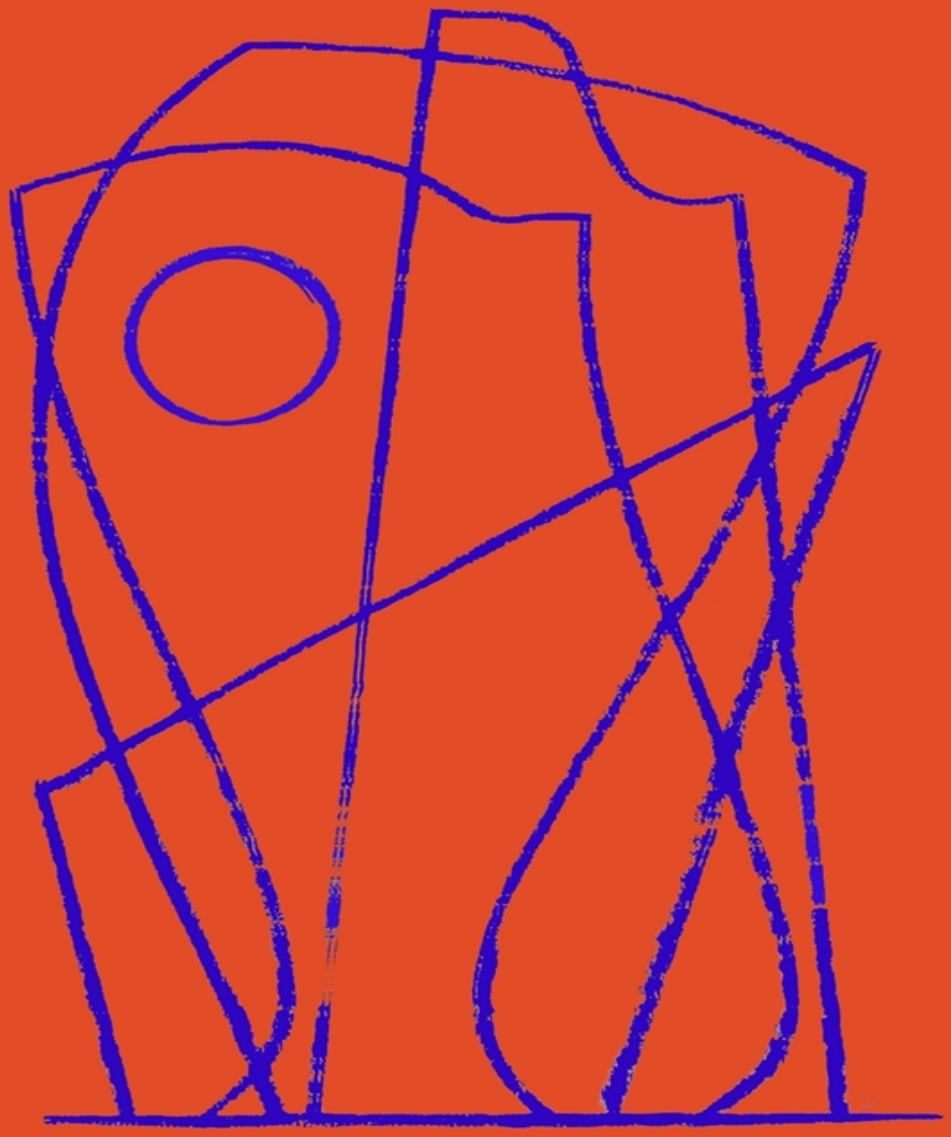
'Groundbreaking'
KATY HESSEL

'Lively and passionate'
SIR ANTONY GORMLEY

'A revelation'
KATE BRYAN

TOTEM

The Untold Story *of* Sculpture



JO BARING

Totem

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The Untold Story of Sculpture

Jo Baring



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For Terry and Ann McDonald

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Most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art, those mysterious existences, whose life endures beside our own small, transitory life.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

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Author's Note

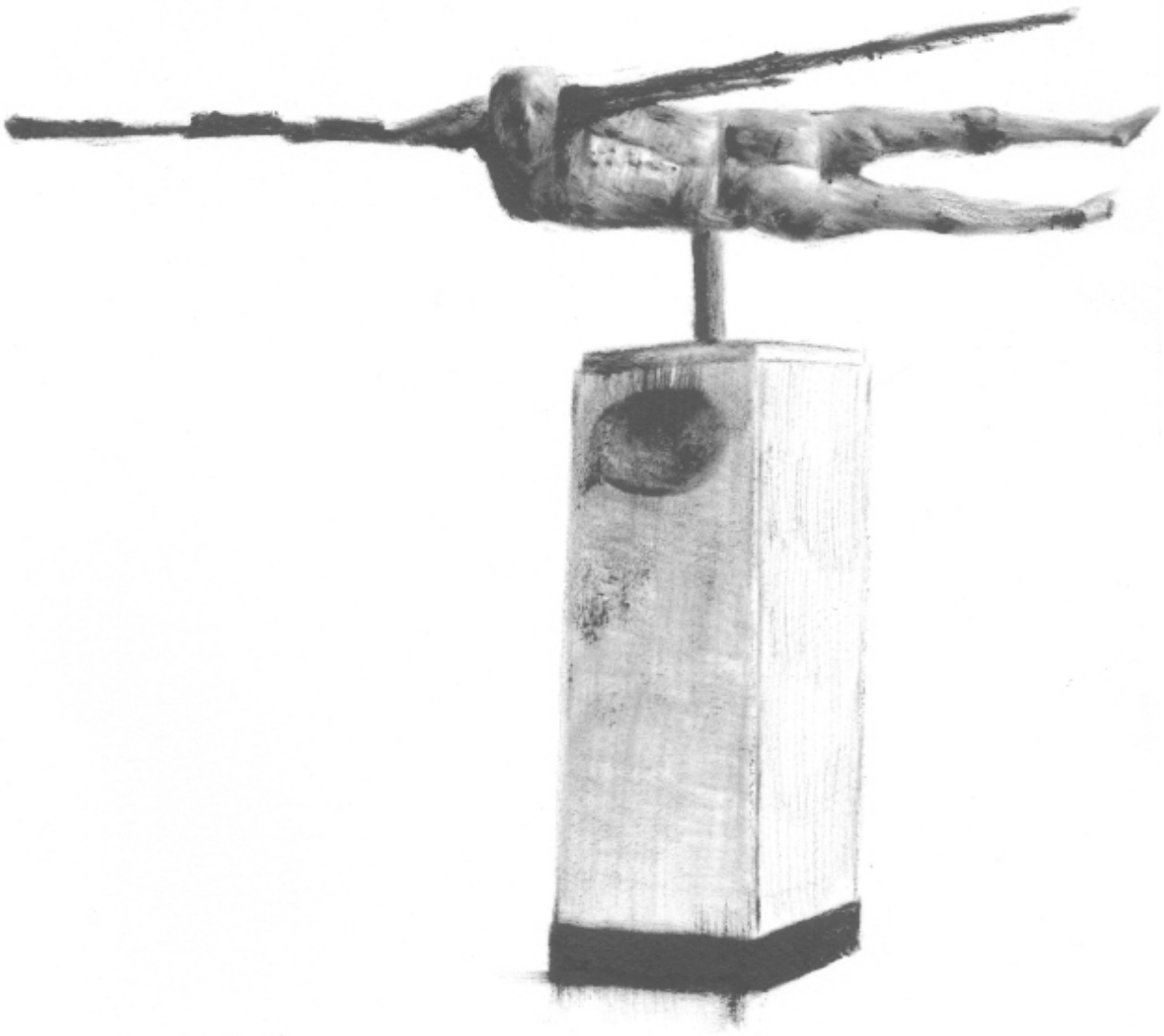
This book is not intended as a history of sculpture. Instead, it is a journey meant to illuminate and inspire. And it is a story of sculpture, not statues, although sometimes the two can be conflated. A good rule of thumb is to think about who or what something represents. A queen on her throne? Statue. Something intended to inspire a more universal feeling or emotion? Sculpture.

A helpful example is the furore over British sculptor Elisabeth Frink's *Alcock and Brown Memorial*, commissioned for the newly built Terminal One at Manchester Airport in the northwest of England. Frink had been tasked to make a work to mark the forty-fifth anniversary of the first non-stop transatlantic flight John Alcock and Arthur Brown took from Newfoundland to County Galway in Ireland. Unveiled in 1964, it was supposed to celebrate Manchester's civic pride in two of its own. It should have been a triumph. Frink was riding high. One of her sculptures had just been acquired for the John F. Kennedy Memorial in Dallas, Texas. She was also young, and photogenic. The stage was set.

But it was not a success. People had expected a statue, a nice readable representation of Alcock and Brown's achievement. Instead, they got a sculpture, an unclothed, winged human body in flight, suggesting ideas of myth, of Icarus, of human hubris. There had been early rumblings against it, primarily due to the nakedness of the figure. A receptionist at the airport decided that 'It's not the sort of thing a woman wants to look at', while an elderly lady was unsure of the need to show the airman's 'particulars'.

At the unveiling, the chairman of the airport committee seemed to struggle in his praise, finding only the euphemistic 'vivid'. A reporter for the *Daily Mirror* hit the jackpot when he found John Alcock's sister, the seventy-one-year-old Mrs Elsie Moseley, who commented: 'I am terribly disappointed. The statue is obscene. At least my brother had his trousers on when he landed.'[1]

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Elisabeth Frink, *Alcock and Brown Memorial*, 1962, bronze

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Prologue: Clay, and a Pinch of Stardust

In 1790 a beaver appeared in London. Not a real beaver. They had been extinct in England since the sixteenth century. This beaver was an outline of the animal that had been carved and burned onto the bare chest of an Englishman, John Long.

Long spun a wild tale.

Arriving in London, he told of working as a fur trader along the Great Lakes of North America and Canada. During this time he had been initiated as a warrior into the Ojibwe, an Algonquian-speaking Indigenous people. As part of his three-day initiation ceremony, he was tattooed. We have his account of this extraordinary moment, when 'extended on his back, the chief draws the figure he intends to make with a pointed stick, dipped in water in which gunpowder has been dissolved; after which, with ten needles dipped in vermilion, and fixed in a small wooden frame, he pricks the delineated parts, and where the bolder outlines occur he incises the flesh with a gun flint. The vacant spaces, or those not marked with vermillion, are rubbed in with gunpowder, which produces the variety of red and blue; the wounds are then seared with punk-wood to prevent them from festering'.[1]

Describing this, Long gave us a new word, a word we still use today.

He called the beaver scorched onto his skin a *totem*.

★ ★ ★

I am on a beach, watching an early tide lap the shore. A clear light slices the horizon. Soft foams of surf wash over the sleeping sand, leaving light dimples as they curl back to the water. The waves are low but loud, like a wind gusting through leaves. There are pebbles all around. Some glint in the sun like glass splinters, others seem to change colour as the water dries, a dense black opening up a new world, like looking at the surface of a planet through a telescope. Some are impossibly perfect, silver moons of stone

smoothed by endless waves. Others are large, pockmarked and rough. But if you look closely each is a world of imagination. White veins line pewter shallows, and tiny spots of fleshy pink peer out from the sand. I pick a favourite, which glows like grand marble, and turn it over in my hand.

I wonder when you last picked up a pebble, and felt its warmth, still hot from the sun. Or perhaps it was cold in your hands, its colour a winter palette of chilled grey and frost-like blues. As children we are drawn to these presents from the sea, their touch as entrancing as the stars in the sky. Maybe you preferred something with more heft, like the dark granite of a rock, carried home as treasure in straining pockets. Perhaps you even carved it with a penknife, shaping it into something new, or scratched into it, matching the deep gullys hewn by time.

Here on the beach, the waves begin to call at my feet, but there is no rush of water towards the shore. Instead there is a languid certainty in its movements, knowing that as day follows night, and the moon waxes and wanes, it will come again. But what I think of does not share such certainty, although it is, like the sea, suffused with ancient secrets, tales of love and loss, and dreams of the divine. The pebble I fold through my fingers, dried now of sea salt, acts as a physical reminder of our connection to both material and what we make.

Even if you have lost sight of the child you once were, you are part of something deeper, and longer, than any of us can imagine. For millennia, our ancestors have moulded, modelled and chiselled the materials they had to hand, creating objects with no immediate practical use. No flint arrowheads or hand-axes here, no cookery utensils or early pots rendered by deft fingers. Instead, there is something else, as mysterious as the origins of the pebble I hold in my hand.

There is sculpture.

I hope you are still here. Because sculpture can seem as dry a subject as the material from which it is made; hard, inert, cold. There is a belief that it is unable to convey emotion as easily as a painting, where brushstrokes can be violent gasps on canvas and impressions of dappling suns renew our vision, showing us a different way to see. But there is something special about sculpture, something that deserves our attention.

Our legends are littered with tales of forges, elemental worlds of air, fire and water, where material shapeshifts and comes to life. This suggests that we have long sensed its magic, knowing that in the humblest of materials we

find the potential for a transformation as astounding as alchemy. Greek mythology gives us the god Hephaestus, within whose smithy the first human being, Pandora, was made. Some versions of the story site his workshop in the liquid bowels of a volcano, giving us a sense of the molten heat with which he works, every strike of his hammer and anvil clanging through the air like a rhythmic heartbeat, conjuring Pandora into life. It is the same all over the world. As we try to make sense of our surroundings, and how we got here, it is sculpture to which we turn. In many of our origin stories, we tell of how we are sculpted into being, shaped by clay drawn from the very fabric of the earth itself, touched by the hands of gods before we awaken to take our first breaths.

In New Zealand, the Māori speak of how the god Tāne, son of the earth father and sky mother, took red clay from that sun-blessed land and modelled the first woman, Hineahuone. In China, the goddess Nüwa (女媧) shaped us from mud found along a riverbank, and it's even how the Bible tells us we were made, God creating Adam from clay, blowing life into his sculpted body. Wherever you look you will find tales of gods sculpting us from the material of the world. Of course our bodies are indeed drawn from nature, even those pebbles on the beach, for the carbon and nitrogen atoms within us were, millions of years ago, shaped as rocks, before they were weathered and worn, and released to find new form. And we know now that some of the atoms which comprise us were once asteroids, hurtling from the deepest fathoms of the universe. So our ancestors were not wrong; we really are made of earth and sky, our bodies blessed with clay, and a pinch of stardust.

I am a curator and art historian, working with sculpture for more than twenty-five years. Over this time, I have fallen in love with it, sensing the wisps of something that goes beyond the politics and the polemic, the monument and the memorial, past those stale generals on rearing horses and into the very heart of sculpture. Although I've never been quite sure what that heart is, I wanted to follow its trail, to unearth the untold story of sculpture I felt dancing just ahead of me. I didn't know where to start, so I chose the beginning.

The earliest known sculpture is the *Lion Man*, or *Löwenmensch*. Carved up to forty thousand years ago from a mammoth tusk, it shows the head of a cave lion on a partly human body. Using a flint tool, someone shaped the surface of the tusk with care. We see loosely posed legs twitching with

energy, like those of a sprinter waiting for the starting gun. It was found in a cave in the Swabian Jura mountain range of Germany, and is a dynamic, fantastical rendering, the ivory of mammoth tusk as elastic as our imaginations. We can only guess at why it was formed, and what it might have meant. But the fact that it was made when mammoths still roamed the earth, before we could write, before we could inscribe and record our lives, speaks to the importance of sculpture to humans.



Löwenmensch (*Lion Man*), circa 35–40,000 BCE, mammoth ivory

In my research on the *Lion Man* I came across something which piqued my interest. It was a comment made by Chris Stringer, of London's Natural History Museum, who said that, 'This was not art for art's sake. Works such as the *Lion Man* had immense social value. They were important in communicating ideas inside a tribe in some way. They may also have played a role in establishing a tribe's identity, as totem poles do for native Americans.'[2]

I was intrigued, but admit that I forgot about it, until I read an article in the *New York Times* about the earliest wooden sculpture to have survived.

It's known as the *Shigir Idol*, and is more than twice the age of the earliest Egyptian pyramids. Scientists tell us it was carved from a freshly felled larch tree, taken from the early forests which appeared as Eurasia emerged from the late Ice Age.[3] Geometric lines and patterns cover its surface and, at the top, there is a face. A human face. Eleven and a half thousand years of time open to us in a second. We recognise a nose, eyes and a mouth carved into an 'oh' shape, its scream frozen for millennia in the peat bogs of western Siberia.

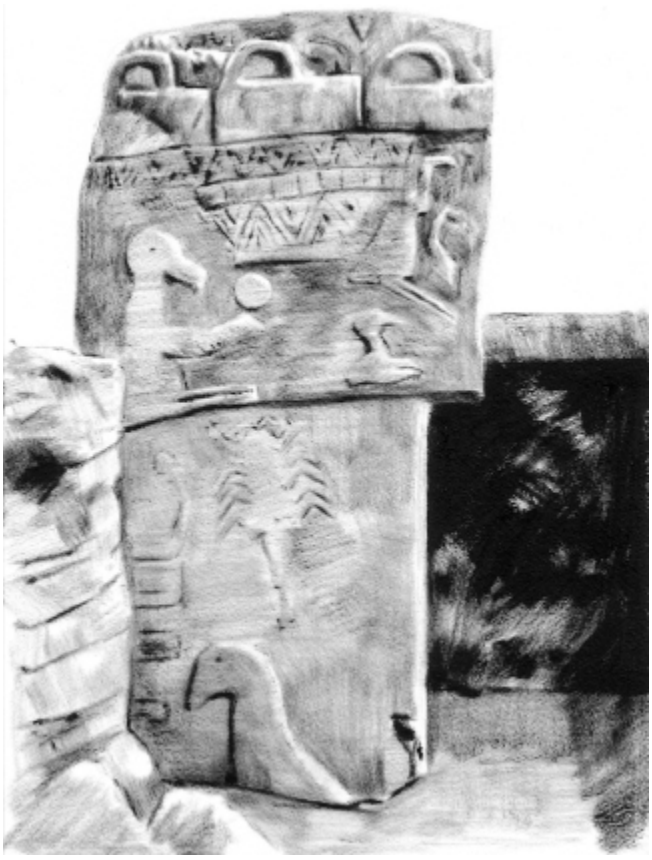
What drew me in was that the article describes the *Shigir Idol* as a totem pole.[4] Of course it can't have been a totem pole. These emerged in a very specific place and time, in the northwest of Canada and the United States of America from the eighteenth century and within the cultures of certain First Nation peoples such as the Haida, Tlingit and Kwakwaka'wakw.[5] But why did the journalist describe it that way? Possibly it's the shape of the *Shigir Idol*. Because it was discovered in fragments buried thirteen feet deep in a bog, we don't know how it was originally intended to be seen, but it has been reposed as a vertical upright stretching to the skies, a form imprinted upon our imaginations by the totem pole.



Shigir Idol, circa 9,500 BCE, wood (detail)

By now a loose thought was forming, but it was nebulous, as indistinct as the scattering haze of a distant horizon. And then I came across something else. In 1994, a German archaeologist, Klaus Schmidt, and his team discovered one of the most exciting archaeological sites of recent times. This is Göbekli Tepe, translated as 'belly hill', a very human name for the undulating landscape under which this important settlement was found. Here, in southeastern Turkey near the border with Syria, Schmidt came face to face with huge stones carved eleven thousand years ago by hunter-gatherers in the pre-pottery Neolithic period.[6] They were set out in designated enclosures, and their artistry is astonishing. Scorpions scuttle across stone, serpents slither up edges and vultures soar. These animals are carved into surfaces, dancing across the fissures of weathered time, but others are more than reliefs: they are fully realised sculptures. We meet crouching predators about to strike, their paws clutching on to the stone, finding form like a gargoyle springing from a cathedral's edge. There is also a sea of abstract symbols, patterns and human figures, all meshed together with creatures in a dramatic narrative we can't access. Birds hold orbs on

outstretched wings. And, in a moment of empathetic modesty shared across time, some of the human bodies wear loin cloths.



Pillar 43 at Göbekli Tepe, also known as the 'Vulture Stone', limestone

During a later excavation in 2009, another animal sculpture was found, but this one was different.[7] History has etched away some of its detail; we can't readily identify man or beast. Instead, legs, arms and heads coalesce and cover stone, as snakes slide around them. It is nearly two metres tall, and the imagery is carved in three distinct sections, stacked one on top of the other. Schmidt saw this creation, cast into stone thousands of years ago, as 'reminiscent of the totem poles known from the northwest coast of North America'.[8]

That the word *totem* was used to describe three of the most ancient sculptures in our world spoke to me. It was like a net thrown to catch the secrets of works made thousands of years apart. We cannot access the intentions of those early makers. I was fascinated that these sculptures, physical portals to prehistory, had an essence of something just outside of our

grasp, meanings we cannot quite glimpse and for which, therefore, we have no words.

But we wanted a word for them.

Perhaps this is my first clue, and, sure enough, soon after I am immersed in eighteenth-century London, reading of the arrival of a beaver.

In 1791, the Englishman John Long published his *Voyages and Travels*, tales of derring-do in the New World. The book was a hit, his firsthand experiences as beguiling as fiction. Indeed, in a later reprint from 1922, the publisher notes that Long's book is 'full of the thrills of the dime novels of our boyhood days'.[9] But Long gave us more than thrills and boyhood games. As he wrote of his initiation into the Ojibwe, he scrambled for a word, and, realising there was nothing equivalent in his mother tongue, tried his best to make a phonetic approximation of the Ojibwe words, *odoodeman* or *ototeman*. These mean 'his clan' or 'he is a relative of mine' and come from the Algonquian-language base meaning 'to dwell together'.[10]

Along with his approximation of these words, he gave his own reading of their meaning. The voices of the Ojibwe are unheard, true meaning left by Long on the other side of the Atlantic. Instead we read of the 'superstition of the savages … each of them having his totam, or favourite spirit, which he believes watches over him. This totam they conceive assumes the shape of some beast or other, and therefore they never kill, hunt, or eat the animal whose form they think this totam bears.'[11]



Göbekli Tepe ‘totem pole’, limestone

By choosing the words ‘superstition’ and ‘savages’ Long is putting himself (and his reader) in a position of intellectual superiority, his book the equivalent of placing the First Nations under a microscope, inspected as biological specimens of a bygone era. This attitude bled into the nineteenth century with the advent of totemism, an attempt to explain away the beliefs, practices and social structures of a bewilderingly wide array of peoples, including the Māori in New Zealand and Aboriginal culture in Australia. But totemism was only applied to First Nations. I read through decades of academic papers on totemism, and it’s like wading through a torturous

swamp, infected with the Victorian belief, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz noted, in the 'division of humanity into those who know and decide, and those who are known and decided for'.[12] It is this inhumane division which gives us totem poles displayed alongside dinosaur bones, like fossilised icons of past time.[13] Here the word totem reeks of colonialism and empire, of appropriation and cultural 'trophies' adorning Western institutions. Fellow humans not treated as such, instead pinned like butterflies into a display case with classifications and measurements.

Perhaps now I understand why my art-world colleagues shuddered when I mentioned my interest in the word. One actually winced when I told her I was researching totem, and what that word might hold for us in relation to sculpture.

'Isn't it problematic?' she asked.

Problematic. I took her point. A sculptor friend of mine told me that she had wanted to use the word totem as her exhibition title, until the museum she was working with warned her off. I almost stopped altogether, putting my research away. But then I would see modern and contemporary sculptures with the title totem. Or I'd go to a museum and find a label describing a sculpture as totemic. That this word is used across time and place to describe sculpture drew me in once more. And surely it is the role of intellectual enquiry, of books and of art, to uncover and reveal our past so that we can better understand our present. Things fester in the dark.

I kept coming back to the original language base of totem: *to dwell together*. Perhaps here lay the story of sculpture, the reasons why, for forty thousand years, we have been shaping material into new form, like those stories we tell of the gods themselves. But still, the path was unclear, occasional glimmers of meaning just a footstep ahead.

And then I learned that the Polish German sculptor Alicja Kwade had unveiled a new sculpture in the bustling docklands of Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong. She called it *l'ordre des mondes (Totem)*. I dived in, reading as much as I could about it. Kwade reveals that she is 'fascinated with the borders between science and suspicion. All the in-betweens'.[14] That jogged something in my memory, and I went back to my discarded notes. Eventually I found it. Louise Nevelson, the American sculptor whose 1956 work *Sky Totem* is in the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, said that her interest lay in 'the in-between places. The dawns and the dusks … the places between the land and sea'.[15]

The in-between. A place art can take us, if we let it.

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Part One

Between Time

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1

The Star House

Just off the northwest Pacific coast of British Columbia, Canada, lies an archipelago of more than one hundred and fifty islands. Here archaeologists have found evidence of human habitation going back thirteen thousand years. These islands are the traditional territories of the Haida people and are known in the Haida language as Haida Gwaii, meaning Islands of the People. It is in Old Massett, a village on the largest of the islands, that we begin.

Chief Anetlas of the K'ouwas Eagle clan and his Raven clan wife were celebrating their recent adoption of a young girl. To mark this important occasion, and to announce their heir, they hosted a potlatch in the first months of 1879. The word potlatch comes from the Nuu-chah-nulth word pa-chitle meaning 'to give'.[1] This was an immense ceremonial gathering which could last for weeks and for which families planned and prepared for years. There were songs and stories; dancers and drummers; people wearing cedar-bark costumes and vivid masks re-enacted tales of magic salmon, mystical ravens, and children who were born half-bear, half-human. Elk-hide instruments issued a rhythmic beat. Gifts such as newly carved canoe paddles and woven blankets were handed to guests immersed in the sights and sounds of the potlatch. There was a thrum of feet on the ground as the ceremony reached its crescendo, the raising of a totem pole outside the couple's residence, the Star House.

But only five years later the potlatch was banned under Canadian law, and, by the turn of the new century, what is now known as the *Star House Totem Pole* was on its way – via the Canadian Pacific Railway, trans-Atlantic steamer and finally a canal barge – to its new home amidst the dreaming spires of Oxford, England.

★ ★ ★

The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford is the most extraordinary cornucopia of assembled objects. Floors are covered in cabinets jumbled with coiled baskets, masks and instruments, while walls are layered with models of boats, kayaks and Māori war canoes. This is the visual debris of the 'collecting rampage' initiated by Western museums at the end of the nineteenth century, and I am walking within it looking for the *Star House Totem Pole*.[2] I remembered the totem pole from previous visits and hoped it would be a good place to start our adventure, rather like the lamp post in Narnia. I take it as a happy coincidence that my journey to the museum took me past the Eagle and Child, the Oxford pub frequented by Narnia's creator C.S. Lewis, and his friend J.R.R. Tolkien.

When I get to the central court of the museum, I see the *Star House Totem Pole* rising up nearly forty feet into the air. It is a six-hundred-year-old red cedar, chosen for its majestic height, with shoulders broad enough to carry the weight of a raven beak, which juts out at the bottom like the prow of a vast ship. The tree has been cut and hollowed out, and everywhere I look there is activity. A frog clambers from the grasp of a grizzly bear. Pairs of black painted eyes peer at us across time. Teeth are bared and nostrils flare. What strikes me most is the artistry of the carved wood, its bold colours and clear outlines. The creativity and skill of the Haida people are conveyed without words.



Star House Totem Pole, circa 1878, Canadian red cedar

The totem pole is surrounded by an ocean of objects. Some still have their original handwritten labels, and I wonder how each item arrived in their current cabinets, walls and vitrines. Which seas they crossed and whose hands made them. What stories they hold. It is the musical instruments which feel most poignant: flutes and trumpets touched by fingers and mouths long past, drums which no longer beat. Standing beside the *Star House Totem Pole* I imagine the celebratory sounds invoked during the potlatch of Chief Anetlas and his wife, her name now lost to history, when their totem pole was first raised. Within the museum, there are large signs advising that it owns 'many

contentious collections'.[3] To understand what this means, we have to go back to 1884, when the museum opened in Oxford. The eponymous founder, Lieutenant-General Augustus Pitt Rivers, wanted to showcase what he called the 'savage and barbarous races'.[4] In exactly the same year the Canadian government issued an amendment to the Indian Act, banning the potlatch, the gathering with which the raising of totem poles was so linked. A potlatch wasn't just a gift-giving feast, it was an important governmental, legal and economic system, integral to life on Haida Gwaii.[5] The original Indian Act of 1880 was designed to eradicate the Indigenous culture of the Haida, as well as peoples such as the Tlingit and Kwakwaka'wakw.

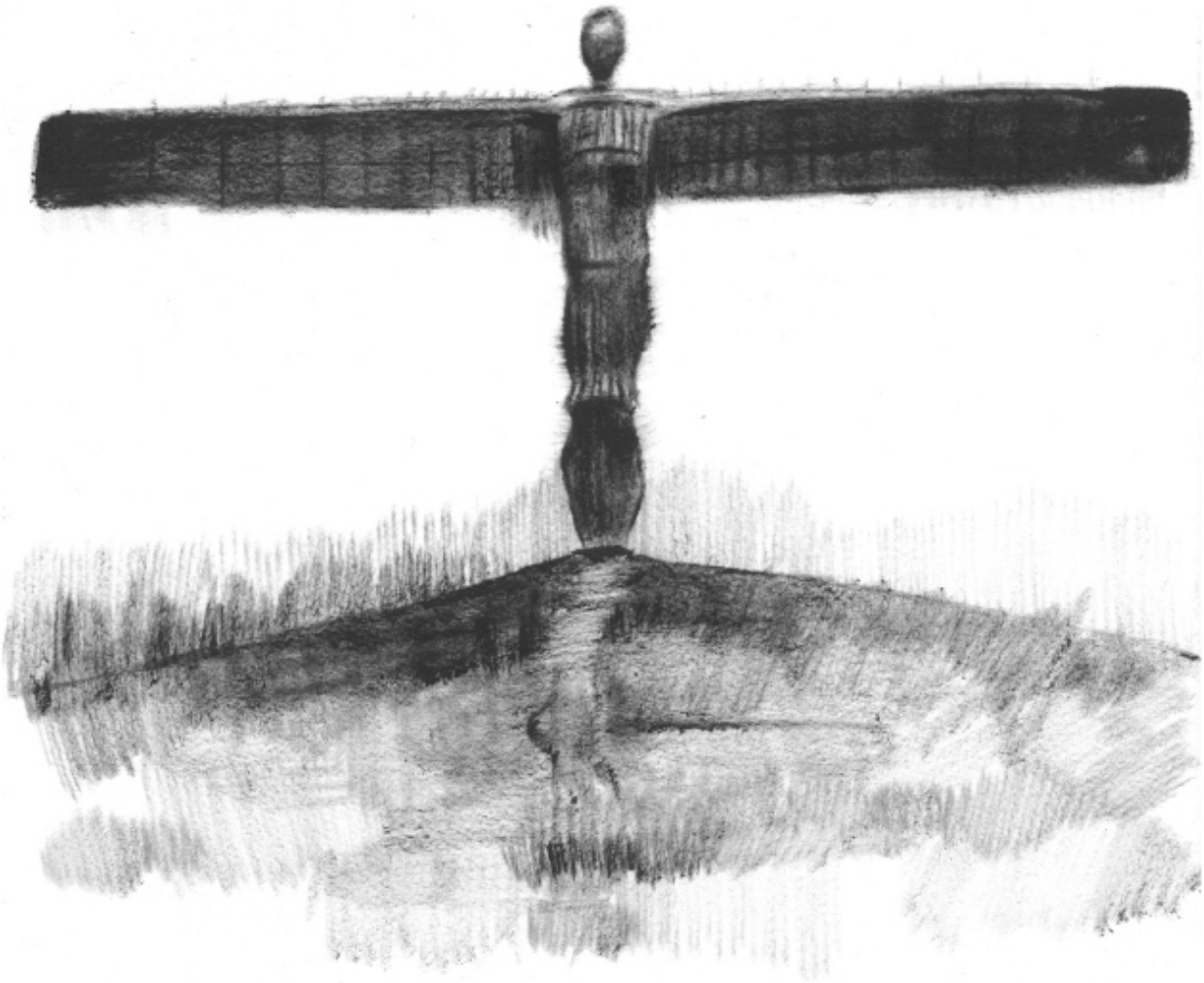
That Western museums were opening to display the culture of the Indigenous peoples at the same time they were erasing the peoples themselves is no coincidence, and within their displays the twin spectres of empire and colonialism whistle through the stacks. I also hear echoes of the intellectual superiority of John Long's description of 'savages' with their 'superstition' blowing in this violent wind. Perhaps I am going too far, but then I find something which tells me otherwise: a handwritten note from the inaugural Professor of Anthropology at Oxford University, Edward Burnett Tylor, which provides an interesting clue. In 1899, he was after a totem pole for the Pitt Rivers Museum. In his research notes, he wrote that 'the word totem seems to have gained a place in European languages through a book published in 1791 by an Indian trader named Long'.[6]

Let's consider what that means. If Long's word – and his dangerous nomenclature – was applied to these majestic sculptures carved by the Haida and other First Nation peoples along the Pacific Northwest, what impact did that have? It perhaps helps to explain why the Christian missionaries who piled into the area in the later part of the nineteenth century believed that they were 'pagan' symbols. In 1876 one clergyman, Henry Collison, told of the totem poles in Haida Gwaii as being 'fraught with meaning to the people themselves' and that he and others 'induced them to take them all down and destroy them'.[7] But the government and missionaries were not the only problems the Haida had to contend with; a smallpox epidemic decimated the population of Haida Gwaii, going from an estimated 7,000 in 1835 to 800 by 1885.[8]

If you visit the *Star House Totem Pole* today, you have to wiggle your way through the museum, filing past an Iguanodon cast, examples of Upper Jurassic limestone and the taxidermied trophy of a Nile crocodile. In this company, the proud history of Chief Antelas and his wife was decreed as exotic and extinct as the dodo.

I'm just outside Newcastle, in the northeast of England. It is early morning and the moon is still visible, its soft translucence a shimmering mirror of pinks and silver. There is a frost on the grass, gravel-hard at my feet. I am at the top of a gentle hill, and the landscape expands all around me. And for these few minutes, I am alone, standing under the outstretched wings of an angel.

I've come to see Antony Gormley's sculpture, the *Angel of the North*, an industrial construction of Corten weathering steel weighing two hundred tonnes. Installed in 1998, it is a landmark, seen by an estimated thirty-three million people travelling on the nearby roads and rail every year. I've been one of that number, glimpsing this still form as we rush past, but today my time belongs to the sculpture which has become, as Gormley has noted, 'a totem pole for the North East'.[9] It's that description that brought me here. I want to know what this means. How can a sculpture, separated by centuries and oceans, be linked to those intricate bold carvings raised along the Pacific Northwest?



Antony Gormley, *Angel of the North*, 1998, Corten steel

The *Angel of the North* stands on history. This part of England is coal-mining territory, one of the engine rooms of Britain's Industrial Revolution. Local moorlands were transformed into sites of production, of burrowing and quarrying, where livelihoods and lives were both found and lost. The *Angel* is sited on the former pithead baths of a coal mine known as the Ravensworth Ann Pit, or Team Colliery, that was operational from 1726. A pithead bath was where coal miners would try to wash themselves of the soot and soil that encased them underground. At least eighty men lost their lives in this coal mine, deep in the earth that surrounds me. The single worst disaster occurred on 10 June 1757, when an explosion took place, killing sixteen. Looking at their names listed on the Durham Mining Museum's website, I read that three of these men shared a surname, an address and a burial date; John Brown; John Brown, son of John Brown; Ralph Brown, son of John

Brown.[10] Individual deaths at the mine are also recorded. Some were 'crushed by waggons' and one, James John Peacock, who was only fourteen when he was killed here on 8 May 1920, 'crushed between two tubs'. There is a longer account of the death of George Johnson on 29 October 1930. Johnson, twenty-one, was 'killed by a fall of stone; the accident happened in the week he was due to be married; he had finished his shift and had just come up from the mine when the deputy stopped him and asked him if he wanted to go back down and earn some more money, seeing as he was getting married on the following Saturday; George of course jumped at the chance and unfortunately this cost him his life.'[11]

Despite these tragedies, men and boys continued to burrow into narrow dank tunnels hewn through the earth. The historian Walter Minchinton explains that 'many mining communities were isolated and predominantly one-industry settlements'[12], and families relied on money earned in the pits. The eventual decline of Britain's coal mining industry in the twentieth century was catastrophic for communities like this, leading to widespread unemployment and a traumatic impact on collective identity and pride. The commission for the *Angel of the North* was meant to restore a sense of community to this area, so impacted by loss and change.

To get to the *Angel* you walk up a simple, grass-covered mound reminiscent of Bronze Age burial barrows. Another word for these ancient burial mounds is a tumulus; and I learn later that Gormley described the site of the *Angel* as a 'tumulus for the Industrial Revolution'.[13] Perhaps it's those travellers sweeping past in a blur, the lives spent in the ground underneath me, or the visual reminder of Bronze Age burial sites, but standing here I think of our understanding of time. In this place the past is all around, and we move ever on, racing along motorways and rail tracks, all designed to go further, faster.

This desire to cheat time is recalled in the shape of the *Angel*: its wingspan is fifty-four metres, larger than many of our passenger jets, larger than Concorde, that short moment in which we humans could go faster than the speed of sound. That experiment ended, and of course the *Angel* is forever grounded, a reminder of our human fallibilities. We might also think of Icarus, and that doomed attempt to soar through the skies. But instead of hubris, I find hope. Reading about the *Angel*, many art historians have emphasised its technology, celebrating it as a feat of engineering, anatomy redrawn as aeronautics. And so when I first see it up close, I'm surprised by how human-like its presence is, the undulations of steel soft like a body. It feels welcoming, its wings enveloping us. It is based on a cast of Gormley's

own body, but walking around it from different angles, the delineation of a male groin and chest flow into curves of breasts and hips. It feels amorphous, ambiguous, somehow fitting for how we might imagine angels; like us, but not quite.

On the morning I visit, someone has laid a wreath at the feet of the sculpture, and there are red roses strewn on the ground, trodden into the grass. People find solace here. A few steps from the bottom of the mound are some makeshift shrines. Here in the trees mourners have left photographs of loved ones, teddy bears, little angels and notes hung with care. In its stillness in this busy world, the *Angel* has created a place of sanctity, of meaning to many, its soaring height like the spire of a cathedral of old. Of course in its shape it recalls one of the central images of Western religious iconography, the Crucifixion. But there is a duality here. Just as death on the cross brought a rising again, the *Angel* points to renewal and rebirth beyond an industrial past.

When I first learned of John Long and his book, I could never have conceived that his approximation of an Ojibwe word would be so ingrained in our collective consciousness and upon our visual imaginations. We all know the imagery of totem poles, but what were their original names?

In the Haida language, a totem pole is called GyaGang.aay, which translates as 'your history is now standing', a poetic explanation of the sculpted symbolism where the animals act as crests, referring to the ancestry and rights of each family.[14] In its original home on Haida Gwaii, outside the Star House, the one now in Oxford stood alongside at least eleven totem poles belonging to other houses. I find a photograph of the Star House taken in 1882, and together they look like the masts of a proud naval fleet coming into harbour, but they are nestled beside and between the wooden houses, as much a part of village life for these seafarers as the canoes stacked up nearby. Jisgang (Nika Collison), the executive director and curator of the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay 'Llnagaay, explains that this proud history goes back centuries, stating that the 'artistic expression' of the GyaGang.aay and other Haida objects 'represents lineage and thousands and thousands and thousands of years of history, and incredible geographic events and relationships to our mainland relatives.'[15]



Based on a photograph by Bertram Buxton of the Star House in Massett Village, Haida Gwaii, 1882, in the collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

It's hard to find anything in the academic literature of the time that gives voice to the Haida, and it is only in more recent years that work has been done by Western museums towards reconciliation, what in the Haida language is known as yahguudangang, or paying respect. In 2009, Elder GwaaGanad, Diane Brown, visited the Pitt Rivers Museum and, standing in front of the *Star House Totem Pole*, said that 'according to our Elders, missionaries and Indian agents just went along mowing totem poles down and heaped them up … and set fire to them. But also some of our poles made it down south, too: white people picked the select few that they thought were the best ones and took them to here, there, and everywhere. But it was a really horrible time in our history.'[16] In a document about the *Star House Totem Pole*, published in 2018 and worked on by Laura Peers, the former curator for the Americas Collections at the Pitt Rivers, it states that the 'Haida people maintain that anything which served a societal function that was sold during the Potlatch Ban period is argued to have been sold under duress'.[17]

I get a sense of this when researching the journey of the *Star House Totem Pole* across the Atlantic. The story involves a Reverend Charles Harrison. He was with the Church Missionary Society, and, as a sideline, was involved in the procurement of objects for Westerners. A letter he wrote to Professor Tylor at the Pitt Rivers Museum tells of how tricky it is to find people willing to sell their totem poles, 'but I think that I can secure two about next February when the people are generally without money & food'.[18]

The totem pole Reverend Harrison found was that raised in celebration of an adopted daughter in front of the Star House. Tylor paid thirty-six dollars, and it was installed in the museum in 1901.[19]

A cold wind is coming in around the *Angel*, and I call a cab. I ask my local driver what he thinks of the *Angel*. He tells me to watch a British film made back in 2000, a couple of years after the *Angel* was installed, called *Purely Belter*. The film follows two football-obsessed lads trying everything to get season tickets to Newcastle United; the sculpture watches over them, and they look to it as a guardian angel. When I download it, I see that the film is told across the seasons, and each change in season is marked by the camera panning back to the serene stillness of the sculpture. The imagery is clear: as our fleeting lives move on, the *Angel* remains. In a scene towards the end, when they are at rock bottom, the boys meet at the sculpture and decide to give their attempt one last shot. Here Gormley's sculpture is used as a cinematic symbol of redemption, and hope.

I think once again of those ideas of renewal and rebirth. The *Angel* was built locally, using steel fabricators in nearby Hartlepool, and in its scale and ambition, required the sort of engineering knowledge used by the celebrated bridge and ship builders of the area. Gormley has described it as a 'collaborative work' that draws on the 'skills and capabilities of the region'.[20] Reading this reminds me of the Haida word for totem poles: a history 'now standing'. Here in the *Angel* there is also pride in recognising a shared history. Of course in its shape the *Angel* recalls those outstretched majestic wings of the powerful thunderbirds that top so many totem poles carved along the Pacific Northwest, a particular motif of the Kwakwaka'wakw in Vancouver Island.[21] We might think that because the *Angel* is a body it differs from the form of a totem pole, but I think back to all those bodies scrambling up and along the *Star House Totem Pole*. This is sculpture as a collective body, a place for all of us to find our own meanings, our own histories.

Just as the *Angel* has become a cipher of a community rising again, the Haida people use the analogy of rebirth when describing the efforts made to restore their culture in recent times. Kii'iljuus (Barbara Wilson), a Haida scholar, tells us, 'We gotta hold on to who we are. And now, here we are … our kids dance, our women weave and make clothing, and our men carve and tell stories … you know how they talk about Snow White. Somebody kissed her. Somebody kissed the Haida nation and we woke up. That's what it's like you know.'[22] In a similar way, Jisgang explains that yahguudangang (paying respect) is 'why we visit our belongings in global museums and are intent on breathing life into them'.[23]

This idea of breathing life into a sculpture draws me in. We might think of sculpture as something passive, an inert physical object onto which we put meaning, but in marking our communities and collective identities, sculpture can bring a place to life. In New Zealand, the Māori make pouwhenua, often described as totem poles, presumably because they are upright carvings from natural materials made by an Indigenous people. These are deeply rooted to place and land, and can be fighting staffs used as posts or boundary markers.[24] At first, I understood these in the Western tradition, delineating land as owned. But a paper on the pouwhenua, with specific reference to the Rangitāne people, who live along the Manawatū River in New Zealand's North Island, is illustrative. Written by Peter Meihana, an expert in Māori history, and Margaret Forster, an Indigenous educator and researcher, it tells me that while the use of pouwhenua is a custom of marking the landscape, by 'naming the landscape and retelling and sharing tribal histories the landscape is living – alive and dynamic'. They go on to say that these 'carved forms were often a focal point for atua (deities) evoking their presence and energies to protect an area or resource.'[25]

I think back to the form of the *Angel*, where memorials and letters left at its feet, marking the lives of lost loved ones, suggest it is also a site of protection, and presence. And of course, to many of us, the cruciform outline of the *Angel* evokes a colossal figure perched on a mountain outcrop of granite overlooking Rio de Janeiro, where Christ the Redeemer, arms outstretched in welcome, reaches heavenwards.

Back in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, surrounded by fossils, taxidermied animals and objects whose lives unfolded over millennia, I think of how meanings flow back and forth across time. To those who raised the *Star House Totem Pole* in the museum, it was redolent of the past, an exhibit

to be studied, like the cast of an iguanodon skeleton found in a Belgian coal mine in 1878 that it shares its home with today.

But unlike the Jurassic limestone, or the whale skull it stands nearby, the *Star House Totem Pole* was made by human hands, imbued with meaning, evocative of the hopes and histories of lives long past. There are an estimated twelve thousand Haida objects, or what Jisgang calls 'treasures and other containers of knowledge' in Western museums. She tells us that in these works the Haida see 'the refined understanding that our Ancestors had of art and architecture, engineering and science, sociology and philosophy, and medicine, and of coexisting with the Supernatural, Haida Gwaii and each other'.[26]

Standing in front of the *Star House Totem Pole*, I think of these meanings within the shapes and grooves of its carved form. Perhaps we should begin to see sculpture not as an object, but a vessel, a holder of human knowledge, and imagination. I look up to the top of the *Star House Totem Pole*, where three human figures, hands clasped around their knees, are shown. These figures are known as Watchmen, and they have outlasted Chief Aneltas, his wife and their adopted daughter. They have seen and heard more than we can imagine. Sculpture is a repository of place, and human community, but it outlasts us.

I go back to those early origin stories where we tell ourselves that we were sculpted into being from the very material of the earth itself, clay. We can see this in the natural materials of the totem poles – the red cedar of the *Star House Totem Pole* was of course once living too. It may be too much of a stretch at first to see the *Angel of the North*, that two hundred tonnes of Corten steel, as natural, but its steel was made from iron ore, extracted from the rocks and minerals beneath our feet. By making form and meaning from the materials of our world, we are saying we are here, we belong.

We are marking our place in time.

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2

Endless Column

In the shadows of the mystical Carpathian Mountains, home to wild wolves and Bram Stoker's Dracula, is Târga Jiu, the capital of the Romanian county of Gorj. It was here that one of the most heroic stands of the First World War took place. On 27 October 1916, German troops amassed on the outskirts of the town. The locals were outgunned and outmanned, but with the help of civilians including a nurse, Ecaterina Teodoroiu, known as the 'heroine of Jiu', they held back the advancing forces on the bridge until more Romanian troops arrived. Counterattacks followed, and fighting remained fierce and bloody until, on 15 November 1916, Târga Jiu fell.

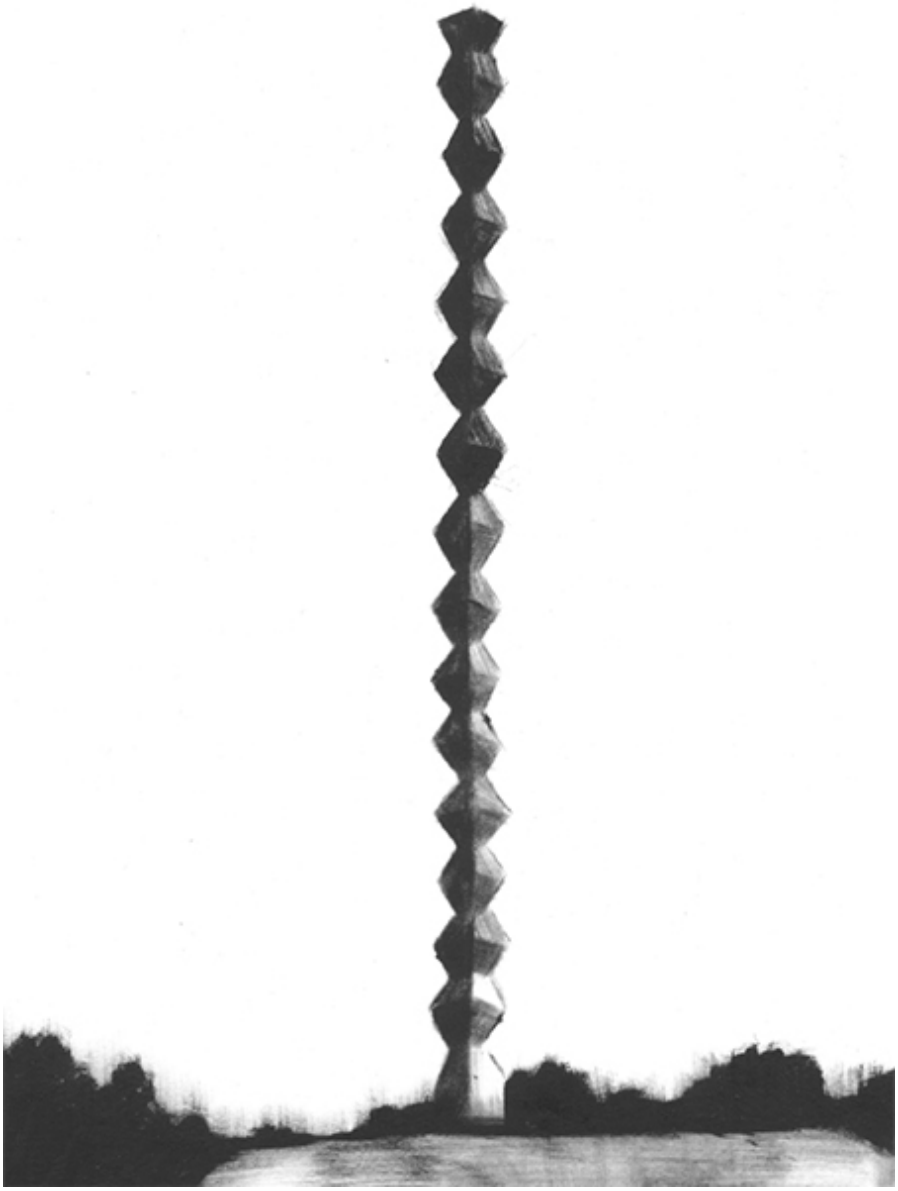
If you visit Târga Jiu today you'll find a sculpture stretching as far into the sky as you can imagine. Matching beads repeat upwards, balancing one upon another, like a magical beanstalk. This is the *Endless Column* by the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuşi, one of the most celebrated works of modern sculpture, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. *Endless Column* was commissioned by the National League of Women from Gorj in honour of those who gave their lives here, but it is a world away from the traditional war memorials we see across our towns and cities. Instead, Brâncuşi chose a shape we've been making for millennia, one tumbling forever upwards into the sky. Here, rooted on Romanian soil, memory is folded into material, made into a marker of love, and loss.

★ ★ ★

The *Star House Totem Pole* had made me think of Brâncuşi's *Endless Column*. Both share the same vertical upright form, both soar heavenwards. And, like the *Angel of the North*, the *Endless Column* is symbolic of a community coming together, held in remembrance, and hope. But I've been busy with work, my day-to-day life of deadlines and curating exhibitions taking priority, so it is not until late in September that I have the time to visit Târga Jiu. In the meantime I found as many photographs of *Endless Column* as I could, absorbed by the ambition and ideas behind the sculpture.

When I arrive at *Endless Column* the sun is blazing, a last gasp of burning heat before the mists of autumn roll through loosening leaves. It is is alone in a park, surrounded by yellowed grasses weary after the dry summer. The most imposing natural forms I see are the distant peaks of the Parâng Mountains surveilling the Jiu Valley. The isolation is deliberate; the artist revealed that he didn't want 'anything but the sky' as a backdrop to the sculpture.[1]

What surprises me is its playfulness. I see joy in shape, pleasure in form, like a child stacking toy bricks as high as they can go. Nearly one hundred feet of cast iron shimmers with delicacy. From a distance its narrowness looks like the shaft of an arrow hovering in the split second before flight. Such effortlessness takes precision. And because it stands alone, with only sky behind and around it, it's impossible to get a sense of its scale. I go closer, craning my neck backwards to take in just how far up Brâncuşi managed to go, but I can't. The sun spins sharp splints of light over the reflective surface of the sculpture, blinding me.



Constantin Brâncuşi, *Endless Column*, 1938, cast iron

Perhaps it is because the sun is so bright today, light recalibrating my vision, the brass-covered cast-iron of Brâncuşi's column glistening like desert sands, that I think of ancient Egyptian obelisks. Maybe it is also the beads of the sculpture which look like stacked pyramids, echoing upwards into the kind of blue sky I rarely meet in England. As with the totem pole, obelisk is a name given by a different culture, coming from the ancient Greek obeliskos.[2] It is the Roman historian Pliny the Elder who tells us that the Egyptian name – tekhen – comes from the shape of a solar ray, the tapering golden threads we sometimes catch for a split second made manifest in material.[3] Another

translation of tekhen is 'to pierce the sky', words which once again capture a bolt of dazzling light, confident and clear like the emanating yellow rays of a child's drawing.[4]

On my way back to Bucharest I look over my photographs of *Endless Column* and see that, somehow, they show these rays of sunshine, formless matter appearing on my screen like those hovering ghosts in nineteenth-century daguerreotypes.

Constantin Brâncuşi is today lionised as one of the greats of modern Western sculpture, the simplicity of his abstraction clear of the self-consciousness that leadens so much twentieth-century art, but it wasn't always that way.

In 1926, Brâncuşi was due to hold an exhibition in New York, and shipped a sculpture called *Bird in Space* across the Atlantic. It was classified as a work of art, and therefore not subject to import duty. But on the day it arrived in New York, a customs appraiser named F.J.H. Kracke was on duty. And he was not amused. The sculpture he saw was an abstract work of silken bronze, not a faithful reproduction of a bird. Taking matters into his own hands he contacted 'several men high in the world of art' to ask their opinion. 'If that is art then I'm a bricklayer,' declared one, and *Bird in Space* was duly reclassified into the 'household and hospital utensils in metal' division (and subject to a forty per cent duty).[5]

Brâncuşi had paid $229.35 for the assessment, and sued the United States Customs Court in New York for the return of his money. The subsequent case – arguing whether or not *Bird in Space* was art – was a gift to journalists. One headline splashed 'Why They Think Mr. Brâncuşi's Famous "Bird in Flight" is Not Meaningless Junk' and within the courtroom record there are many gems, including a judge, Justice Young, whom I imagine as straight out of central casting, wizened and peering over his desk to reveal his definition of what a bird was: 'If you saw it in the forest you would not take a shot at it?' he enquired of a witness.[6]

The artist won his case, although history does not relate the bricklaying career of Kracke's art expert. Brâncuşi had redefined sculpture in United States law. *Bird in Space*, with its sensuous evocation of the split-second trace left by a bird gliding through air, shows us a new way of seeing our world. I don't believe for a second that Justice Young's gun would have got close to this wheeling, diving form.

Despite this inauspicious start, Brâncuşi loved the United States, in particular the sky-soaring architecture. When he first glimpsed New York

from his arriving ship in 1926, he exclaimed, 'Why, it is my studio! … All these blocks, all these pieces to be shifted and juggled with, as the experiment grows and changes'.[7] In an interview which appeared in the *New York Times* the same year (perhaps riding high on the publicity the court case received) he declared 'the architecture of New York – the great skyscrapers – gives me the sensation of a great new poetic art.'[8]

But there is one interview in particular that catches my attention. On the same trip to America, Brâncuşi saw the Washington Monument and declared his ambition to make a column in Central Park that would 'be greater than any building, three times higher than your obelisk in Washington'. At the top of this imaginary column Brâncuşi said he 'would have my bird – a great bird poised on the tip of my infinite column'.[9] Was he thinking of his *Bird in Space*, its sleek form delineated in the modernity of polished brass?[10] But I think back to those ancient Egyptian obelisks raised in honour of the sun god Ra, whose human body has the head of a bird. Brâncuşi making an explicit comparison to the obelisk intrigues me and I spend some time researching the Washington Monument. It was raised in 1884, the same year as the opening of the Pitt Rivers Museum and the amendment of the Indian Act in Canada, and designed by Robert Mills, a man who understood the power of history, so I'm interested that he chose the obelisk, that sought-after sentinel of power and prestige in foreign lands.

Where *Endless Column* stands close to the Jiu River that was so contested in the autumn of 1916, loss repeating in its depths, the obelisk announces its bellicose origins proudly. It was the Romans who found them particularly appealing. Here, writ large in granite quarried from the shores of the Nile, was a tangible shape of conquest. The difficulty in shifting, transporting and raising these upright structures weighing up to five hundred tonnes spoke to a sophisticated understanding of engineering, as well as copious funds. To vanquish the civilisation who could build such ambitious forms, and then drag them back home, was the ultimate veni, vidi, vici. Today there are more obelisks in Rome than in Egypt.

By the nineteenth century we see obelisks reaching skywards across the rising suns of the West. Cleopatra's Needles, a pair of ancient obelisks built originally for Heliopolis, were separated; one raised in London, the other New York. Here they speak to the new systems of power, not just governmental. The transport to New York was paid for by a Vanderbilt, perhaps a nineteenth-century successor to the Caesars at the dawn of the new American civilisation. Thinking back to the Washington Monument that so impressed Brâncuşi, I'm troubled at first that Mills picked a shape so

associated with conquest and contest to commemorate George Washington, a liberator, the mythic embodiment of the ideals of nationhood. And then I realise that this obelisk announced the contest as *over*; the United States was the new power, a statement in stone as strong as the sun rising over the Nile.

In the rippling heat in Romania, I look again at the *Endless Column*. I believe it stands for more than conflict remembered; that something else hums within its forms. But what? Although Brâncuşi never used the word totem as a title in his works, their mostly hand-carved shapes, and his preference for using natural materials, has led a host of curators and writers to describe them as 'totemic'.[11] There is also a whole subcategory of modern design based on Brâncuşi's 'totems'. Over coffee I play around on the internet and discover you can buy a 'Totem Floor Lamp', that 'looks to the ideas of Brâncuşi'[12]. But this is no help, and so I head to a place called Hobiţa. It lies around thirty kilometres north of Târga Jiu, deeper into the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. This tiny hamlet in western Romania is where Brâncuşi was born and I visit what is now marketed as the Constantin Brâncuşi House Museum.

Getting out of the car the first thing that strikes me is the silence; there is only birdsong, pierced by the occasional toll of a cow's bell. A simple sign is carved in stone beside an elaborate wooden gate where loose patterns weave their way up and round the vertical posts. The tallest things here are the trees, lining the way past a well and some tumbledown outbuildings towards a one-storey wooden house. The interiors are plain, the hand-made materials bestowing a spare elegance that now takes money to achieve. Walking through the three rooms of this tiny house, I bend down to avoid knocking my head on the low door frames. But this is all staged; a set-up. The actual house Brâncuşi lived in alongside his parents and six siblings over one hundred and fifty years ago is long rotted.

In the modest garden of the museum, perching on a stone, I think about the myths that rise up around artists. There is a romance to Brâncuşi's origins that permeates so much of the writing about him. We learn that he was from a poor peasant family, and worked as a shepherd from the age of seven before he succeeded in his various attempts to run away from home. Later on, he walked most of the fifteen-hundred-mile journey from Bucharest to Paris to seek his fortune, like a latter-day Dick Whittington. Of course even today artists need a backstory, a narrative that can be packaged and sold to curators and collectors. And Brâncuşi himself added to the mystique, always fond of a

gnomic aphorism. 'To see far, that is one thing; to go there, that is another' is an illuminating example, and I can't help but think he would have done well on Instagram.[13]

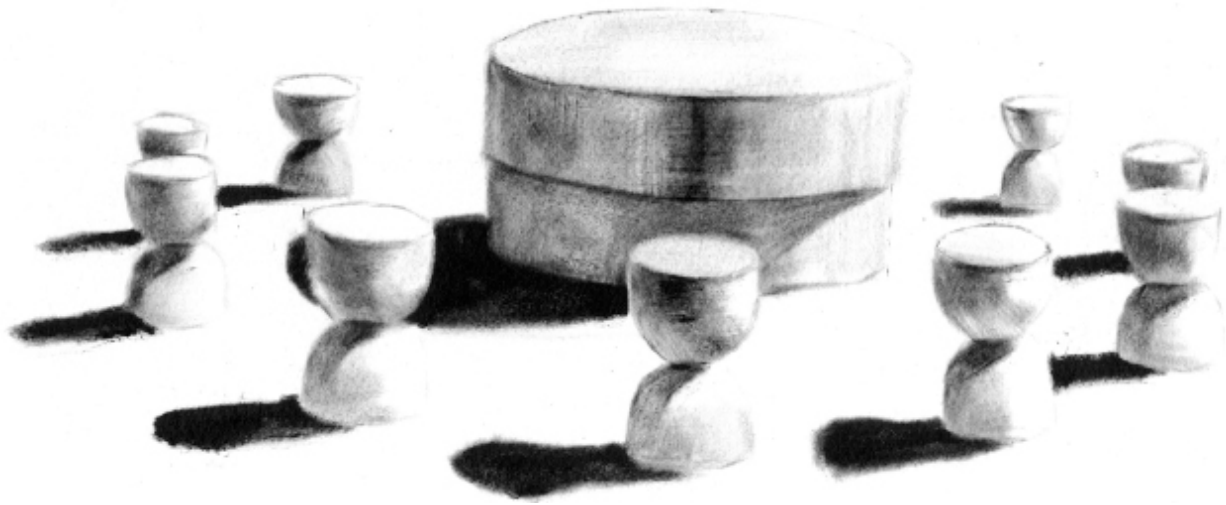
Later I spend a few hours reading the more whimsical versions of Brâncuşi's life, enjoying the myth-making, before alighting upon the winning quotation, which tells me that Brâncuşi 'conjures the image of a travelling hermit, an old soul arrived from Eastern Europe, carrying with him the essence of modernity'.[14] That feels ridiculous, as though Brâncuşi was created from an old Romanian folk tale, making no allowance for his ambition, deep dedication to his work and experimentation with form and material. But the use of the word 'essence' here is deliberate.

What Brâncuşi wanted to do with his sculpture was to distill it; to lessen the noise and create what he called 'the essence of things'.[15] This quotation has been used to explain Brâncuşi's sculpture for decades, and is the title of numerous Brâncuşi exhibitions. What does it mean? If we think back to that *Bird in Space* which so confused poor Mr Kracke in the United States Customs department, there is no beak, no wings. Instead it looks supersonic, a form we glimpse in the corner of an eye as it slices through the air. We sense the *being* of the bird, wind gasping past feathers in the outer reaches of the sky. Brâncuşi did not believe that outer form could even hint at the truth of our existence. How can the banality of a nose or foot convey the simple, extraordinary heartbeat of life?

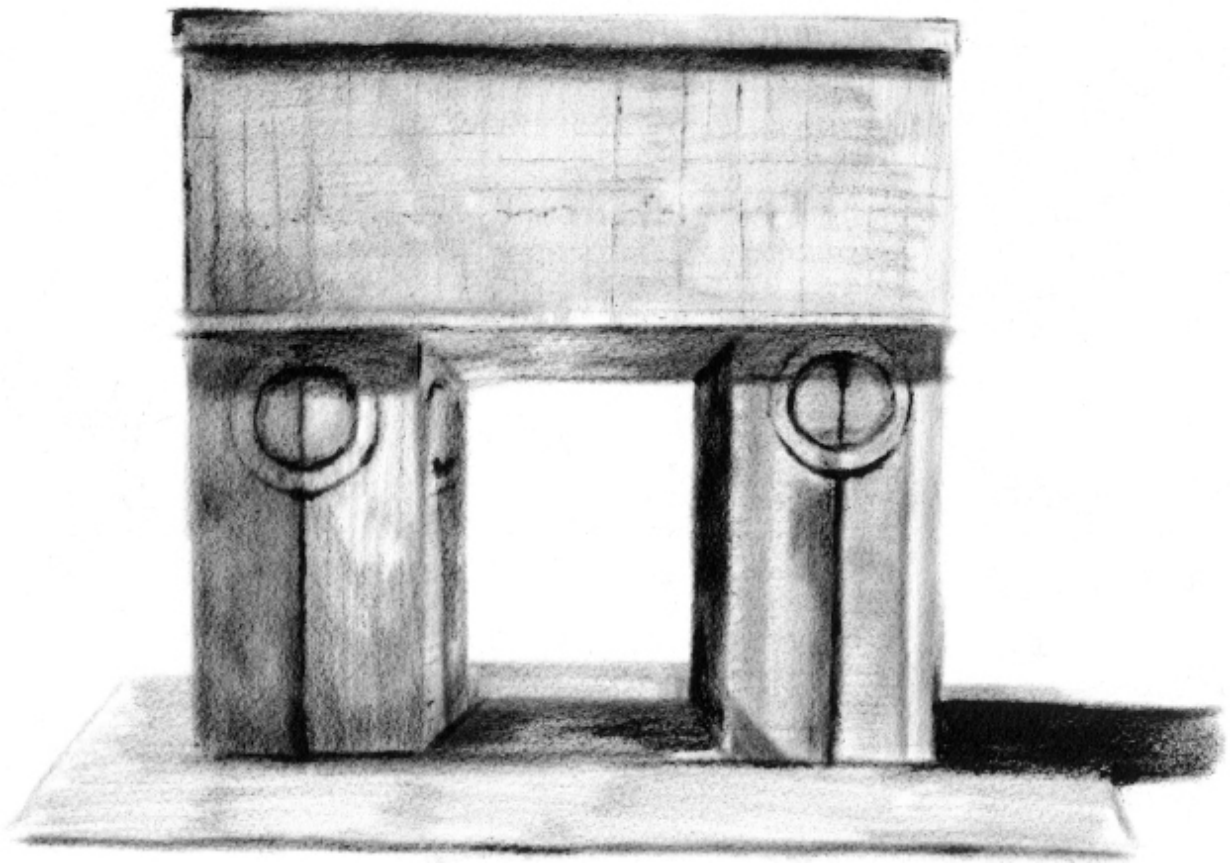
But still I can't quite see what Brâncuşi is guiding us towards in the *Endless Column*, and so I decide to follow the trail he laid out for us. In Târga Jiu Brâncuşi sited three sculptures along a straight line from the western limits of the town to the *Endless Column* in an escalating narrative of sculpture. I begin at the furthest part, in a park on the banks of the Jiu River, where we find his first work in the trio, *Table of Silence*. A large slab of circular Romanian limestone, with twelve seats set around it, recalling the twelve disciples gathering together in the most famous meal of Western art, *The Last Supper*. Surely we are meant to think of this, faces of those soldiers who died here populating our thoughts, a final breaking of bread for this band of brothers before the day of battle dawns. I find this symbolism too obvious, the mawkishness more fitting for Hollywood than this sculptor who exercises such a light touch in his material thinking. But later I look over my notes from the day and read that I saw *Table of Silence* as an altar slab, ready for sacrifice. Perhaps I'm not as immune to this tug of the heartstrings as I thought.

What sings most clearly to me is that *Table of Silence* is a meditation on the passing of time, or lost time. The number of stools set around the table is twelve, the number we use to measure our days, nights and years. The stools themselves, with their flowing curved lines, are shaped like hourglasses, and from above this arrangement in stone reads like a clock face. Time beats on, leaving silent chairs in all our lives. Brâncuşi had an affinity with his materials, and he chose Romanian limestone for this sculpture, a natural substance formed over millennia. Here by the banks of the River Jiu, as water flows past from the Şureanu Mountains, we enter into a space between times; the time of a human life, and geological time, the deep time of water and mountains.

A wide path takes me from *Table of Silence* towards the centre of Târga Jiu, but still in the park which, after the strong summer, seems defeated, the grass dead ochre and brown. About one hundred and fifty yards from the table is the second sculpture in Brâncuşi's trail, *Gate of the Kiss*. From the photographs I have seen in books and lectures this gave the impression of a triumphal arch, those monuments to power, decorated with friezes showing military conquests and allegorical depictions of myth and legend. But in person it is smaller, less heroic in stature, more intimate. Moving underneath *The Gate of the Kiss* feels like walking into a cavernous space, the carved lines glowing in stone like centuries-old hieroglyphics or cave markings, symbols and meaning just outside of our human knowledge.



Constantin Brâncuşi, *Table of Silence*, 1938, Romanian limestone



Constantin Brâncuşi, *Gate of the Kiss*, 1938, travertine marble

The kiss in the title refers to Brâncuşi's early sculpture *The Kiss*. Made in 1907–8 it is a world away from the flamboyant facility of Rodin's celebrated sculpture of the same name. In Brâncuşi's *Kiss* we see two lovers elucidated within the same block of limestone, only a few curves and lines of stone inferring conjoined bodies, shared eyes and lips that cannot be separated. Brâncuşi has used the motif of his kiss to decorate the gate in a repeating pattern, but here it is even more distilled, just two halves within a whole. I see a plaster model of *The Gate of the Kiss* in the National Gallery in Bucharest and there, on a smaller scale and up close, the kiss has become a zygote. This is a space of transformation, a threshold. My local guide tells me that on 31 December every year couples gather to marry in the shadows of the gate, stepping through it into both the new year and a new life.

From here it is almost a mile to *Endless Column*. The path is straight, like a Roman road. I stop for coffee and read over my research. When Brâncuşi announced his intention to best the height of the Washington Monument it was twelve years before *Endless Column* was unveiled in Târga Jiu. But the idea of a tall upright sculpture, with repeating diamonds on its trunk, was one

he had been working through for a while. The earliest iteration that we know of was made in 1918 and is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Here the column is etched into being from the trunk of an oak; the wood shows the marks left by Brâncuşi's tools: it is rough, loose and reminds me of the diamond patterns dancing up the wooden gateposts that I saw in Hobiţa. It also makes me think of the geometric undulations of the *Shigir Idol* made over eleven thousand years before, that grand expanse of time shrunk by our shared human connection.

In the 1920s, Brâncuşi carved another piece of wood, taken from a felled tree found in the garden of his friend Edward Steichen's villa in France. This time the column reached twenty-three feet into the air. It was restored to the garden from which it had come, a tangible symbol of new life, or rebirth. Steichen said that he had never before seen the 'great beauty of his garden' until Brâncuşi's sculpture revealed it to him.[16] This reminds me of a story told by the British sculptor David Nash. In the 1980s, the owner of some land in Ireland gave Nash the use of a huge dead elm tree for his sculpture. Nash cut the tree from the top, leaving 'a huge trunk and big branch'. These were like a ladder climbing into the clouds, and Nash tells how 'a neighbouring farmer said he'd like to go up those steps and have a Guinness with God'.[17] This idea of a stairway to heaven – with or without the Guinness – acting as a connecting site to the divine features across cultures is known as an axis mundi. An axis mundi is a spiritual concept that finds expression in a number of ways, usually in a place or object that reaches from the very centre of the earth up to the heavens. I look for Romanian examples of the axis mundi and learn that in Romanian tradition the tree is a mythic representation of the connection between earth and sky, rooted deeply in the soil and stretching up to another realm. Romania is lush with forest; the Carpathian Mountains, so graced with beech and oak, spruce and fir, are home to Europe's largest remaining old-growth forests. One researcher has described the mythic tree as the 'archaic totem' of Romania and states that 'abstract representation of these trees, as repeated diamonds, is common in Romanian folk art'.[18]

I continue on my journey in Târga Jiu, along what has now become known, somewhat sentimentally, as the Heroes' Way. As I walk I realise that it is through these three sculptures that we go from the most basic of human needs, eating and gathering together at a table, through the threshold of life, ending in a soaring, heaven-tipping sculpture. Brâncuşi drew our attention to the supernal aspect of this sculptural path, telling us that '*Endless Column* is like an eternal song which leads us to infinity beyond all artificial pain and

joy'.[19] When Aretia Tatarascu, the head of the Women's League of Gorj who had first commissioned Brâncuşi, saw the finished column at Târgu Jiu, she asked the artist what she should call it.

'Let's call it a stairway to heaven,' Brâncuşi replied.[20]

In Târga Jiu he has created a metaphorical, as well as material, journey; low to high, heavy to light, earth to sky. Here sculpture is transcendent, shaking off the dirt of the earth in our grasp towards the infinite.

On the plane back to London, I take out my things to prepare for a new exhibition, and start to read about one of my favourite sculptors, the British abstract artist Barbara Hepworth. It must be serendipity, because I find out that in 1932 she visited Brâncuşi in his Paris studio. Here, amidst the 'inches of accumulated dust and chips on the floor' she found the 'great eternal column in wood', a version of his *Endless Column*.[21]

Closing my eyes, I go back to when I first saw *Endless Column*, set in a large circle of grass. It was just after midday, and, backlit by the blazing sun, shimmering like a fish, the clear line of the column's shadow struck the ground like a giant sundial. Time repeating in its echoing beads, searching ever upwards, beyond our reach. As I think of the repetition in glinting geometry of that one simple motif, I wonder if it also represents us. For our combat and conflicts, loves and losses, ring out across time, without end. Brâncuşi's sculptural installation commemorating those who died defending Târga Jiu was inaugurated in October 1938.

Within less than a year, Europe would once again be at war.

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3

Single Form

In 1961, Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General of the United Nations, was in his office in New York. On the walls hung 'a very good Picasso, a good Gris, a Braque and a Leger'.[1] He also had a sculpture by Barbara Hepworth. On the surface, the pair were unlikely friends. Hammarskjöld, a Swedish economist, was three years into his second term leading the United Nations. He was at the heart of international politics, intervening in the Suez crisis in 1956 and establishing the United Nations Peacekeeping force to support the establishment of democracy in Congo. Hepworth was a British sculptor, born and brought up in Yorkshire and now working in a small studio in a fishing village on England's Cornish coast.

But the two shared what Hammarskjöld described as a 'kinship'. In 1961 he wrote to Hepworth, sharing his belief that she articulated in sculpture the role and ambition of the United Nations in the world, adding that, 'I promise you that we shall, for our part, continue as well as we can to model in action and words what you are so fortunate to express, to perfection, visibly and tangibly'.[2]

Three months later, Hammarskjöld was dead.

★ ★ ★

Cornwall, situated on the southwestern tip of England, is the most remote of its counties, and has long been a home for legend and myth. Tales of titans, shipwrecks and Arthurian knights are poured into a landscape abundant with

megalithic and ancient holy sites, each stratum of the earth layered with histories and peoples.

I am on my way to Cornwall, following in the footsteps of Barbara Hepworth, who moved there in 1939 as Europe teetered on the brink of war. When I read about Hepworth visiting Brâncuşi, I thought of the connections between them. Both made forms which flow, carving curves as dynamic as leaping salmon. And both were tasked to make sculpture as memorial. After Dag Hammarskjöld's death, a grieving Hepworth was commissioned by the United Nations to make a sculpture in his memory. In 1964 she unveiled *Single Form*, an abstract bronze that still stands today. Beside the glistening modern architecture of the United Nations Secretariat Building in Manhattan, New York City, we find whispers of ancient stones and Neolithic burial mounds, the call of seabirds echoing across oceans.

Arriving by train into St Ives in Cornwall is spectacular. In 1877, a short branch line opened between St Ives and St Erth, designed to transport both fish and Victorian tourists. Today the line is still open, and on this most picturesque of passenger journeys, my windows are filled with luscious greenery, golden beaches and endless seas. The train passes Carbis Bay, with its perfect sands and clear water, where Hepworth first lived in Cornwall. But by 1949, she found herself at a crossroads. She was forty-six, and the house she shared with her husband, the artist Ben Nicholson, had begun to stifle her. Nicholson agreed that she needed a dedicated studio space in which to work 'away from kids & housekeeping & husband'.[3] She soon found one. A property known as Trewyn Studio in St Ives was for sale by auction, and Hepworth wanted it, writing to a friend that it 'is all I desire to develop my work & give me peace'.[4] Springing into action, she even took out a loan against her husband's life insurance.

The auction was taking place at the Palais de Danse in St Ives, the local dance hall and cinema. With her finances in place, Hepworth made her way there, and, taking a seat in the crowded room, felt that 'my heart was pounding so much I thought my ribs could not contain it'.[5] She was successful, but wrote the day after the auction that 'I have never gambled before & made up for it yesterday'. Trewyn was a huge undertaking and buying it meant that she was 'utterly ruined, having staked all I possess'. She joked that she was extremely glad of her new conservatory because she'd be living off homegrown mustard and cress for the foreseeable.[6]

Her situation was indeed precarious and, a year later, at the end of 1950, her marriage broke down. She was facing a second divorce, with four children. But at Trewyn, with its garden sanctuary of roses and palm trees,

she felt at peace. There was a magic in the air, and any visitors who walked up steep lanes past white-washed seafarers' cottages to reach her could feel it too.[7] Trewyn was more than just a piece of property. To Hepworth it was freedom, the ability to work and think away from personal responsibilities, and buying it was a statement of intent, of ambition.

Following her divorce she lived at Trewyn, putting her bed in her indoor studio opposite a mirror so that she could enjoy the reflection of 'the rising morning sun', admiring its 'incredible splendour'.[8] Moving here wasn't a retreat from life. Rather it was the opposite. Trewyn is on high ground, like the castles of old, and it became a source of strength for her, where she could grow, build and make in what her friend described as a 'sculptor's paradise'.[9] She created a separate carving studio where the light poured in even from the low winter sun. She enjoyed working in the open air, the squawk of hungry gulls carrying the sounds of the Atlantic Ocean overhead, and took delight in the birds she found nesting near the tiny pond.

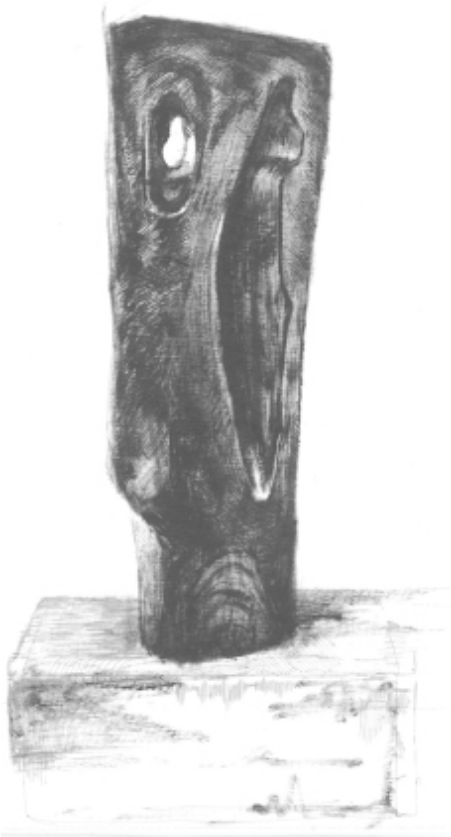
During her first months at Trewyn, Hepworth was drawn to the work of William Wordsworth. Reading his poetry in her garden, she found in his visions of the English landscape new ways of thinking and seeing, his love of the 'beauteous' forms of nature finding physical expression through her chisel and mallet.[10] But in February 1953, she received the news that her eldest son Paul had been killed, throwing her into 'unspeakable anguish'.[11] He had been on active service with the Royal Air Force, and died in a plane crash in Thailand. He was twenty-three years old. The same year she carved her first sculpture with the title *Totem*.

Made from the wood lignum vitae – according to some versions of Arthurian legends, the same material from which Merlin's magical wand was crafted – Totem is an upright sculpture with holes within its form. I see a head in these curved organic lines, an outer skin revealing interior voids, suggesting a dialogue between the internal and external, the hidden and the revealed, what is felt and what is seen. Perhaps 'void' is the wrong word to describe the holes, that interior space articulated by the sculpture. Void speaks of emptiness, but these are not empty. The writer Jeanette Winterson reminds us that 'hole' can also be spelled 'whole'.[12] By drawing our attention to the spaces within, Hepworth introduces the endless possibilities beyond the physical dimensions of material form.

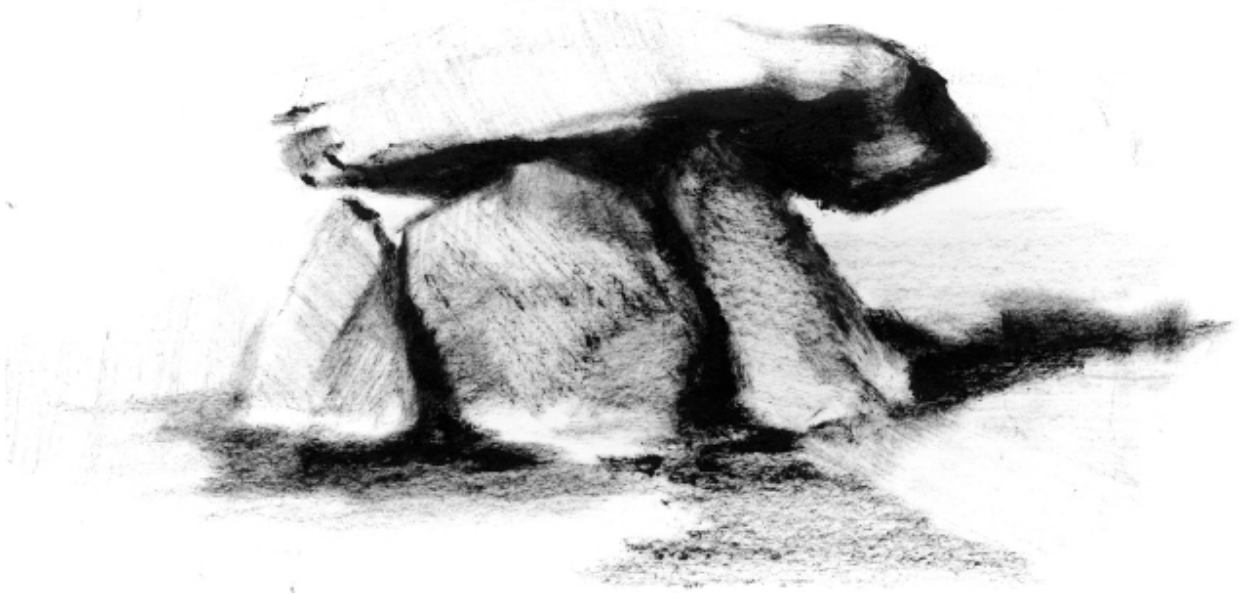
I'm walking in the garden Hepworth made at Trewyn, surrounded by the foliage of the plants and trees she cultivated (her father used to send her a new rose each year, until she uprooted them all to make way for more

sculpture). As seagulls call overhead I think of Hepworth titling her sculpture *Totem*. What did that word mean to her? Perhaps we can find a pointer in an interview she gave to *The Times* in 1968. When asked what she desired for her work, she answered that she wanted to create 'a totem, a talisman, a kind of touchstone for all that is of lasting value'.[13] Here Hepworth is connecting sculpture to something *outside* of time.

Not far from Trewyn, on exposed Cornish moorland where birds wheel and cry in darkening skies, lies a five-thousand-year-old stone construction known as Chûn Quoit. This is a dolmen, a prehistoric stone chamber usually consisting of two or more upright stones with a horizontal capstone laid across the top, like an altar or a roof slab. It is a shape repeated across the world. We see them throughout the Middle East, from Jordan to Syria, while in Korea there are thousands of dolmens (called koindol or chisongmyo) dating from the Bronze to early Iron Ages. Scholars have suggested that these might be burial chambers, or associated with funerary rites. Chûn Quoit is the best preserved of these monuments in western Cornwall. In Hepworth's archival papers she explains that the word Chûn derives from the Cornish 'Chy Goom', which means 'House on the moor' and that when she goes there in the summer, the 'only sound is that of a lark'.[14]



Barbara Hepworth, *Totem*, 1953, wood



Chûn Quoit, West Penwith, Cornwall

In 1961, Hepworth made a sculpture called *Single Form (Chûn Quoit)*. It is a standing bronze with a pitted, textured surface, recalling the lichen-strewn stones of Chûn Quoit itself. If we look at the work straight on, we see an elegant circle on the top left of the sculpture. To me this is the sun, so evocative in readings of ancient stones whose meanings pulse with the solar rhythm. A few miles from Chûn Quoit lies the megalithic site of Carn Kenidjack, which marks the setting of the midwinter sun. Standing here, as the wisps of clouds catch the last light, the wind carries the salt brine of the sea, reminding me of the proximity of the Atlantic Ocean. Before it meets the East Coast of America its waters will lap the land of an archipelago just off the Cornish peninsula. These are the Scilly Isles.

Hepworth took the name of one of Scilly's smallest inhabited islands, Bryher, as the title for another sculpture created in 1961. We can see its relationship to *Single Form (Chûn Quoit)* in their shared upright shapes. But in *Curved Form (Bryher)* Hepworth opens up the circle in the upper portion of the bronze, creating a view through the work. She has also strung copper wire across the front, articulating the space within and around the material. Hepworth described the inspiration for this sculpture as 'being in a boat, and sailing round Bryher, and the water, the island, the movement of course. If I experience something bodily like that, I often get an idea for a sculpture. Bryher is a relationship between the sea and the land'.[15]

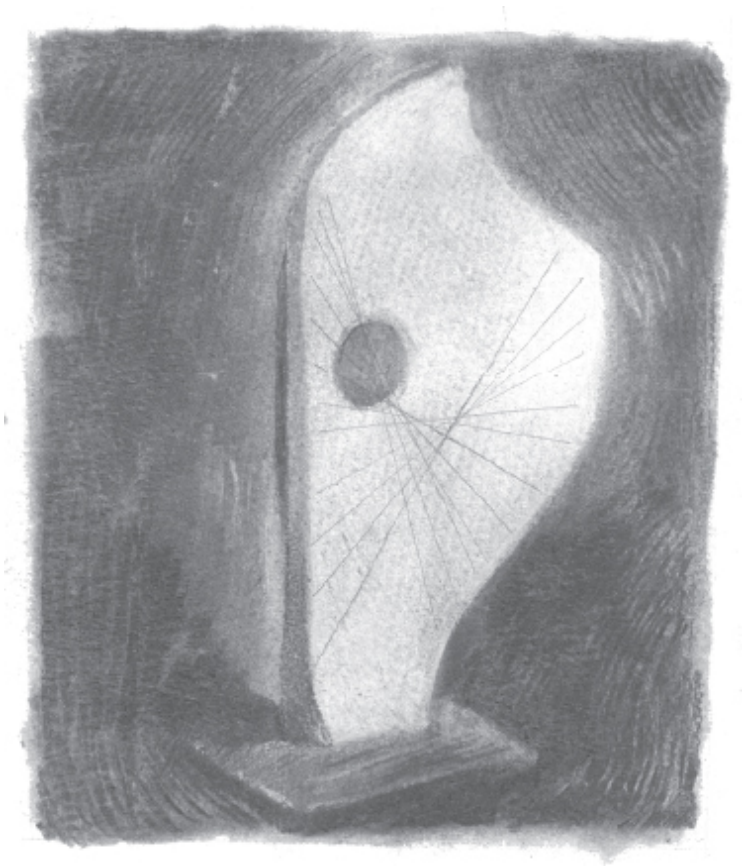


Barbara Hepworth, *Single Form (Chûn Quoit)*, bronze, 1961



Landscape of Bryher, Scilly Isles

I follow in Hepworth's footsteps and take a boat to Bryher. A flock of razorbills skirts the surface of the sea behind us. Bryher's dramatic place names, Hell Bay and Hangman's Island, belie its beauty but hint at an imaginative location beyond the margins of the earth. To get there we sail out past the granite of Land's End, as dolphins slice through water and an opportunist seagull hangs over the undulating curves of our wake. In fact I see curves everywhere; in the waves, the clouds, the gentle hills of Bryher itself, each mirroring the shape of *Curved Form (Bryher)*. It's only when I'm on the ferry back to Penzance that I see a small boat with its sails ballooning out, filled by the wind, and realise this sculpture is the shape of a sail at full pelt, the strings echoing the rigging stretched tightly across the boat's edges.



Barbara Hepworth, *Curved Form (Bryher)*, 1961, bronze

But perhaps those strings also signify the movement of an ocean breeze we can only feel rather than see. They might also suggest rays of sun reaching through low honeycomb clouds to dapple the sea. *Curved Form (Bryher)* is less about an exact evocation of a landscape, and more about how it makes you feel. It's for each of us to bring our own experiences of that breeze rippling across our face, inhaling the brine and seawater smells, catapulting us back to childhood or where we have felt happiest. We can see the sinuous carved lines of the sculpture as Hepworth's response to those ancient rhythms of the landscape and sea that we all sense and understand: the play of light and shadow, the ebb and flow of tides, the slow lap of water against rock creating cavities and internal spaces within the coastline. Hepworth was as much a poet of language as she was of form, and I am drawn in by her description of the Cornish landscape, seduced by her reading of the natural world: 'The sea, a flat diminishing plane, held within itself the capacity to radiate an infinitude of blues, greys, greens, and even pinks of strange hues: the lighthouse and its strange rocky island was an eye; the Island of St Ives an arm, a hand, a face … The incoming and receding tides made strange and wonderful calligraphy on

the pale granite sand which sparkled with feldspar and mica. The rich mineral deposits of Cornwall were apparent on the very surface of things; quartz, amethyst, and topaz; tin and copper below in the old mine shafts, and geology and pre-history'.[16]

Here we are not in our human clock time, but deep time, in the infinity of Hepworth's spaces within her sculpture, where the geology and prehistory she identified are as strong a pull as the tidal heartbeat, that perpetual motion in which – invisible to our eyes – water shapes landscape, as the hard materials of cliff, rock, pebble yield to the sea's movements over millennia. Even those stones that we perceive as solid and permanent will shift and evolve.

There is no stasis in life.

On 17 September 1961, Dag Hammarskjöld boarded a DC-06 passenger aircraft in Leopoldville, the former capital of the Belgian Congo. After gaining independence from Belgium in July 1960, the Republic of Congo had suffered a civil war, and Hammarskjöld was on his way to secret peace negotiations in the region. Shortly after midnight, his plane crashed. There were no survivors.

A week beforehand, he had written to Hepworth from his Manhattan office about the second sculpture of hers he had just installed there, detailing the 'great joy' it gave him.[17] This was *Hollow Form (Churinga III)*. A churinga (also spelled tjuringa) is a sacred, spiritual object for the Indigenous Arrernte language groups of Central Australia. The churinga are associated with Indigenous Australian deep time and creation stories, an epoch known by Westerners as 'The Dreaming'.[18] I'm fascinated when I read that 'The Dreaming is difficult for people of western culture to comprehend because western norms such as the idea of linear time are not followed'.[19] The churinga are used within initiation rites, their meaning only available to those who have been admitted. As objects that occupy an ineffable threshold space, I am not surprised therefore when I see the churinga mistakenly described as totems in Western literature. How intriguing then that *Hollow Form (Churinga III)* is carved from the same wood, lignum vitae, as Hepworth's 1953 *Totem*. Hepworth was meticulous in her choice of material; lignum vitae is the Latin for 'wood of life'.

Hammarskjöld had been keen to commission Hepworth to create a large-scale sculpture for the United Nations headquarters in New York, and prior to his death the pair had been discussing where to site it, even talking

through 'the kind of shapes he liked'.[20] She said later that she had made *Single Form (Chûn Quoit)* with 'Dag in mind', and when she heard of his death in September, Hepworth fell into 'a kind of despair' and titled the sculpture she was currently making *Single Form (September)*.[21] Both these sculptures are simple, elegant forms, with a perfect circle incised on their surface. Some art historians have read them as shields, but I see them as standing stones, those silent sentinels of the land, especially as she gives one the name of that ancient chamber echoing on Cornish moorland, Chûn Quoit.

I go to see *Single Form (September)* on display in Hepworth's upstairs room in Trewyn, and although the perfect smoothness of the circle is astonishing, my eye is drawn to the concentric rippling of the walnut rings, struck through by a darkness surging across the diagonal. After this she made another single form called *Memorial* 'just to console myself, because I was so upset'.[22] Here the artist has taken the shapes of *Chûn Quoit* and *September*, but the circle is pierced, like a heart, recalling the imaginative sky circle within *Bryher*.

Earlier in 1961, Hepworth had finalised the purchase of a building across the road from Trewyn. Her indoor studio had become too small for her ambitions, and she needed more space if she was to make significant public sculpture in bronze. The Palais de Danse had come up for sale, the place where she had ventured, heart pumping, to bid for Trewyn less than ten years before. The architecture of the Palais gave her the height to work on a grand scale; no more would she have to create makeshift scaffolding in the garden at Trewyn, lights fixed precariously so that she could work through the night.[23]

I'm taken behind the scenes at the Palais as it is being prepared for a major refurbishment by the Tate Gallery, which now owns it. The chiming bells of St Ia's Church, built from Cornish granite and consecrated in the fifteenth century, reach in through the windows. I walk around the small bar left over from its previous life, and into the dance hall. The music used to flood over the road into Trewyn, keeping Hepworth awake at night. It still has a row of floor-to-ceiling mirrors at one end, and at the other, a stage, recalling the ballet classes held here during the Second World War. Hepworth changed very little, getting straight to work. Her commission for the United Nations Secretariat Building was formalised in November 1961, and she spent that winter in St Ives – despite its 'zero weather' – at 'hard and exacting' work on *Single Form*.[24] It was on a chequerboard floor at the Palais that she laid out the outline for the twenty-one foot sculpture that would

make its way across the Atlantic Ocean, an outline that is still visible on the floor today, like the impression of a fossil. Hepworth said later that *Curved Form (Bryher)* was 'really the beginning' of the United Nations commission, its wind-blown shape informing her thoughts, along with that sun circle incised into the bronze of *Single Form (Chûn Quoit)*.[25] But perhaps Bryher had more of an influence than the salt-scented curves of the sea, for the island is also the site of one of the largest Bronze Age burial sites in northwestern Europe, Shipman Head. How intriguing, then, that Hepworth looked to this wild, tiny island facing headlong into the Atlantic to create a memorial to her friend, killed on his way to initiate peace talks.

We have long made monuments to our dead, marking their lives in quoits, cairns or standing stones. From archival material, we know that at the time she was working on the United Nations sculpture Hepworth was thinking explicitly of standing stones, writing of her belief that 'the standing stone is a sign of our desire for survival and security'.[26] Our survival and security; I can't think of a simpler way to describe the ambitions of the United Nations.

What is most noticeable about *Single Form* is its texture. The Secretariat Building is a shimmering rectangle of sharp edges, with the sun's rays refracting onto the windowed façade like a chessboard of mirrors. The skyscraper was designed by a group of international architects including Le Corbusier and was opened in the summer of 1950. From the inside, views take in the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building. But Hepworth has created a deliberate contrast with the glass-sheened perfection of the Secretariat and its surroundings; her surface is almost pockmarked, gouges and scratches made using axes and hatchets, and at one point she even dragged a rake across the plaster model she used to create the finished bronze sculpture. Here ancient veins of rock and stone are evoked, rivulets of rainwater furrow into grooves, and deep time is signalled amidst the post-war modernity of New York City.[27]



Barbara Hepworth, *Single Form*, 1961–64, bronze

On 11 June 1964, Hepworth gave a speech to the great and good who gathered in Manhattan at the unveiling of her sculpture, a work made in a remote fishing town on England's coast, bringing with it the swell of the ocean and the song of a lark over Chûn Quoit, that Neolithic burial chamber on the north Cornish moors. *Single Form* was sited at the entrance to the Secretariat, the assortment of flags gusting nearby a reminder of the optimism of this gathering of nations. Here there is no parenthesis in the title; this is the ultimate single form, uniting us. The sculptor's words rang out to the crowds:

‘The United Nations is our conscience. If it succeeds it is our success. If it fails it is our failure.’[28]

Back in St Ives, I’ve walked from Hepworth’s studio in Trewyn to Porthminster Beach, a crescent of sand that stretches along the eastern side of St Ives. My hotel room is perched on a rocky outcrop beside this beach, and I’d been woken early by the noise of the tide against these granite forms, as loud and relentless as an approaching train. I go for a walk on the beach, looking across to Godrevy Lighthouse, and the bay of St Ives, with its smuggler tour boats at anchor, seals bobbing between them.

One of the peculiarities of St Ives is that because it is a peninsula, you can watch the sun and moon both rise and set over the sea. In 1966, Hepworth made another sculpture called *Single Form*, this time *Single Form (Sun and Moon)*. It is only five inches high, and similar in composition to the monumental sculpture which stands within a circular pool of water in midtown Manhattan, a stone’s throw from the East River. Here though, the surface is polished bronze, an evocation of dazzling solar reflections, and instead of a single hole, two incised spheres dance together.

Writing about *Single Form (Sun and Moon)*, Hepworth said that, having lived in St Ives for ‘a quarter of a century, I have observed both the Sun and the Moon rise over the water, and set over the water, in ever varying aspects’.[29] Here on the beach, I think about the connections between sculpture and the sea; between form and flow in this place of covering and uncovering, of transition and transformation. Hepworth was drawn to the sea, particularly ‘the movement, the sound & the way it shapes the rocks & throws us towards the pebbles & leaves the sign of its rhythms on the sand’.[30]

In those rhythms we can perhaps hear the drumming echoes of previous lives issuing across the ancient Cornish landscape, a distant beat found in its standing stones and the lap of water against rock. As I listen for those echoes, I begin to think of sculptures that sit in this place between land and water; a place where, as in Hepworth’s sculpture, we see time begin again every day, as sun and moon rise across glistening waves.

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Part Two

Between Land and Water

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4

The Comb of the Wind

On the northern coast of Spain, within ancient Basque Country, lies a crescent of water which arcs around the land like a seashell. Here, as wind and waves roll in from the Bay of Biscay, they meet the beach in a city with two names. This place of land and sea is known in the Basque language as Donostia, and in Spanish as San Sebastián. The Basques are an Indigenous people whose home for centuries has been the western foothills of the Pyrenees, at the point where that mountain range reaches over to southwestern France and northern Spain. Archaeological evidence suggests they have lived here for millennia. The Basque Country is an outsider description for this distinct culture; in the Basque language it is known as Euskal Herria, a specific reference to Euskara, their language, which is distinct in origin from any other, and one of the oldest still spoken in Europe.

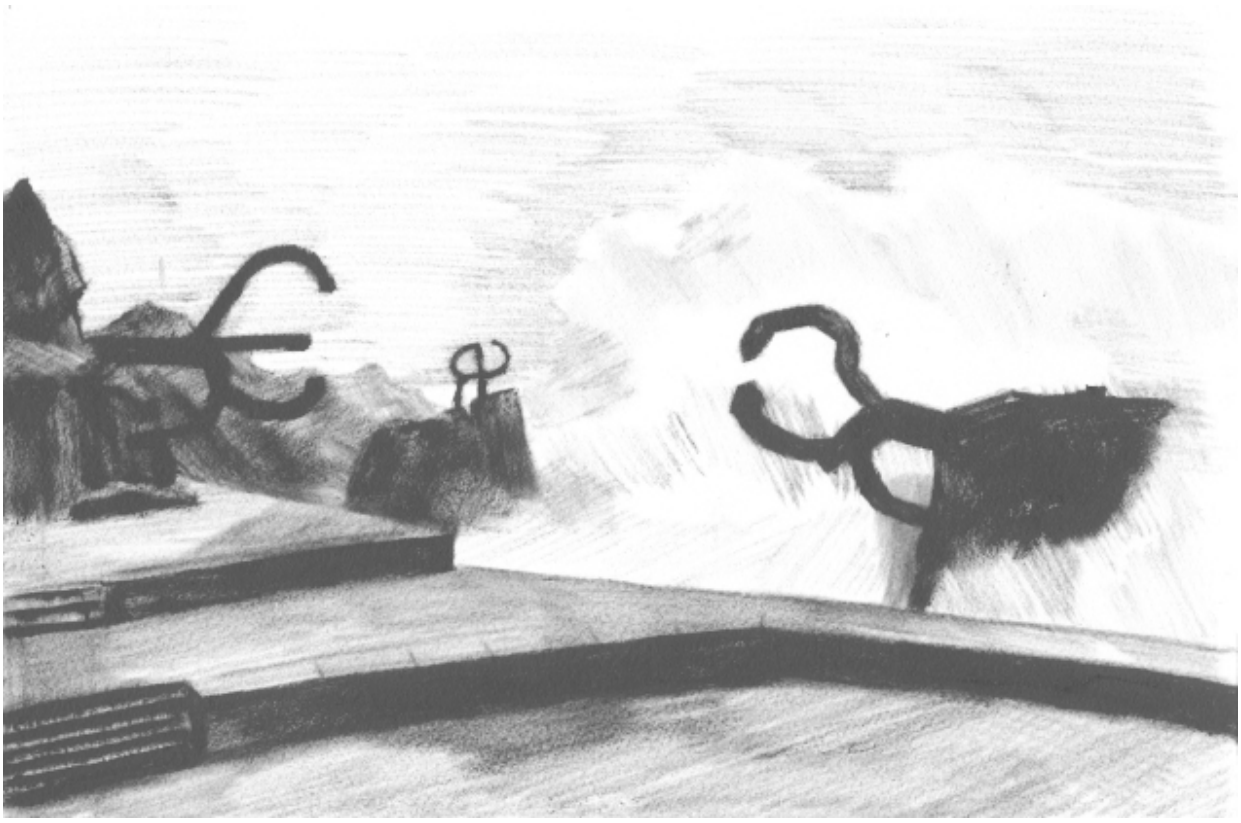
Donostia-San Sebastián is now famed for its Michelin-starred restaurants and 'pintxos', small savoury bites to be enjoyed over conversation and a drink. But if you walk just beyond the end of its curving bay, a place where mountainous headlands face into shipwreck waves, you will turn a corner and find three sculptures, each one wrought in steel and anchored onto its rocks.

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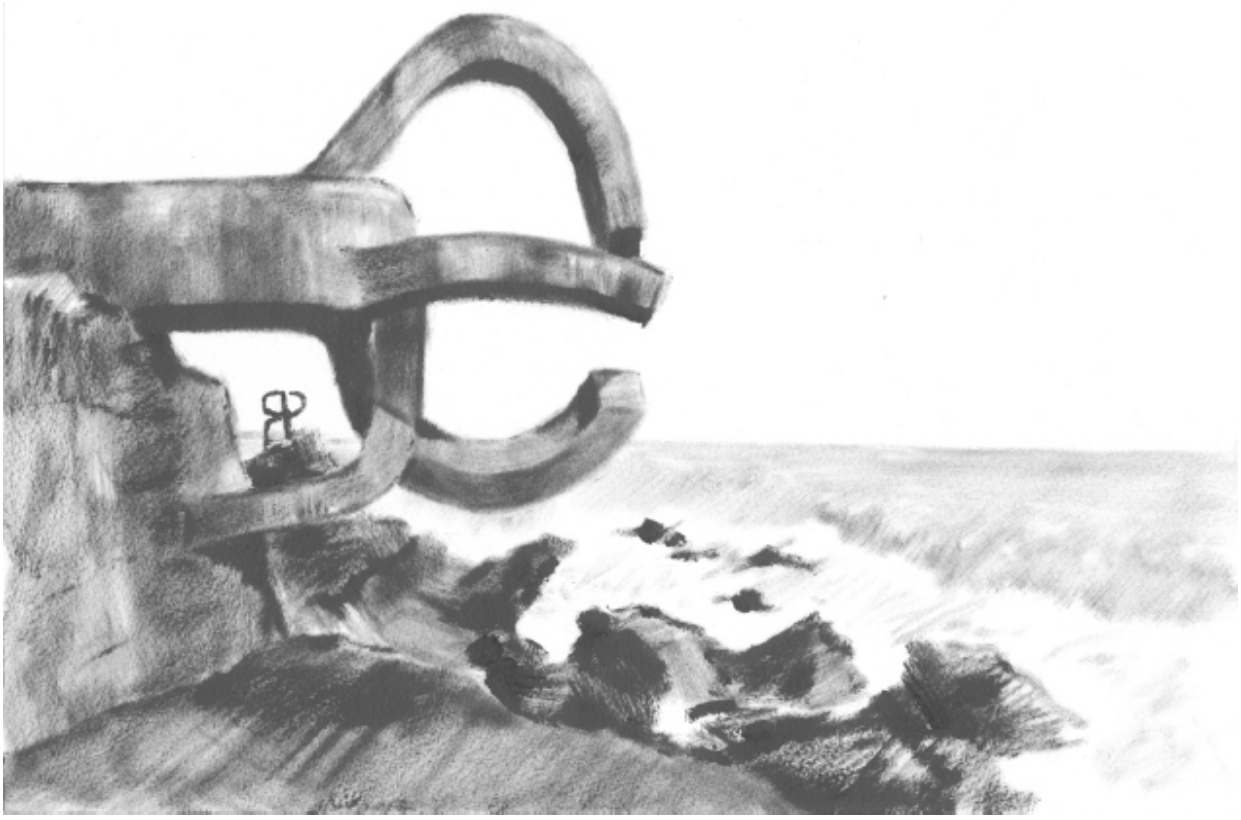
The way in which Hepworth's work speaks of the sea, like putting a seashell to your ear and hearing its distant roar, suggested the many sculptures which sit in that place between land and sea. And one in particular was calling to me; *The Comb of the Wind* by Eduardo Chillida. This was sited in Donostia-

San Sebastián in 1977 in collaboration with the Basque architect Luis Peña Ganchegui. It is one work made up of three individual sculptures, rather like a trio of musicians coming together to play one piece, each part as necessary as the other.

Donostia-San Sebastián is itself a place of the in-between, where the swell of the Atlantic Ocean finds land in the rocks of the Pyrenees. Today the light is cold but clear, casting a simplicity of colour; the water is blue, the sands yellow. People dive into the wide breakers that flow up onto the beach. This bay is known as La Concha, shell in Spanish, a reference to its shape which fans open like a semicircle. The tiny island of Santa Clara rises in the middle of the bay, surrounded on either side by two mountains, Monte Urgull and Monte Igueldo. As I walk along the promenade, its celebrated railings hinting at a Belle Époque past, I see signs that warn of large waves, but there is no trace of them this morning. I'm heading towards the western end of La Concha where, at the foot of a mountain, I'll find *The Comb of the Wind*. I try to catch a glimpse of the sculptures as I follow the curve of La Concha's beach, but they are obscured by this daring landscape, darting in and out of view. At the end of the bay, as sand becomes rock, I start to smell seaweed, a fresh saltiness biting the wind as it changes direction. I know I am close, but still I can't see the sculptures. Instead there are steps and cobbles made of red Spanish granite, with a low wall running alongside the sea. I start to make my way along this walkway and it is here, in this place just beyond the city, that I come to *The Comb of the Wind*.



Eduardo Chillida, *The Comb of the Wind* (*El Peine del Viento* XV), 1976, steel



The Comb of the Wind (detail)

Three sculptures clasp on to separate masses of land. They appear at first to be entirely abstract, curving organic lines of metal which form a shape I can't recognise, like some sort of symbol or the letters of an ancient alphabet. One reaches from the cliffside itself; this is the one I can get closest to, even touch, as I share my footing with it. But the other two are beyond my reach. One is on a tall rocky outcrop just to the right of the walkway, the one you see first as you round the corner. And in the distance, drawing our eyeline towards the horizon, the third piece stands upright on a rock within the sea. These sculptures are made from steel, designed to withstand water and wind. I am here just before lunchtime, and in that unforgiving midday sun, rust glistens over their forms, illuminating red grooves in the rocks, carved over decades by the flow of water.

I have to admit that when I first saw them, I felt a pang of disappointment. I had imagined them as spectacular, grandiose. Sculpture with a power over its environment, like Neptune's trident overcoming the vicissitudes of the ocean. I had hoped for something that took your breath away the moment you encountered it. But that's not what happens here. It takes more than a moment for me to realise that is the point. The longer I

spend here, the more they become part of the landscape. My attention is drawn to the waves which, even on a still day, roll over and around the sculptures. I hear the crashes and splashes of water as it rushes through rock.

I go back again at sunset. It is golden hour, when the light is softer, and smudged lines of warm pink echo across the sky. But if the light is more forgiving, the water is not. There is a powerful swell to the ocean which seems as though it is gearing up for a bravura performance. This time it is a different experience; drenching waves crash up and over the walls where I sat this afternoon, and water pools onto the stones where I stand alongside my fellow visitors. If earlier we were participants, now we are an audience, moving away from the sculptures as it gets darker, all huddled together for the best view of the next spectacular wave, like a crowd at a fireworks display. And then the sun goes down, leaving the sculptures as silhouettes against a clear black sky. Now, with no light to guide me, their forms appear to grow out from the landscape itself, stretching and clawing forwards and upwards, like the outlines of trees leaning out from the cliffside.

Walking back along the promenade towards the lights of Donostia-San Sebastián, the high tide pushing at the walls beneath me, I feel that there is something different about this sculpture, something that asks us to rethink the role of sculpture in our world. Maybe it's the time I've spent looking out to sea, its roaring darkness still dominating my thoughts, but I can't quite glimpse what this sculpture is telling me.

It's only when I'm back in my hotel, reading over a book of Chillida's writings, that I find a clue. As a young boy Chillida would come to this end of La Concha Bay, the very place where his sculptures are now washed over by the sea, and watch the waves. His son Luis says that this 'was my father's favourite place … it was at the end of the city and nobody was there; he would just be alone on the rocks'.[1] Chillida himself told an interviewer that 'the sea has been my master and I have learned so much from it. When I was young, I would go there instead of going to school. I watched the waves and thought, where do they come from?'[2]

How many of us have done the same: stood looking out to a sea which has moods as mercurial as our own, and wondered about the waves, the wind, the horizon? I read more, and learn that Chillida wrote 'in the known, we discover the unknown – we hear its calling'.[3] And I realise that is what his sculpture is; an invitation to consider the unknown. So often in art history we are given fixed meanings, pronouncements from university lecterns, but

here of course nothing is static; the sea, the wind and the light are always moving, always different, ever changing. We are given endless possibilities.

Chillida tells us when he was a boy, sitting alone on these rocks, 'I was already thinking about "Wind Combs." The place is the origin of the work.'[4] What did he mean? How can a place of the unknown and the unfixed, where winds cast untethered waves and horizons slip into darkening seas, seed a sculpture?

In 1948, Chillida was in Paris, and made his first sculpture. For the next three years he sculpted in the French capital, but 'I went through a rough patch'. He found Paris 'magnificent, splendid, but extremely hard'[5] and decided to return to his birthplace. He settled in a small town next to Donostia-San Sebastián, Hernani, where 'I found myself with a blacksmith who lived in front of our house. He was working, making horseshoes in a very dark environment, with black light – which is how I see myself as Basque, how I see the Basque people, a country of black light'.[6] In France, Chillida used plaster, and later alabaster, but in Donostia-San Sebastián he was drawn to the blacksmith's forge, a place of fire and transformation, of black light, and dark materials. This contrasted with the white light of the Mediterranean, as though the Pyrenees, which stretch from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, absorb and transform the light into a granite darkness as it reaches the northern Spanish coast. A few months after arriving back in the Basque Country, Chillida forged his first iron sculpture.

This is an upright vertical sculpture, to which he gave a Basque name, *Ilarik*, a reference to the ancient funerary steles, upright carved stones decorated at the top, found in the Basque Country since the fifth century BCE.[7] A year after this, in 1952, Chillida made his first sculpture with the title *The Comb of the Wind*. This seems at first sight to be a geometric sheet of iron, forged and welded. But the shapes drop at odd angles, horizontal and vertical, curved and straight, wide and narrow, and a line of iron seems to dance along the centre, like a tightrope hovering between two posts. In this hint of movement, or vibration, I'm reminded of a line written by Chillida, that 'the leaf quivering on that branch knows something I don't'.[8] This sculpture is perhaps the first indication that he is directing our attention to something we can't see, something just beyond our consciousness.

In 1956, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard published an essay on Chillida called 'The Cosmos of Iron'. It was early in Chillida's career, and two decades before later versions of *The Comb of the Wind* were levered onto rock in Donostia-San Sebastián. But Chillida had quite clearly told of his intentions. Bachelard writes that 'in the village on the Basque coast where he

lives he is going to build an iron antenna on a rock facing the sea, an antenna that will vibrate with all the movements of the wind'.[9] Here we learn that Chillida wanted to use his sculpture to show the wind, how it blows through, over, beyond. When we are at the coast, we feel that wind, we sense its presence, are sometimes even blown backwards by its gusts. But how to articulate it in form? No one can sculpt the wind, but there is a short poem by Chillida which tells us where to look.

I didn't see wind
I saw clouds passing
I didn't see time
I saw leaves falling[10]

Before I left my hotel to see *The Comb of the Wind*, I had looked around for nearby landmarks to find my way back, and made a mental note to use the spire of the Buen Pastor Cathedral. The lighthouse on Santa Clara island also acted as a guide as I began to head towards the city. I turn to catch a last sight of *The Comb of the Wind*, but it is already out of view. I understand then, in the inky darkness, what makes this sculpture so different. It is not a landmark, it can't be used to orient yourself or find your way. It can't be seen from elsewhere. Instead, it can only be experienced in its place, at the end – or beginning – of the city.

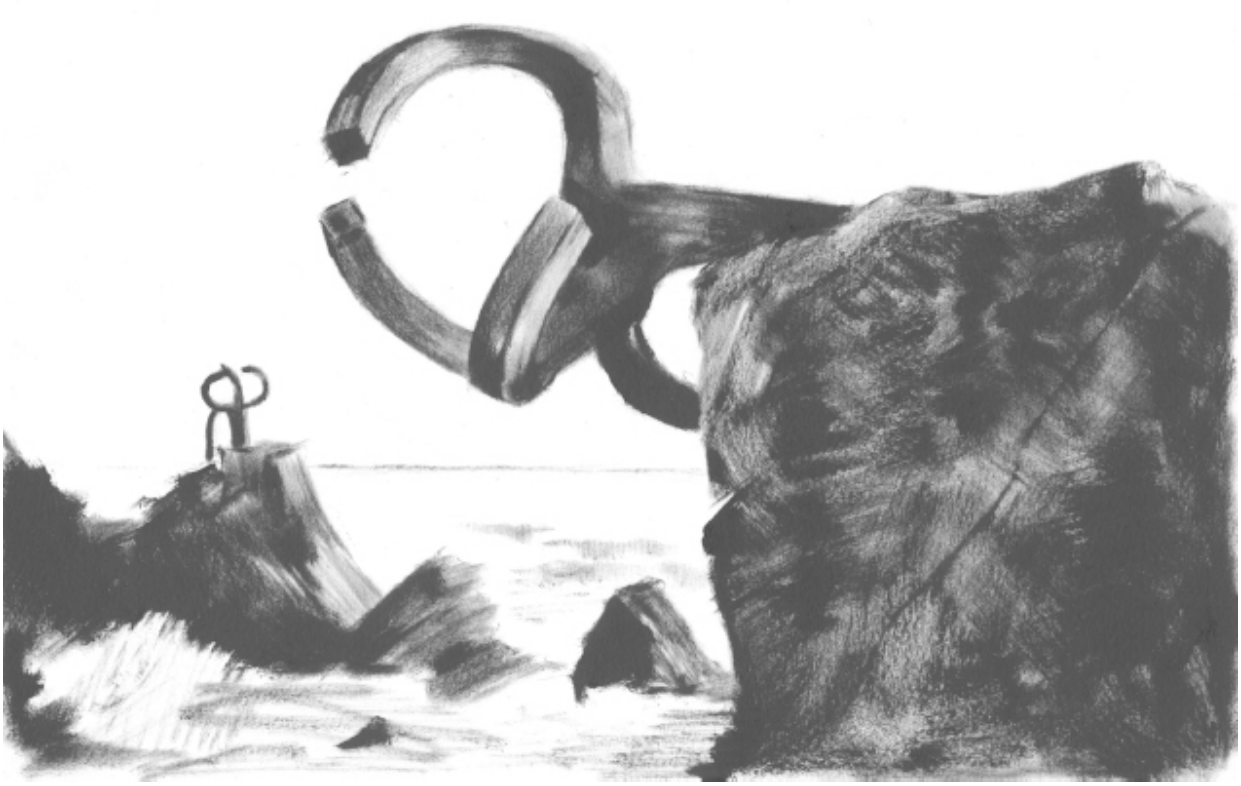
In 1968, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger met Chillida at a gallery exhibition in Switzerland. In a later interview, Chillida said that Heidegger was 'astonished to find so many relations between his ideas and my ideas, translated into sculpture'.[11] The sculptor had long been interested – as Heidegger was – in the spaces between and within matter. We might think of space as empty, waiting for a body or a thing to be placed within it, to fill it up. But Chillida and Heidegger were each questioning this view, and the pair collaborated on a 1969 publication, entitled *Die Kunst und der Raum* [*Art and Space*], in which Chillida illustrated Heidegger's short but influential essay.

If Heidegger's original essay is dense, then the literature surrounding it is denser still. I've pored over it. Some papers make no sense at all, a word salad of philosophy which gatekeeps and obstructs understanding, so I decide to go back to Heidegger himself. He begins with a quotation from Aristotle, who acknowledges that concepts of place and space are 'overwhelming and hard to grasp'[12]. If even Aristotle finds it difficult I am not sure what hope I have.

Heidegger then notes that his essay is a series of questions, even though they may be written as assertions. Now I am interested; Heidegger is probing at our understanding of the world around us, how space operates and how we live within it, rather than giving a definitive and explicit conclusion. In this way I see the similarities with Chillida's sculptures. As the sculptor himself said, 'It's fairly simple: it all comes down to learning to question'.[13]

Within the text, Heidegger makes a key proposition. He suggests that we 'have to learn to recognise that things themselves are places and do not merely belong to a place'.[14] What did he mean? I think back to my initial disappointment upon seeing *The Comb of the Wind*, when I'd found the size of the sculptures a surprise. The photographs I'd seen beforehand, which usually show a crescendo of waves as a backdrop, don't give any indication of their scale. But I'd missed the point. These aren't sculptures designed to dominate the landscape, they are intended to activate it, to draw us here, to *be* this place. You might think that even without the sculptures, people would come here to watch the waves, enjoy a sunset. But before Chillida's sculptures were installed here, on land 'reclaimed from the ocean', this was not a place of human gathering – it was practically unreachable.[15]

It is this idea of sculpture being a place that intrigues me, a place that, as Heidegger writes, is 'a *dwelling* for man in the midst of things'. I think back to the original meaning of totem, coming from the Algonquian base meaning 'to dwell together'.[16] This concept of sculpture itself being a place of human dwelling feels too important to get wrong, and so I check the word Heidegger uses in his original German. That is the verb wohnen, which indeed translates as 'to dwell' in English. Across time, sculpture both signals and becomes a dwelling place for humans, a place of gathering and community in the world.



The Comb of the Wind (detail)

And as their curved steel grasps at the wind, I think of how children run along the seafront, hands in the air, letting the wind comb through their fingers. We all know that sensation of aliveness, that feeling in the place between land and sea where the elements catch our breath. There is something within us all that understands this as a place of being, of human dwelling. Do we need words to articulate it? I think even Heidegger says we don't. He ends the essay Chillida illustrated with a quotation from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This states that we don't always need to define the truth of our world. It is enough if it 'hovers about and evokes harmony, if it floats through the air like the solemn and friendly sound of a bell'.[17]

In 1983, Chillida and his wife Pilar Belzunce bought a sixteenth-century farmhouse on the outskirts of Hernani, a few miles inland of Donostia-San Sebastián. They called it simply Leku, which is Basque for 'place'. It's now a museum, and on the afternoon I visit I am practically alone, one of just a few other lone travellers walking around the sculptures sited over the sloping fields surrounding the farmhouse.

There is another sculpture from *The Comb of the Wind* series here, and this time the landscape allows us to walk around it and see it from different angles.[18] Up close, I see that it is on a human scale, only just taller than me. It also feels organic and alive in a way that is surprising for just over six tonnes of Corten steel. There is an upright portion which acts as a base. This is the shape of a rectangle, balanced on its tip, but there are flaws in the surface and lines which suggest it was made by human hands, rather than a machine. On this part of the steel I see flutes and ridges which look like fingerprints. There is a sign when you enter Chillida Leku that tells us we are allowed to touch the sculptures and so I trace my thumb over these grooves; it fits. I think of Chillida's first sculpture in iron, *Ilarik*, which in shape and title recalls both this work and the ancient funeral steles of the Basque region. Here, once more, the past hums ever closer.

At the top of the sculpture curved forms branch out in different directions, like plant shoots searching for the sun. This is the part that we see on the rocks of Donostia-San Sebastián, and this is the section that feels alive, each branch or arm twisting, turning, responding to changes in the light, the wind, the water. I move my hand within the spaces left for us by Chillida, thinking of what Heidegger said about these spaces within sculpture, that 'emptiness is not nothing'.[19] Chillida said he was an 'architect of the void', and that 'my concern was with space as the true material; iron was to serve only as an aid, to be the string and the bow that helped space to resonate'.[20] Chillida is suggesting that it is those spaces in between which let the sculpture sing for us, rather like the way in which it is the silence between notes that makes music, or the pause in poetry that gives it such grace.

I realise now that when I was at the sculptures on the rocks, I was looking *through* those spaces, thinking that Chillida had used them as a frame for the horizon, or a glorious sunset. In fact I had tried – and failed – to get a photograph of those final rays of sun framed by the steel forms, as though Chillida had created a cinematic keyhole for us to peep through. But those spaces are for the wind, for the mysteries of the air, for the unknown. There is an interplay here, between light, wind, waves, but also between us. Each of us brings something different to this space. Clouds move, rains shift, water spools below us, but we hold our own memories and thoughts within ourselves. In his essay 'The Cosmos of Iron', Bachelard wrote that he found a 'kind of freeness of symbols in [*The Comb of the Wind* sculptures]. Every dreamer can enclose his dreams inside them.'[21]

On my final day in Donostia-San Sebastián I decide to see *The Comb of the Wind* at sunrise, and get up early to walk through the town in the dark silence of morning. I'd gone before at midday and dusk, and it feels like a neat conceit to go for a third time to watch the dawn. But the weather is against me. Rain pummels my soaked skin, and the strength of the wind means I have to push my way along the promenade. The only sound that can be heard above the wind is the thunderclap of waves in the sea below. I nearly turn back, but decide to keep going, hoping that *The Comb of the Wind* will reward me with a spectacular experience. But when I get there the sea is a cold metal, choppier and angrier than I've seen it before. Today it is all about the wind, and I stand with my back to the cliffs for fear of being blown away. I wait. There is no romantic sunrise. In its place a grey haze leaks through the clouds, casting pewter shadows into the depths of the sea. I'm not disappointed though. I understand now that what Chillida has created for us here is less a visual experience, and more a sense of being, of belonging. His son Luis explains that the two sculptures that are closest 'are searching for one another, trying to link what was previously connected: the past and the present. And then he wanted to define a point that would take us beyond this place, the horizon, the future, what is going to come. That is the third sculpture, the one furthest from us. For my father the horizon was the motherland, what we have in common'.[22]

I think back to those hundreds of us who experienced *The Comb of the Wind* the night before, as sea and sky met at the rocks. There is something shared as we stand in front of the horizon. Chillida was drawn to this place, fascinated by borders and limits, and by our inability to define and make them explicit. He made a sculpture called *Eulogy to the Horizon*, installed in Gijón, northwestern Spain, facing out towards the storms of the Bay of Biscay. He described this as 'an attempt to summon the doors that open the roads of night and day'.[23] Night and day, dark and light, full and empty. His work might seem to be about these opposites, but he is asking us to consider what lies between them. Chillida is a man who describes light as black, while the emptiness of his spaces is pregnant with possibility. And on the horizon, the boundaries of sea and land dance before our eyes.

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5

Spiral Jetty

In 1859, the American geologist John Strong Newberry was on an expedition with the US Army. They were surveying the regions around the Colorado River, water which begins as melted snow from the peaks of the Rocky Mountains in Northern Colorado, taking in the southwestern states of America, before travelling through the rocks of the Grand Canyon and reaching the Gulf of California in Mexico. During their trip, Newberry and his colleagues stopped to make camp near Moab in Utah and it was here, on a canyon cliffside, that Newberry found some bones.

This was the first dinosaur fossil found in Utah, the dystrophaeus. But due to the unforgiving landscape and lack of suitable equipment, he could only make a partial excavation. The site of Newberry's dig was lost to time, until, over a century later, it was rediscovered. Utah now holds the largest record of dinosaur fossils in the world. It is a place of the prehistoric, where our imagination soars in great expanses of land, where mountains and desert meet in the basins of ancient lakes. The Great Salt Lake in Utah is what remains of a huge Ice Age freshwater lake. If you visit the northeastern shorelines of the Great Salt Lake today you will find a spiral coiling within its sands. This is formed from volcanic rocks, and for long periods of its lifetime the spiral has been underwater, taken over by the salt lake, lost to us like Atlantis.

Until one day, it reappeared.

★ ★ ★

I am on my way to Utah, but severe weather warnings have been in place across the United States. A couple of days before my departure snowstorms hit, and, mid-journey, I get an email from my guide to say that as the drifts have not yet cleared, we may not make it to our destination. We are planning a trip to *Spiral Jetty*, a sculpture made by the American artist Robert Smithson in 1970. This is a sculpture that lives on the shores of the Great Salt Lake in a remote part of Utah. I had wanted to see it because, unlike Chillida's dark iron silhouetted against the horizon, this was a sculpture that slipped in and out of focus, existing in the shadows of the lake, submerged by water, a place where, as Smithson himself wrote, 'solid and liquid lost themselves in each other'.[1]

When I reach Utah, we decide to attempt the journey. *Spiral Jetty* is deliberately remote. Travelling north for a couple of hours from Salt Lake City there are mountains all around, snow-covered and still. These are the Oquirrh Mountains, named after the Goshute word for 'wooded mountain', one of the most mineral-rich ranges in the United States. We also see the Wasatch, the westernmost range of the Rocky Mountains in Utah. Here a flat horizontal line cuts along their surface, like the tidemark left by soapy water in a bath. This is visible even with the heavy layer of snow, and is the ancient shoreline of Lake Bonneville, formed around thirty thousand years ago. Most of what is now western Utah would have been covered by its waters, including the basin through which we drive.

Being in this expansive landscape of earth and sky, where we can see the geological markers of past time, I understand why Smithson chose it for his sculpture. It is a place where histories collide, like the tectonic plates underneath our feet. But there are also more recent stories here. The road from Salt Lake City ends at the Golden Spike National Historical Park. This is the spot on which, in May 1869, the transcontinental railroad met, transforming America. The journey from New York to San Francisco, which in 1860 took a month via Panama or up to three months via Cape Horn, now took less than a week by rail.[2] I stop here, to see the site where the two companies, the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific, marked the meeting of their railroads with a ceremonial golden spike. But within this industrial progress, hidden voices lie dormant, like the obsolete trestle pylons nearby. The Union Pacific used mostly Irish workers, while the Central Pacific employed Chinese labourers. At the time the transcontinental railroad was completed, ninety per cent of the Central Pacific workers were Chinese. They were hired because their wages were well below those given to American or European workers.[3] And of course the railroad displaced

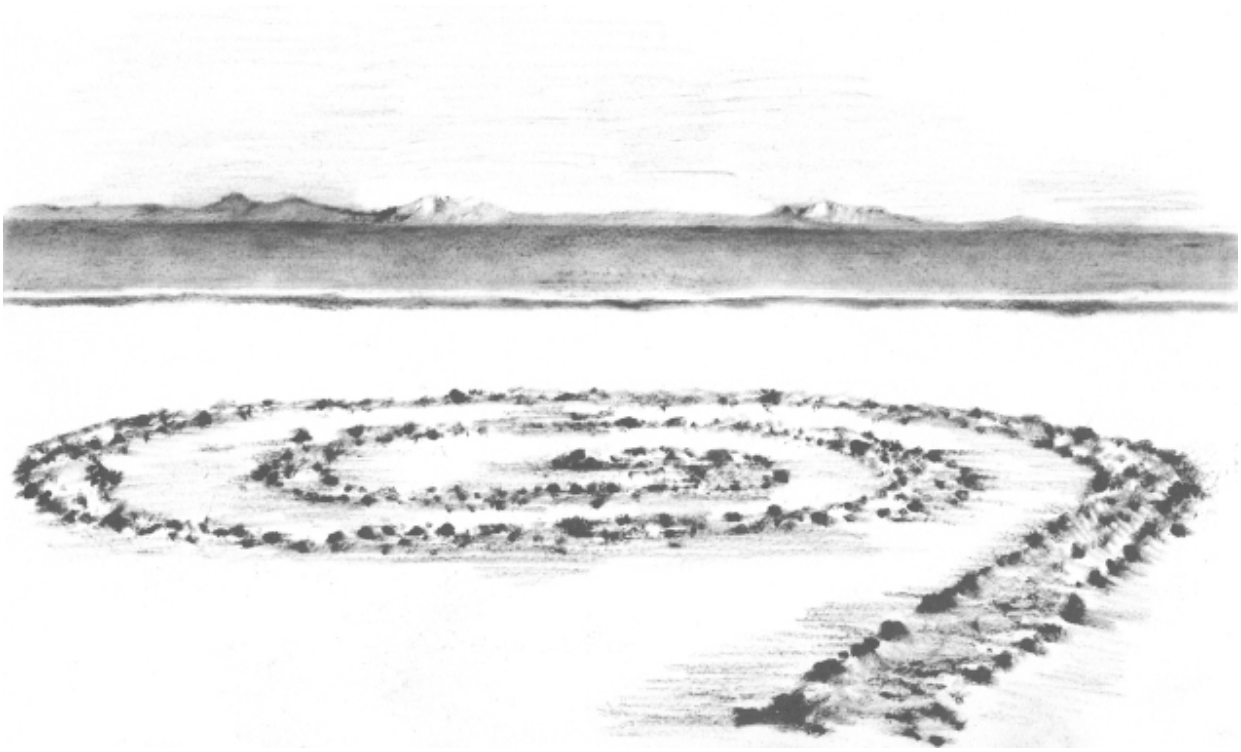
Indigenous peoples, the tracks slicing through lands within which they lived and hunted.

We come off the road, taking the final sixteen miles of near dirt path as we follow the shore of the Great Salt Lake as it reaches up to its northernmost peak. It may still be unpassable in the snow. This landscape is deserted, our track blocked by lugubrious cattle. I see a herd of horses up ahead, the morning sun casting their shadows as long blocks into the snow-white ground. They are untethered, and I feel the romance of the Old West in their wildness. But I am soon pulled back. As we get closer to *Spiral Jetty*, there are old wooden promontories, the remains of oil-drilling operations left to ruin. Smithson was fascinated by the 'trapped fragments of junk and waste' of such old drilling sites.[4] It is these human histories, running alongside the prehistoric and the wild, that drew Smithson to this place. He wrote that 'a great pleasure arose from seeing all those incoherent structures. This site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems mired in abandoned hopes'.[5] It was important to him that this wasn't a place where we lose ourselves in the picturesque; he didn't want a spirit-soaring landscape or for us to find the sublime in the scenic. Instead it is the detritus of human life that drew him in, rotting amidst the ancient salt basin, as water laps slowly at the shore in an ever-enveloping flow of time.

We finally make it to *Spiral Jetty*. Smithson identified this spot, near Rozel Point, as 'one of the few places where the water comes right up to the mainland'.[6] In fact when he laid out the shape of his spiral sculpture, he had to wade in the waters of the Great Salt Lake, using stakes to mark out its placement, like a skeleton waiting for its flesh. He used local basalt rock, a black material formed from the molten lava of volcanoes, to fill the body of the spiral. When I arrive it is just after midday, and a piercing sun has cleared the sky of clouds, leaving it bright blue. There is no hint of the past storms. This is a world of contrast, where the snow acts as a dramatic staging for the black basalt of the rocks. The lake shines in silence towards the horizon like a watching mirror, and mountains observe us from all around. The only sound is the crunch of our feet on the snow. We are alone here, and for a moment this modern sculpture, made using heavy machinery, upending the local earth, looks like the curving form of an ammonite fossil, a marine creature whose spiral shell is forever etched in sedimentary rock.

The spiral is an extraordinary symbol which has entranced us for millennia. It is both natural, and man-made. If we look at the forms of nature we see spirals everywhere, from the horns of the kudu antelope to the spirals in the

head of a sunflower. It is also within us. The double helix of DNA is a spiral, and the cochlea in our inner ear is a spiralling chamber of bone. The fibres in the surface epicardial layer of our hearts are spirals. And even our home, the Milky Way, is a spiral galaxy. We carve the spiral into the earth and our buildings, and use it on our bodies. We see it in the Nazca lines of southern Peru and in the tāmoko (facial tattoos) of the Māori. It's in the first-century BCE lintels of the Great Stupa in India, and in Buddhism, an urna is a spiral or circular dot placed on the forehead.[7]



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water

In Malta there is a UNESCO world heritage site known as the Megalithic Temples of Malta constructed between 3600 and 2500 BCE.[8] This is made up of six extraordinary sites including the Tarxien Temples, a group of four stone structures on the southeast of Malta's main island. Here we see the spiral carved into blocks across the site, but I am interested in the placement of a pair of eye-like spirals on a stone marking the access point to the inner part of the temple. This hints at a deeper symbolic meaning, suggesting the spiral denotes the passage between spaces, places and worlds.

This idea of the spiral marking a journey has been suggested as an explanation for the spirals found at Newgrange, a prehistoric monument in the Brú na Bóinne complex in Ireland. This was built around 3200 BCE and

one of the primary symbols found at the site is that of the triple spiral, known as the tri-spiral. Newgrange is a passage tomb, the name given to a stone-lined passage leading to a burial chamber. At Newgrange, an opening known as a 'roof box' is aligned to let the rising light of the winter sun pierce through the stone, running along the passage until it lights the end chamber. Here the spiral is associated with the passage of time; the glorious arrival of the sun at the peak of midwinter, the cycle of our lives, and deaths.

How interesting then that *Spiral Jetty* is laid out as another passageway, a path you can walk along. It is constructed from natural materials, but put into place using modern machinery. It evokes the past, like ancient earth markings such as the Steppe Geoglyphs found in the Turgai region of northern Kazakhstan, but was created in the latter part of the twentieth century. I feel that Smithson is drawing us towards this place of opposites, of contrasting ways to read the work. When Smithson envisaged the sculpture it was underwater, both concealed and revealed, but now the Great Salt Lake has receded, and its shoreline lies far beyond *Spiral Jetty*.

I walk out towards the lake, but it gets pretty swampy in parts. I have no spare shoes and don't fancy taking the journey home in sopping trainers, and so I decide, despite the snow, to roll up my trousers, take off my shoes and socks, and tackle the last part barefoot. The water here in this part of the Great Salt Lake is red, a phenomenon caused by the presence of algae known as *Dunaliella salina* and the bacterial species *Halobacterium*. And it's extraordinary, a pinkish red rippling across the horizon to the mountains. There are no sounds, the water is as still as an ice rink, but the white snow brings its red to blazing life. I notice that I have cut my foot on something, perhaps one of the rocks. As I see the little drop of blood, I remember how Smithson compared the coagulation of the salt lake to blood; its thickness alive. He wrote an essay on *Spiral Jetty* which began with a quotation by the English author, philosopher and critic G.K. Chesterton: 'red is the most joyful and dreadful thing in the physical universe; it is the fiercest note, it is the highest light; it is the place where the walls of this world of ours wear thinnest and something beyond burns through.'[9]

There is something primal about the spiral, an archetypal human symbol suggestive of the passage of life. It goes both forward and backward, clockwise and anticlockwise. Smithson made a film of *Spiral Jetty* in which he films his sculpture from a helicopter. The name helicopter comes from the Greek word 'helix', meaning spiral. As he spirals around in the sky above, he narrates the film, saying 'following our spiral steps, we return to our

origins.'[10] Only three years after he made *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson was killed when the small plane he was in crashed in Amarillo, Texas.

I turn my back to the lake and look towards *Spiral Jetty*, but it has disappeared. The basalt rocks of its outline are subsumed by the landscape surrounding it. All I can see is the flat white of the earth until it reaches a small bank covered with rubber rabbitbrush, a perennial shrub found in the plains and mountains of the American west, interspersed with rocks at all angles. As I walk over the sand, salt and snow, past the imprints left by birds' feet which look like hieroglyphs or old markings on the earth, I think of the shifting views of *Spiral Jetty*, and how it appears and disappears, like a mirage in the desert.

When I first read about *Spiral Jetty*, and from the photos I saw, I thought it was some grand heroic gesture changing the environment, anachronistic, almost bellicose in its treatment of the natural world, a symbol of the arrogance of the twentieth century. One paper I read says that 'little environmental consciousness seems involved in *Spiral Jetty*'.[11] But when I am here, standing in front of it, walking around it, I believe that it is anti-heroic in its treatment of this place. I wonder if Smithson was influenced by the moon landings which took place less than a year before he built *Spiral Jetty*. Where that was a conquering, a new territory for man, marked by the American flag staked into the moon's surface, *Spiral Jetty* is an acknowledgement that there can be no conquering of nature, and that even in this great frontier nation, nature overtakes and changes what we create. Smithson was fascinated by entropy, which in thermodynamics is the expression of energy loss, or randomness, in any system. Entropy is impermanence and change; it is the power of molten lava neutered by time, cooled into basalt rocks, and moved into place by an artist many years later.

In an interview on his work, Smithson declared that 'since I can't believe in objects and I can't believe in totems, what do I believe in? Fiction. Now let's get to the integrity of the fiction'.[12] What fiction was he referring to? I think he means the fiction that we have any autonomy over our environment, and the fictions we tell ourselves about our place within this world. I remember the monument marking the Golden Spike National Historical Park, which we passed on our way to *Spiral Jetty*. This is the Southern Pacific Monument erected to commemorate the meeting of the transcontinental railroad, and it is everything we understand about memorial, and history. A small stone obelisk, it marks a specific moment, and to

mitigate the ravages of time, it has been restored and repaired, and undergoes regular maintenance. It marks what we consider to be significant human activity in this place. We understand its role. But *Spiral Jetty* points us towards a different truth. Here in Utah, amidst the rocks, the disused oil rigs and the shoreline of the ancient Ice Age lake, time has both elapsed, and collapsed. Like the curving form of the spiral itself, time is not linear. Smithson himself wrote that 'The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum'.[13]

And of course *Spiral Jetty* isn't protected by a museum. Instead it has succumbed to the ebb and flow of the lake, hidden and revealed within the water in this place where we lose all sense of time. This is a sculpture made from the land itself, and as it coils within the sands like a patient snake, I think of what was happening in America as Smithson came to this isolated place. As the *Apollo 13* mission took off for the moon, why come here, why make a sculpture from volcanic rock in this remote landscape? It goes against what we think sculpture is. It is not grand and strong, announcing our achievements in bronze or marble. Instead it is horizontal, lying on the ground, susceptible to the elements. It reminds us of our mortality; that eventually everything changes, we cannot hold on to anything. The art historian Craig Owens has described *Spiral Jetty* as an 'emblem of transience, the ephemerality of all phenomena; it is the memento mori of the twentieth century'.[14]

Smithson was aware of this entropy, dancing with it and enticing it out into the open, but, just as we don't quite believe death will happen to us, he still wanted to remain just ahead of it. When the waters of the Great Salt Lake covered the sculpture, he intended to build the sculpture fifteen feet higher so that it remained above the waterline.[15] Smithson's early death precluded any intervention in the site, and *Spiral Jetty* remained underwater, like a mythical sea beast, for over twenty years, raising its head occasionally, until 2002, when it was fully visible once again. I see every time *Spiral Jetty* reappears as a rebirth, a new moment in time, as it is changed and made anew. Released from the water, the salt crystallises in the air, leaving bright white sparks glistening like stars within the midnight blackness of the rocks.

The coiled path of *Spiral Jetty* is fifteen hundred feet long, and as I walk along it, I have to look at my feet, watching my step along the way. The basalt rocks are dropped on the ground like breadcrumbs left by Hansel and Gretel, each one a different size and shape, and no doubt many ankles have been grazed and damaged due to trips and falls on the spiral. The sand between the rocks is layered in virgin snow. Every so often I look up, and

the expansiveness of the landscape seems exaggerated in contrast to the focused view of my steps. The snow is dazzling. Looking down, there is no sense of the spiral, of the Great Salt Lake, of the mountains widening the horizon. Smithson draws our attention to this concept of scale in *Spiral Jetty*. He compares the microscopic lattice structure of the salt crystal, forming over the basalt rocks, to the form of his sculpture, writing that 'The Spiral Jetty could be considered one layer within the spiraling crystal lattice, magnified trillions of times'.[16] I thought that Smithson had created a place of opposites, of land and water, of the micro and the macro, of past and present. But I realise instead that it is a place where opposites leak into one another; where the shoreline moves and shifts on sands, and our concept of time blinds us like the sun on this morning's snow.



Spiral Jetty (detail)

Before travelling to Utah, I had watched Smithson's film of *Spiral Jetty*, and it is designed to show this site as a palimpsest of life. Dinosaurs are backlit by a burning red sun, and the camera lingers on a map detailing the location of the ancient Ice Age Lake Bonneville. The soundtrack adds to the sense of

collapsed time; as we see the diggers moving the rocks, there is a growling animalistic sound, and we are surely intended to see them as modern dinosaurs. Then the sound cuts out, and we hear only a deep ancient breath, in and out, like a beast nestling underwater for millennia. Watching it feels like stepping into science fiction, an imaginary elemental word of fire and ice, of life and extinction. Smithson writes that as 'the movie editor, bending over such a chaos of "takes" resembles a paleontologist sorting out glimpses of a world not yet together, a land that has yet to come to completion, a span of time unfinished, a spaceless limbo on some spiral reels.'[17] This idea of time as a spaceless limbo interests me. So much of the research on the *Spiral Jetty* considers its transience, that descent and decay of entropy which is the nature of life on this planet. But here Smithson seems to be suggesting that time is all around; that it is unfinished, incomplete and, like the spiral, it can move in any direction.

Apart from my guide, there isn't another soul around at the *Spiral Jetty*. He has walked back to the car, and so I am alone here, my feet still tingling from the snow. There is a tang of salt in my mouth, and I'm not sure how it got there. I follow the spiral around, and as I do, I think of those lives spent in this land. The Shoshone people lived in the northern areas of Utah, and other Indigenous peoples in this area of America include the Utes, who gave their name to the state. Today Salt Lake City is known for the Mormon pioneers, or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who moved here after the death of their leader in 1844. I think of the mostly immigrant workers who died building the transcontinental railroad, and the change in life it heralded. I remember that driving out on the unpaved road to get here we passed by the Thiokol chemical plant in Brigham City, named after the Mormon leader Brigham Young. It was built in 1957 as a rocket building and testing facility and is where NASA space shuttle rocket boosters were made. Here in this land of fossils, of westward expansion and settlement, we are still seeking more.

Standing at the centre of the spiral, I turn to look at the Great Salt Lake. There is no wind, which my guide told me is unusual in this place. Instead, there is only stillness, creating diamond-like reflections of mountains in the waters below. In the bright sunshine, colours fan like a paint chart. On the lake's surface, a translucent pink lies over blood-red water, while the light glass of the sky deepens as it reaches the mountain tops. When Smithson built *Spiral Jetty* it was surrounded by water, but each year the lake shrinks further

away due to drought, and it has now receded to its lowest levels since records began.[18] The Great Salt Lake is home to an ecosystem that includes millions of migratory birds, and there are concerns that toxins held within the lake bed will be released into local communities if it dries out.[19] *Spiral Jetty* acts as a challenge to us; it is a literal marker in the sand, evidence of the ecological crisis, and our disconnection with the natural world.

Looking around the centre of the spiral, I see that some of the artwork's rocks have been moved to create a fire pit, and yesterday's snowfall has been disturbed. The embers are cold, so it must have been lit last night. There is a generosity to this artwork, created in this remote landscape and with no security, which has been abused. *Spiral Jetty*, left here for us, shows a hope for human behaviour that perhaps we cannot fulfil.

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6

Another Place

On the northwest coast of Germany lies a city called Cuxhaven. This is where the wide mouth of the River Elbe, one of Europe's major waterways, flows into the North Sea. For centuries, Cuxhaven has been a busy fishing and shipping port. One of the principal landmarks of the city is the Kugelbake, a wooden structure nearly one hundred feet tall. It is now a tourist attraction, but once served as a vital navigational aid to sailors and fishermen as they passed beyond the land into the dark waters of the North Sea.

In 1889, the German shipping company Hapag (the Hamburg to America line) moved its docks from Hamburg to Cuxhaven and it is from here that thousands of Europeans sailed to new lives in America. By 1900, the fastest and largest ship in the world, the *Deutschland*, sailed from Cuxhaven, and to cope with the burgeoning numbers of travellers, sometimes up to four thousand a day, a new train station was built at the harbour, including halls for the first- and second-class passengers. Known as the Hapag-Hallen, these were a marvel, their domed ceilings the first place in Cuxhaven to have electric light. You can walk through these halls today, resonant with the memory of bustling bodies, each full of hope and promise for an unknown life on the other side of the Atlantic, their last sighting of home the quayside here. Such was the emotion from those leaving, and those waving goodbye, that it was known as the Kai der Tränen, the Quay of Tears.

★ ★ ★

When I was in Utah, travelling through that landscape so breathtaking in scale, the decaying drilling rigs and discarded remains of human ambition felt antlike in comparison. It made me consider how, as a species, we are always seeking something else. Those pioneers, arriving in the Salt Lake valley in 1847 to a world already inhabited by Indigenous peoples. The site where the transcontinental railroad met, and a golden spike was erected as a monument to our movement. The Thiokol complex not far from the Great Salt Lake, where we make rockets to send up to space. And I thought of a sculpture which seemed to embody these ideas, a sculpture which asks: what prompts us to seek out a new life in another place?

In 1997, the British sculptor Antony Gormley installed one hundred life-size cast-iron figures near the Kugelbake on the Cuxhaven coastline. They were based on casts of Gormley's body, and arranged on the beach so that each stood alone, facing out to the depths of the water. We all know that feeling, the fresh tang of the sea in our lungs as we look towards the horizon. These iron figures make up Gormley's sculpture *Another Place*, a work which has always been sited in the place between land and sea.

Originally, Gormley had been invited to make a work for the Hapag-Hallen, but it was the building's history of migration, the whispers of those huddled bodies queuing and waiting, that spoke to him. The one hundred bodies stood across two and a half kilometres of shoreline, and stretched one kilometre into the water. There only for a few months of that autumn, the bodies were placed on their own, but close enough to the others to be part of the larger community. In this I am reminded of those echoes of the past at Cuxhaven; the halls of the shipping line a place of collective bodies with individual dreams.

In Cuxhaven, *Another Place* was situated within the long expanse of the Wadden Sea (the Wattenmeer), a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and experts believe that its natural landscape has not changed for one thousand years.[1] The life the Wadden Sea supports includes ten million migratory waterbirds such as the brent goose and bar-tailed godwit which stop there along the East Atlantic Flyway from the Arctic Tundra.[2] I'm interested to learn that the Wadden Sea is an important area for migratory birds, as it was the concept of movement that seeded the idea of this sculpture. But Cuxhaven is also a port which, like so many others, saw movement driven not by hope and ambition, but by conflict – and necessity. In the 1930s, as Hitler consolidated his power, Jews fled Germany through ports such as Cuxhaven, and in the aftermath of the Second World War, thirty thousand 'displaced persons' left Cuxhaven to rebuild their lives in Canada.[3] Their

individual stories are now just a number in the broader retelling of moments in history, lost to time, heard only by the walls of the Hapag-Hallen.

Cuxhaven is a place of the in-between, both man-made and natural. It was a waiting room for those moving between countries, and continents; while on the banks of the Wadden Sea itself, an intertidal zone of mudflats and sandbanks, of marshy shores and reed beds, the sea expands and contracts in a regular breath, covering and uncovering as land becomes water. *Another Place* draws our attention to this space. Each figure is placed with care; those closest to the shore are buried by the sea at high tide. We gauge the sea level as it swells and floods the sculptures, before it washes back over them, leaving them open and exposed to the elements.

That these hundred figures which make up *Another Place* are directing us towards ideas of borders was made even more visible when the work moved from Cuxhaven to Sola Beach, Stavanger, Norway. Stavanger is on the southwest coast of Norway, and Sola Beach is a long stretch of fine-grained sand and turquoise waters which sits close to Stavanger Airport. It is a picture-perfect beach, voted one of the most beautiful in Europe. But, like Smithson and his *Spiral Jetty*, a natural idyll didn't suit Gormley's intentions. When *Another Place* was installed here in 1998, some of the figures were sited within the airport perimeter, behind the security fences. Instead of seabirds and seals the figures had what Gormley describes as 'these huge runway lights and aerial identification lights as their companions'.[4] Once again the sculptures identify 'another place'; this time one we reach via the skies, rather than the seas. And of course it was the advent of air travel that led to the demise of the busy Atlantic passenger shipping routes from ports such as Cuxhaven. I remember the sounds beside the *Angel of the North*; a site of sanctuary for so many, surrounded by the thunder of trains and traffic. We are forever rushing on: higher, faster, further.

Another Place was only in Norway for the summer of 1998, and so I have to look at photographs to get a sense of its placement. The weather here is different to the coastline of Cuxhaven, which is protected by the Frisian Islands, an archipelago in the North Sea. The Stavanger coast is buffeted by powerful Atlantic gales, creating strong heavy waves and temperatures out to sea of almost minus fifty degrees Celsius. The bodies are buried by water and sand, some up to their chests and necks, but what is most visceral is seeing a photograph which shows the figures behind an electric fence, staring towards us, like an image in a newspaper. We are used to barriers between us and art, inconspicuous ropes in a museum keeping wandering hands at

bay, but this is different. Behind the bars of the fence, the sculpture has identified another boundary, another waiting space, both physical and metaphorical; 'another place' that perhaps we do not wish to see.

Within the figures of *Another Place*, what is most obvious is that they are sculptures of easily recognisable humans. And as I consider our journey so far I realise that, with perhaps the exception of the *Angel of the North*, which is based upon a human body (though one that morphs into the mythical), all our sculptures have been abstract. If you've been to a museum or gallery recently, or just seen contemporary art online or in a town centre, you will understand how radical it is to make sculptures of the human body in our modern world. Perhaps artists fight against it because we've been making sculpted images of our bodies for millennia. What is there left to do with the body? What more can it tell us about the human condition, and the world in which we live?

If we look closely at those bodies of *Another Place*, there are perhaps some clues in the technique used to conjure them into being. They are not created from the outside in, chiselled from marble like Michelangelo, or modelled in clay like Rodin, or even carved from a mammoth tusk like the *Lion Man*. Instead, they are created from the inside. Gormley is covered with a protective layer of wrapping, and then draped in wet plaster as a full casting is taken of his body. Once dry, that results in an outline similar to a sarcophagus. Here the real element of interest, the shell-like interior, is the creation point of the sculpture.

The process reminds me of a death mask, that extraordinary tradition in which – to commemorate life – we capture its ending. The death mask is a site of both presence and absence, where the face, a lived-in place, is now inert, cold, silent. But of course Gormley is very much alive when the casts are taken. In contrast to a death mask, which is all about the exterior view, it is the inside space of the body that is key here. I think back to what we saw with Hepworth and Chillida, who both identified the void, supposedly empty, as an infinity of possibility and life. When I look at the noses and mouths of death masks I also think of those life-giving breaths no longer taken. When Gormley made the seventeen different casts of his body for *Another Place*, the only noticeable difference between them was the variation in his lungs, each cast taken with different breaths. There is a quiet intimacy here, as ribs push up and out, or contract inwards. And it reminds me of the

sea, where *Another Place* has always been installed, tidal waters inhaling and exhaling in steady breaths.

The presence of life is also signalled in the material of the sculptures, iron. Gormley says 'I think of iron as being a concentrated earth material; it's the most potent element, it's the thing that makes the red in our blood. It's the thing that keeps the whole jolly planet on its course in space. Something like eighty-five per cent of the core of this planet is iron. If you go down in the magma, you don't have to go very far, and you are in iron world'.[5] By making these sculpted bodies in iron, Gormley is connecting our bodies to the world. He continues by suggesting that iron is a 'useful material for thinking about the relationship between the human body and the more enduring bodies in space'.[6] Once again sculpture is a connector, a thread between the cosmos and our very being, a lifeline of matter and form. In our early origin stories, and in this sculpture, we are telling ourselves that just like the stars and the planets, the seas and the mountains, we are part of this life; we belong.

In 2005, *Another Place* was installed on Crosby Beach, around five miles from Liverpool city centre in the northwest of England. On this beach, the cast-iron figures are spread along three kilometers of shoreline. The easiest way to get there from Liverpool is a short train ride to Blundellsands and Crosby, and as I walk from that station I come to a wide avenue of huge Victorian villas, built for wealthy business owners and their families to escape the nearby city. Elegant trees stand to attention, their grandness echoed in the architecture on display.

Coming over the sand dunes at the end of the avenue I can hear the sea before I see it, a roaring wildness which contrasts to the domesticity of the Victorian villas. The day is overcast, blocking my view, but I smell the sea, a fresh wind punching me with the scent of brine and algae. Finally I see it; an expanse of gun-metal grey rumbling at the other end of a wide plain of sand. It's a late afternoon at the end of May, but it feels like the dark slate of a British February. Heavy clouds seem about to fall in from above, and the wind brings sand flying towards my face like splinters of glass.

Perhaps it's the weather, but this is no romantic idyll. A busy shipping channel connecting the River Mersey to the Irish Sea runs parallel to the three miles of sand along Crosby Beach, and despite the flatness of the day, I can see the outlines of colossal containers moving slowly along the horizon line. There are also the tall turbines of Burbo Bank wind farm out to sea,

and the busy Seaforth Dock which punctuates one end of the beach. This mash-up of industrial and natural was key to the sculpture's placement here, and is similar to the maritime activity on display at Cuxhaven, where up to five hundred vessels a day traverse the River Elbe. When asked what it was about Crosby Beach that first attracted him, Gormley said 'I was very struck from the moment I first got there by the robustness of the beach and those huge sewage pipes, and the observation tower for the docks itself, the great piles of scrap metal that seemed to be regularly collected by ships.'[7]

This is an inhabited landscape, and its histories are embedded here, like fossils left for us to find. As a port city, Liverpool was a target in the Second World War, and suffered substantial losses during the Blitz, particularly in May 1941. The wreckage caused in Liverpool, huge craters filled with debris, remnants of architectural pediments and their flourishes, were transported to Crosby Beach to shore up the sea defences and clear the city. Even today, if you walk over the beach to the north you'll find this Blitz rubble beneath your feet, turned over by time and tide.

I'd seen photographs of *Another Place* installed on Crosby Beach, some with spectacular sunsets behind bodies standing up to their chests in water, waves lapping at their necks, but nothing had prepared me for the shock of coming across these life-sized people in real life. It's discombobulating, confusing. Why are they standing in the sea, why aren't they moving? Someone help them! But just as quickly you remember they are static sculptures, and a disquieting acceptance sets in. They are human, but not. I count three uniform lines of bodies, each one buried in sand at different depths as far as the eye can see. From a distance their arrangement reminds me of the little toy soldiers my sons used to lay out with care, lined up in formation, ready for battle. In fact some of the descriptions I'd read before my visit described the men of *Another Place* as an army, and of course the imagery of collective male figures deployed on a beach recalls campaigns such as the D-Day landings. Before seeing them in person I'd wondered about their gender; if they were female bodies would they have the same military connotations?



Antony Gormley, *Another Place*, 1997, cast iron (detail)

But here on Crosby Beach, the grey sea rolling in as the tide changes, what strikes me most is their passiveness. It's not about gender, the typical triumphant male military hero we see in so many of our towns and cities. None of the usual signifiers of male power in Western sculpture are evoked; there's no sensuous muscle grappling with almost superhuman strength, no sinews about to burst through marble flesh. Instead, shoulders are loose, arms hang by their sides. Passivity, not aggression, is the marker here. In their openness these bodies feel like an invitation; a space for each of us to inhabit, to fill with our own hopes and dreams. Another place for us to step into for

a moment and look out to sea, following the horizon to the place where there is peace, and possibility.

The next morning, I head back to Crosby Beach before travelling home to London. Walking on the same path through the dunes as yesterday, this time there is no hint of what lies beyond, no sounds or smells announcing the presence of the sea. Instead there is an enclosed stillness to the air. When I get to the beach, I can hear birdsong, and the muffled noise of children playing. There is a boy digging a sandcastle in the fleeting sunshine which has just emerged. A family appears with buckets and spades, ready for the day, while dogs race in and out of the water. Rose petals and discarded flowers start to blow around my feet as the wind begins to wake up, and a ball rolls in front of me, lost. This is a site of human presence.



Another Place (detail)



It's a place where we mark our existence, writing our name in the sand, enjoying a day out with family and friends. It is a place for the solitary, and those looking for solace. But the beach is also associated with darker experiences. In Morecambe Bay, along the coast from Crosby Beach, at least twenty-one undocumented Chinese labourers were killed picking cockles in 2004. Out working one evening, they were cut off by the relentlessness of an incoming tide, lost to its waters. And more recently, the migrant crisis has politicised the beach, those photographs of dead children washed up on foreign sands, personal tragedies laid bare for the world to see. The beach is a place of sun and fun for some, and a tomb for others.

I think about these things as I walk the miles of sand, weaving in and out of the bodies of *Another Place*. Today the tide is far out, and has revealed what yesterday was concealed by the sea. Last night's tide had submerged so much of the sculpture. Where before I only saw three lines of bodies, now there are five arranged on the beach, those closest to the water drying in the sun. This morning's out-tide has also made visible the plinths upon which these figures stand, recalling all those heroic sculptures and statues where the mighty and lionised are placed on plinths to be admired. But here Gormley subverts that tradition. Going up close to the sculptures, I can see barnacles

growing on them, rust curving over their forms. One of them has seaweed curling around it, reminding me of the laurel wreaths used by the Romans as a symbol of triumph. The seaweed will rot, as ephemeral as those ancient victories.

In *Another Place*, I think we are being asked about human hubris; the impossibility of keeping time at bay. The detritus of human life is all around, humbled by nature, mirrored in the decay of tiny marine organisms which melt into the sands. When I get to the far end of the beach, the wind is whipping shards of sand up all around, and there is one sculpture where the head is just visible, half buried. As it gasps for breath, I remember the poem 'Ozymandias' by the English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. It was written in 1817, after the British Museum had announced the acquisition of fragments of an ancient Egyptian sculpture of Pharaoh Rameses II. In the poem, Shelley writes of the remnants of a great sculpture erected to celebrate Ozymandias, the 'King of Kings'. But all that remains of this mighty monarch is 'two vast and trunkless legs of stone' and 'a shattered visage', around which, 'boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away'. I start to walk back to the pathway towards the station, and looking down I see the outline of past footprints being washed away. The tide, like the desert in Shelley's poem, is removing any trace of our existence, leaving our castles to fall back into shifting sands. Later I learn that Shelley himself was drowned, his body washing up on a beach.[8]

On the train back to London, I think about what this sculpture is pointing us towards. It is placed in a site of constant change, where it is consumed and subsumed by the sea and then revealed, given back to us like a magician performing a trick. It is this idea of sculpture articulating a place we can sense but cannot see that is central to *Another Place*. Antony Gormley said that 'Sculpture, for me, uses the physical means to talk about the spirit, weight to talk about weightlessness, light to refer to darkness – a visual means to refer to things that cannot be seen'.[9] We are being pointed towards the limits of our material experience, asked to consider what is both visible and invisible, and what might be hiding just in front of us.

This is a work about borders, both man-made and natural, the borders we travel across to try for a new life, and the borders between land and sea. But it is also about the borders between our inner and outer worlds, between what we can see and what each of us feels. If you went to Crosby Beach, I wonder what the tides would reveal to you. The sculptures are

always there of course, aligned in their rows like skittles across the sands, still and silent in the face of our constant movement. You would see the business of humans on the horizon, the container ships, hear the racket of the dockyard; our lives marked in architecture and activity.

Within all this stands the sea, vast and unknowable, moving to the time of the tides and the moon, the beat of an ancient rhythm against which our lives seem fleeting, but no less glorious. Only you know how this place would make you feel; what memories, loves and losses, would be evoked, whose voices you would hear across the expanse of sand and time. It's not for me, or for Antony Gormley, to tell you how to feel. Here sculpture is an open, generous question, inviting you into the space it has created.

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7

The Surrag Path

The Outer Hebrides is a chain of islands off the northwest coast of Scotland. Facing out to the Atlantic Ocean on their western side, some of these islands, with their wind-battered mountains and wave-swept sands, are home only to animals and the elements. Here on the edge of Europe you will find large colonies of puffins and razorbills, and birds of prey including golden eagles and peregrines. I am on a small plane flying to the Isle of Lewis, the largest island of this archipelago, readying to land at Stornoway. Back in the ninth century, Stornoway was a Viking settlement, its sheltered harbour a strategic advantage to the Norsemen who held these islands, and the name Stornoway is most likely derived from the old Norse stjórnavágr, meaning 'steering bay'. The Vikings left material evidence of their presence here. In 1831, small chess pieces were discovered in a tomb on the Isle of Lewis. Carved by Viking craftsmen in the twelfth century, these intricate figures give us an imaginative insight into how these seafaring warriors might have spent their hours on the Outer Hebrides. Kings and queens, knights and pawns are evoked in walrus and whale ivory; we see eyes and steely mouths, horse manes and crowns, readying for a game of strategy and warfare.

These islands contain the echoes of other stories too. Long before the Vikings arrived, the oars from their longboats a drumbeat on water, tribes known as the Picts lived here. Their name comes from the Latin word picti, which means painted or tattooed people, a title given to them by the Romans as they battled their way up the British Isles. Here in this place of ancient seafarers and soaring eagles, the layers of history are visible like the strata of an archaeological dig, and in an uninhabited tip of rocky landscape, as the Atlantic Ocean rolls in, a sculptor works with the land.

★ ★ ★

Aird Bheag is on the west coast of the Isle of Lewis. Its name is Gaelic for 'small point', but there is nothing small about this landscape. Expansive skies fold over mountainous terrain, waterfalls dance through rock like ribbon and the ocean feeds lochs as deep as time. For centuries, Aird Bheag was reachable only by boat, a journey involving the open sea of the Atlantic, with its heavy swells and wind-whipped waves. Your small vessel would hug the coastline, before dipping into the mouth of Loch Hamanavay. Perched a few metres up from the shoreline lay a couple of blackhouses, low stone dwellings covered in thatch, and a bothy, the only sign of human habitation as far as the eye could see. As my taxi driver tells me, as we pass the stone remains of other blackhouses on our way from Stornoway, 'They were hardy back then.'

I am on my way to stay with the sculptor Julie Brook. Every summer Julie Brook comes to Aird Bheag and lives in the only dwelling in Aird Bheag still standing today. Here she makes sculpture from the land, sculpture which, in the face of the tides and the wind, might sometimes last less than a couple of hours. I hope that by spending a few days with her, in the bothy where we have to light the fire every morning to keep warm, I might uncover something from her deep connection to this place.



The bothy at Aird Bheag

In fact, this is my second attempt to get here. The first time I tried, my itinerary involved a train, two planes and a taxi to a small pier where she would meet me in a boat. We would then follow the centuries-old sea path around to Aird Bheag. Once you are at Aird Bheag you are uncontactable; this is a place too remote for mobile phones, beyond the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and everything has to be planned in advance. But one of my flights was cancelled due to bad weather, and I couldn't get in touch with Brook, who waited for me at the pier for hours before turning back. This time I make it to Stornoway, but the forecast warns of winds too strong for our little boat in the Atlantic, and so we agree to meet inland. Where in the past this was nearly impossible, there is now a tarmac road and then around nine miles of dirt track. At first glance, the sloping, undulating terrain through which we drive is green, but within that word lies another world. For the luscious depth of wet dark greens which dry into lighter hues feels heaven-sent, and patches of the ground are dappled with a yellow-ochre which glistens like the loose brushstrokes of an oil painting. Huge shadows of grey-black move across the earth as clouds cover the sun, and rivers as loud as city traffic run beside us. The final part is passable only by foot, and so we pack our fresh food and my belongings into rucksacks, and trek for almost an hour across heather-strewn moorland. When I arrive at Aird Bheag, I go upstairs to my room, and it feels serendipitous that on the shelf beside the bed, alongside some poetry, are two old, well-thumbed art books. One is Robert Smithson's writings, and the other is a biography of Barbara Hepworth.

The sea is integral to how Brook lives here; after feeding her animals, every day starts with a swim, and so the following morning I join her, ice coursing through my veins. Bracing is perhaps too generous a word for the sensation of chill and thrill it gives, but soon we are back by the fire, preparing a picnic and planning our day. This already feels like the most isolated, remote landscape I have ever lived in. But for Brook, the silence is restorative. 'Solitude is a honing tool for me,' she writes. 'Each day I feel a little more aligned again in these big spaces. Is it something to do with knowing they are here whether we are present or not? Even though the landscape is constantly on the move and changing with the seasons and the weather, it also has a sense of being unchanged for millennia'.[1]

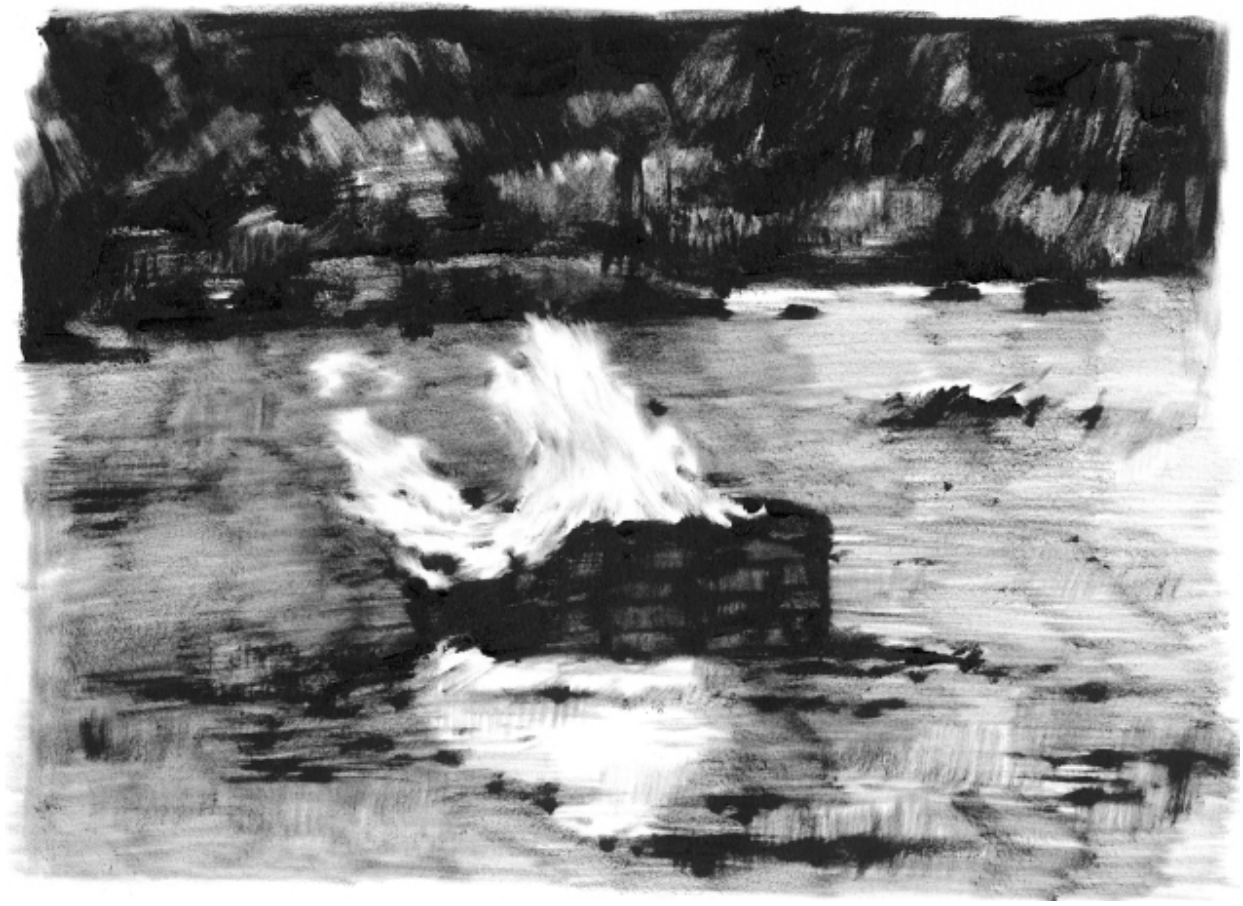
Although our bothy has just a stove for heat, and electricity for only an hour a day when connected to a generator, Brook has lived in even more basic conditions: in an arch of rock on the island of Jura, where she stayed for up to a year at a time over a period of three and a half years. Here she

unlearned what are deemed the luxuries of life, threading herself instead within the deep rhythms of nature. This is a world where fire is the only fuel, where shadows flicker on cavernous rock and the moon comes close as it swells and ripples the tide. It was within this world that she began to make sculptures from the elements, sculptures which burn and sizzle themselves into extinction in a stone cauldron of sea and smoke.

After our breakfast of freshly laid eggs, picnic packed, we set off up into the crags and gullys of the Hebridean moorland. The sky hangs high above the land. Today it is grey, but flashes of clear light emanate through, like the shimmer of fish darting in water. Hills crest like waves in the distance. Rain has made some of the ground marshy, and the peril is hidden under the heather, so I am careful where I step. We are hiking to the small beach of Loch Tealasbhaigh, where Brook makes the sculptures she calls *Firestacks*. It lies in a small valley between hills with names which tell of the past: the summit of Sneathabhal stands as proud as the prow of a Viking longboat, a reminder of the Norsemen who slept under these skies before us; the other is Eoranish, which Brook thinks might be an anglicisation of a lost Gaelic name. When we reach the beach it is rockier than I had imagined it; huge boulders stand like sentinels around its edges, and seaweed slips over watery stone. This is a place of imagination, not people.

On Jura, Brook had no weather forecast, or tidal timetable. Instead she observed, watching the push and pull of the tide as it breathed in and out over the shoreline near where she slept. She made fire for warmth and to cook, foraging driftwood to burn and stones to encircle the flames. For Brook, by then in her early thirties, art had become self-conscious, a career, with the commercial galleries of London demanding and critical; a place where money was king. Many of us might fantasise about quitting it all, shutting up shop and moving to the middle of nowhere, but that is exactly what Brook did. Huddling beneath a crag of rock, we take out our picnic, and she tells me that she sensed there was something more within her, and she needed to find what that was.[2] On Jura there was no alarm clock, or rush to catch the commuter train. Instead it was the ancient rhythms of our world which dictated how she lived, the glow of a waning moon telling of tomorrow's tide. One day, she wondered what would happen if she built her fire within the spooling pools of water in the seabed at low tide. Stacking stones like a kiln, driftwood burning within, she waited for the sea to roll in, sweeping over her work like a sandcastle. It was simple but dramatic, allowing Brook to observe differences in the tides. Some were calm, a slow

drowning for the fire, others dark and surging, bringing a sudden eclipse of the light. When she moved to Aird Bheag, Brook grew more ambitious in the staging of the *Firestacks*, building them in the same place on the same beach. It is the Atlantic which feeds the beach of Loch Tealasbhaigh, bringing weather from far out in the ocean, miles from land. If you went west from here you would find Newfoundland, giving a sense of the reach of the water which today skims over the rocks, quiet as a shadow.



Julie Brook, *Firestacks*, 2015–2022, Lewisian gneiss, driftwood, fire

Over the years here, Brook has created her *Firestacks* across the seasons, enjoying observing the differences between a summer firing and that of a hail-strewn winter's eve. Whether it is dawn or dusk, midsummer or midwinter, waves and wind subsume the flames, and stones fall back into the water like a collapsing house of cards. Although it is two years since her last firing, the remnants of her build remain here on the beach, like the ruins of those stone blackhouses beside our bothy.

We walk back to the bothy, and, generator on, watch the film of an autumn firing. Brook had put waterproof microphones within the stones, and we hear the glug of the tide as it surges through, the knock of liquid against solid. Watching fire battle water under darkening skies is an elemental experience. Soon the backdrop is black, like the climactic finale of an opera, and the flames are doubled, their reflection in the surface of the sea a mirror of the action above. And then, suddenly, it is over. The incoming tide has finally swallowed the firestack. As the embers are carried out to sea, the silence is pierced by what sounds like the call of a seabird, but is just the last voice of wood and flame, as the enveloping water curls it into the deep darkness below.

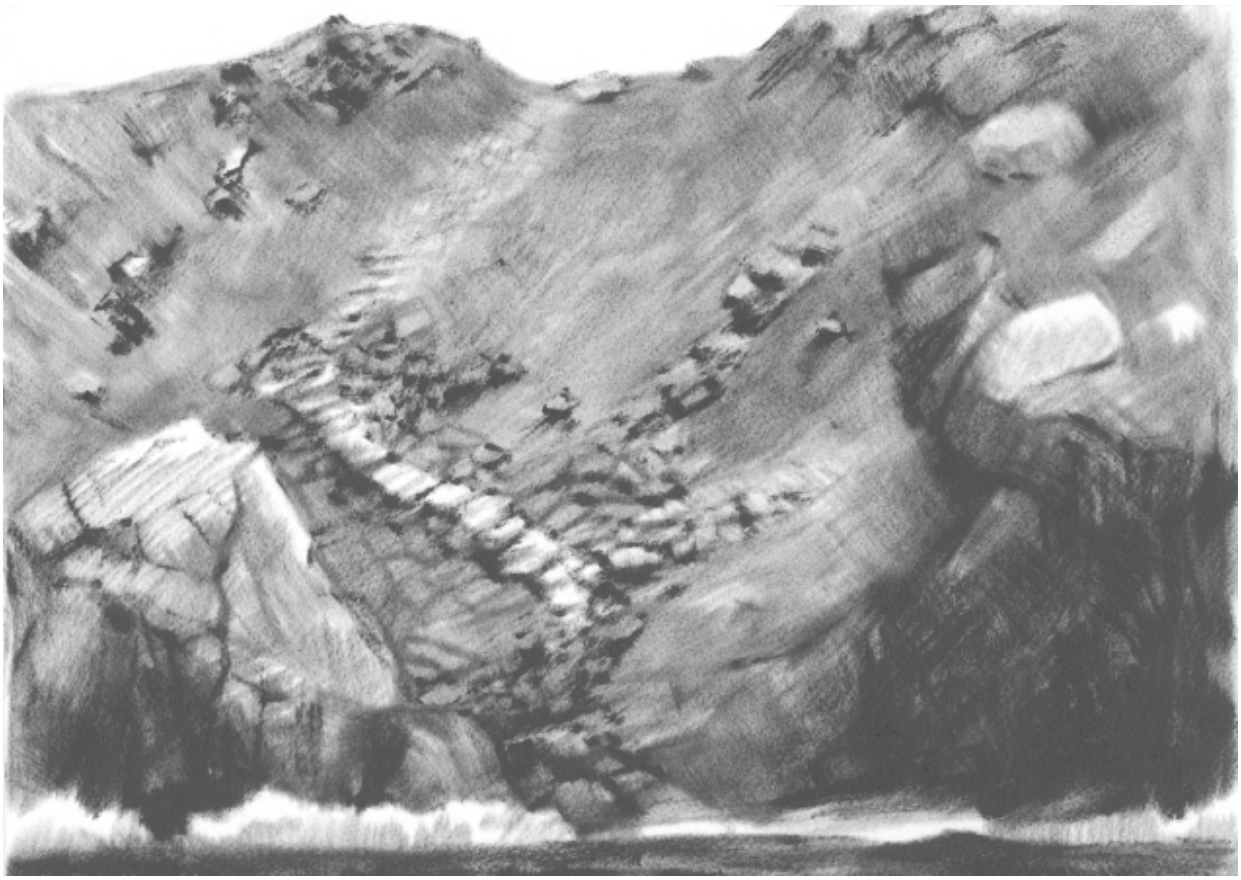
Even being in Aird Bheag for only a few days brings a different sense of time. Human time, with its ticking clocks, our rushing and racing, feels small here, subsumed by the longer breaths of the landscape which lies slumbering like an ancient sea beast. The rocks on which I stand are believed to be some of the oldest on earth. Called Lewisian gneiss, some were created three billion years ago, when heaving pressure and molten heat created the landform which remains today. The minerals within the rocks appear in layers of shimmering colour, lines of greys and blacks interspersed with an extraordinary salmon pink which catches the eye even in the drowsy light of the clouds.

It is this longer sense of time which Brook evokes in her *Firestacks*. At first the dancing theatricality of the flames, with their choreography of light and dark, and the jeopardy of each encroaching wave, entrances us as a child watching fireworks. But there is a deeper truth held within its form. As water silences flame, we are reminded of the time of the tides and the moon, the endless motion of the oceans across the earth.

The following morning I swim once more in Loch Hamanavay, already used to the near electric shock of cold. As I do so I think of the *Firestacks*, and wonder if they are at their most intriguing at the moment of their fall. Just like the pause taken by an orchestra after a building crescendo, we know what is to come, readying ourselves for the drama of disintegration. Sculpture may appear to speak of ambition across the years, of material which lasts longer than our own bodies, but it is always in a state of disrepair. Those figures of *Another Place* which stand on Crosby Beach, with seaweed climbing up legs and barnacles leeching across eyes, are only a few centuries behind the classical figures of Greece and Rome which once told of great victories

granted by the gods, and are now humbled by time. As I think about the relentlessness of water climbing over and slipping through the gneiss of the *Firestacks* over the seasons and the years, I begin to understand that sculpture acts as both a marker of a fixed point in time, and of time passing.

After my swim, we pack our belongings and head off once again into the moorland. Today is warmer, and a lucid light glows over the heather, dressing it in a regal purple. Soon we are making our way down to the shoreline and into a small red boat. Sea roads are quicker than moor here, and as the wind is sleeping, we venture out into the open mouth of the Atlantic before curling back into a bay between two hills. Just as in the Scilly Isles, this is a world of evocative place names, and our boat bobs beside the Hill of the Fairies, Meall nan Sìthean in Gaelic, and the Hill of the Vent of the Kiln, or Meall nan Surrag. Back on land, it is into the vent of the kiln that we go, another long hike to our destination. This is the most treacherous of journeys; as the tide is low we are slipping on seaweed-covered rock for metres, and then there is a steep, long ascent to the top of the hill. There is no footpath to follow. Within the marshy ground Brook looks for the shadows of animal paths, who always take the easiest route, and so my steps retrace those of red deer far more agile than I. We are going to *The Surrag Path*, a sculpture Brook finished recently and which, due to its remote location, few have seen.



Julie Brook, *The Surrag Path*, 2021–2023, Lewisian gneiss

My relief when we reach the top gives way to panic when I realise we have to make an equally steep descent on the other side. Boulders balance precariously around me, like a giant game of marbles frozen in time, and I hold on to heather roots to make sure I don't slip. It feels like an easy drop to the Atlantic, where the wind is now waking up below me, and I see deep surges and swells out at sea. On a clear day the view takes in the island of St Kilda, believed by a writer in the fourteenth century to exist 'on the margins of the world'.[3] It certainly feels that way today. Earlier we had walked past the ruins of old dwellings known as shielings, or beehive huts, built as shelters when taking animals for summer grazing. The only other living soul we encounter here is a white-tailed eagle, also known as a sea eagle. Soaring above us at languorous speed, the celestial light of this coast conveys its majesty, and grace. At last we arrive at the gully, which sits just above the sea. It feels precarious, and isolated. But as my eyes adjust to the colours and shapes, I make out a run of steps which begin and end within some dense rockfall, a staircase constructed by hand from Lewisian gneiss.

During the last ice age, the Isle of Lewis was covered in huge sheets of ice, vast glaciers which held the power to shape the land. When they melted, the earth was carved as if by a sculptor with a chisel, deep valleys curved in cliffs, the sheer force of ice and water eroding and moulding as it went. Deposits were left too, creating rockfalls still visible today. One day Brook was on her boat, keeping close to the shore, observing the land. She noticed a gully between two points on Meall nan Surrag, which led down to the shore like a dry riverbed, containing what appeared to be untouched rockfall. It took a few failed attempts to find the gully when she had landed her boat, but once she located it on land, she knew it was a place she wanted to make work.

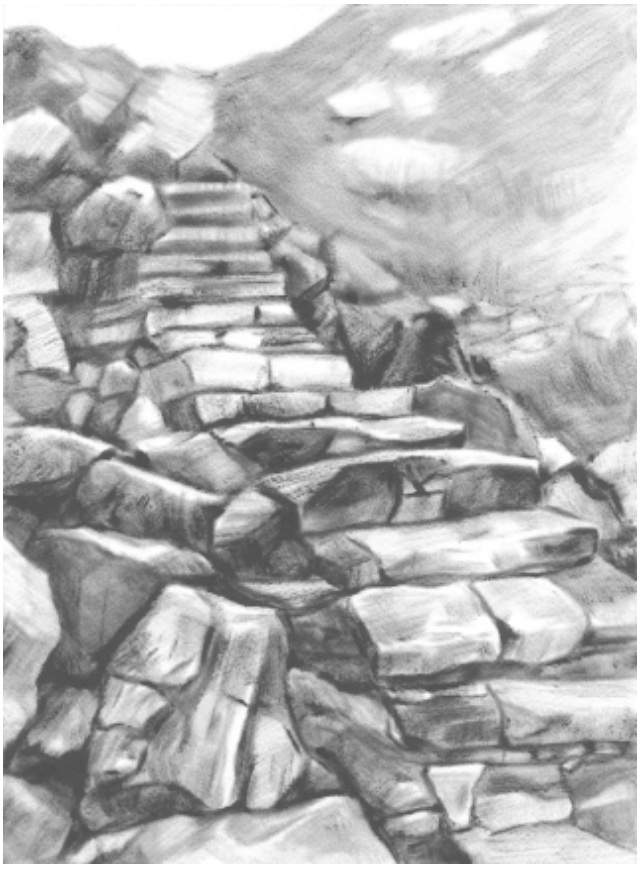
When we enter the gully, I feel so unsure of this place. To find a sense of protection from the elements I nestle into the underside of a large rock, and, looking out to sea, I ask Brook what impulse brings her here. Why make sculpture in such a remote place? It has taken us a few hours to get here, a journey by sea and foot, and all around are these rocks of Lewisian gneiss, their striations of colour laid down as they were made billions of years ago. Normally rocks of this age are deep under the earth's crust, but the movement of tectonic plates brought them up to the surface for us to touch. Minerals such as quartz and mica dazzle, their pearly lustre as bright as stars. Geologists have identified a pale rock on the top of Meall nan Surrag as anorthosite, a rock type also found on the surface of the moon.[4]

Brook tells me that it is *because* it is so remote that it is so appealing. For here is a place with 'no sign of habitation, and it's not a convenient site to live in like we saw with the beehive dwellings. So it felt like the stone has been untouched'.[5] Over three years, Brook and various teams of two assistants heaved and hauled stones within the rockfall, using them to create runs of steps by hand, with simple tools. Once complete, she called it *The Surrag Path*. The rocks come from this place, and over time they will fall from these steps, back into the waiting mouth of the valley. For this is also a meditation on time, but slower time than that evoked by the flicker of flame and hiss of dying ember. This is the slow breath of stone time.

As we sit within the gully, Brook tells me of a different sculpture she has made. This is *Ascending*, another hand-built set of steps, but this time in a quarry in Japan. The Kanagaso Quarry in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan, is a site of beautiful yellow-ochre stone that has been worked by humans for generations. In this way it is the opposite of where we sit within a gully of Ice Age rockfall, for that quarry is a place of human activity, of construction and ambition. In Japan, Brook worked with stones discarded as rubble within the quarry, and left unused. She once again moved them into place by hand.

When I see photographs of *Ascending*, the yellow steps glow like bars of gold. And while that sculpture is a straight line, incised onto the quarry cliff in perfect geometry, *The Surrag Path* is laid out like a ribbon, undulating in direction and depth depending on the landscape through which it winds.

Throughout our conversations, our hikes and sea journeys, I'd been thinking about the idea of totem, and what Brook's work might open up for us. At first there is nothing, just a deep human connection to the landscape in which she spends her time. But then I realise it is this connection which is key. In Japan, Brook had help from the local Takigahara community, in particular a farmer, Tsujimoto-san, who spoke no English, but who understood her sculpture. A few weeks after she began making *Ascending*, he took her to a nearby sacred site where, she says, 'I learnt then that Taicho, a famous Buddhist monk, had come back from China over the sea to Ishikawa and brought Buddhism with him. He had made a sacred place in a cave on top of the mountain in Kanagaso and placed a wooden statue there of Buddha.'[6] To get to the cave you walk up almost six hundred steps built by human hands. Here steps activate landscape to create meaning, and a sense of spiritual ascension. And from a clearing at the top near the cave, you can see the cliff of the quarry, with the sea moving beyond.



Julie Brook, *The Surrag Path*, 2021–2023, Lewisian gneiss (detail)

Back in the gully, my body is adjusting to the rugged beauty of this place. On our arrival here, when Brook first asked me to walk the steps of *The Surrag Path*, I refused. Too dangerous, too remote. What would happen if I fell? But as I watch its curving body moving through the stone, I am drawn to it, and know I would feel disappointed in myself if I didn't attempt it. And so I descend. One foot in front of the other, hands reaching out to a banister of boulder, I make it down. Where has it taken me? I am just further down into the gully than before, closer to the sea, where an incongruous patch of lush green grass is laid out like a picnic rug. Perhaps it is waiting for us to come to this place, to sit, to simply *be*. The walk back up the steps is faster, sure-footed, and I feel the thrill of exhilaration, of a bodily connection to this place. I understand now that for Brook sculpture is an invitation to us: an invitation to step into the unknown, to remind ourselves of our connection to our bodies, and to the earth in which we live. On the walk back to our moored boat, I ask Brook again about her connection to specific places. She tells me that it is the 'absolute core' of her work, 'because I can really only understand what to make when I dwell or inhabit a land in a given

landscape.'[7] She sleeps outdoors, she feels the rock and water with her feet and her hands, imbibing the spirit of place. For me, I see a deep tie to the original language root meaning of totem, 'to dwell together'. It feels as though this land, a place of ancient Viking warriors and fairy-laden hills, where the mist descends as quickly as it rises, has given me what I've been looking for.

But on the plane back to London I start to feel uncomfortable. Maybe it is because the real world is closing in, the loose caress of that magnificent landscape now lost, that I worry I am too swept up in what I want to feel. For in seeing sculpture as a material link to place and time, an evocative connection to the beauty of our world, I had ignored the full story, the tendrils of which were beginning to curl into my thoughts.

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Part Three

Between Bodies

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8

The Couple

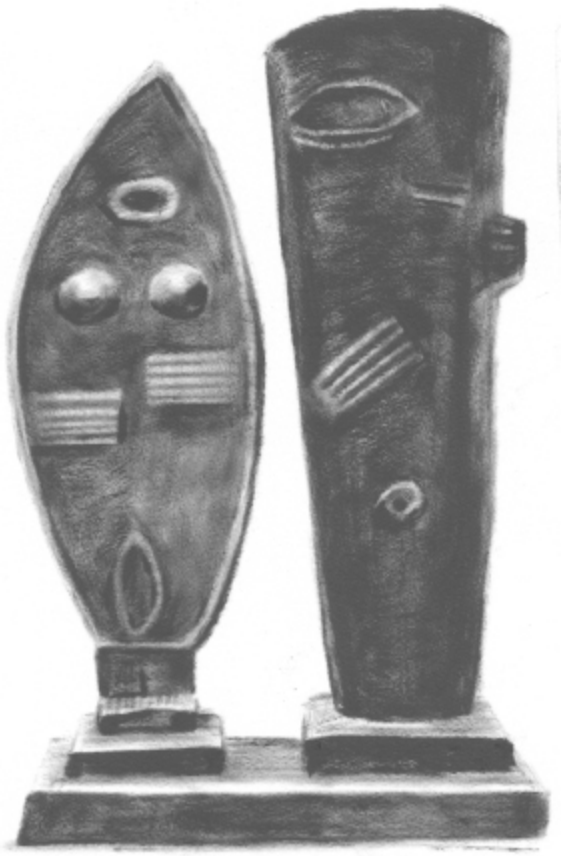
One of the best places to see the Eiffel Tower in Paris is from a place called the Trocadéro. Standing on the opposite bank of the Seine, among jostling tourists, street hawkers laying out their wares and the smell of frying waffles warmed by chocolate, you get an uninterrupted view of France's most famous landmark. The Jardins du Trocadéro are laid out in front of you, the theatre of their fountains contrasting with the sedate meander of the Seine, and Art Deco architecture curls around either side of the stepped esplanade upon which you stand.

It feels as though this has always been here, but it was all designed for the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in 1937. To make room for this new urban plan old buildings were torn down, including the Palais du Trocadéro. Built for the 1878 World Fair in Paris, the old Palais du Trocadéro surveyed this part of the Seine before the Eiffel Tower was even built. It was a mixture of Moorish and Byzantine influences, with architectural flourishes and flights of fancy which suggested the wealth, grandeur and ambition of a city that hosted seven World Fairs between 1855 and 1937. It was also the site of a museum known as the Musée d'Ethnographie. Established in 1878, only a few years before the Pitt Rivers Museum opened its doors in Oxford, this was the new home for objects taken from around the world, particularly Africa and Oceania. Visitors described the museum as dark and dingy. Spears, masks and reliquary figures were all stuffed together, strewn in cabinets and layered upon walls. Pablo Picasso first went in 1907 and complained about the smell, labelling it 'disgusting, like the Flea Market.'[1] But the corners and crevices of this museum are more than just a cameo in a Picasso anecdote.

★ ★ ★

Within the misty mountains and fairy glens of the Isle of Lewis, I had a glorious moment of understanding. Talking to Julie Brook it all seemed as clear as the light of those high skies: that sculpture was about the world in which we lived, and our bodily connection to time and place. But on the plane journey home I realised that, just as I had sidestepped the rocks on my way down *The Surrag Path*, I had been avoiding the problems that everyone had warned me about at the beginning of this journey. Ensnared in this trap of my own making, I was looking for what I wanted to find. But if sculpture is about our relationships with one another, and the world around us, then it must also be about the very darkest parts of us.

To uncover the story of sculpture I had to face these difficulties head on. And so it felt like the right time to look into a sculpture I had found around the time I nearly abandoned my research. This is *The Couple*, made in 1926 by the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti, and described by the Guggenheim Museum as being like 'two totemic idols'.[2] It is made up of two figures on a shared base, and, instead of the usual spindle-like bodies evoked by Giacometti, where you can almost see his finger and thumbprints as plaster is pressed and built up around a skeletal armature, these surfaces are flatter and wider, with pattern-like indentations marking eyes, mouths, hands and genitals.



Alberto Giacometti, *The Couple*, 1926, bronze (front view)

Giacometti made this sculpture in his studio in Montparnasse, Paris, where he would live until his death. He had moved to Paris in 1922, and found the studio a few years later. His biographer Michael Peppiatt describes it as 'a broken-down, rickety, insalubrious hovel, with little heating, no running water, and a roof that leaked'.[3] Today you can see a recreation of it at the Giacometti Institute in Paris, and, as I know they have a cast of *The Couple* on display there, I arrange to visit.

At first it's a disconcerting experience. A section of the tiny studio is recreated behind glass, with newspapers laid out on an unmade bed heaped with blankets, and cigarette butts left in an ashtray. But I soon get used to the glass wall, enjoying old splatters of paint on palette, and the placement of a pair of glasses among coloured bottles. And then I see it. Where most of the sculptures on display share a luscious viscosity of plaster, and a dynamism that takes your breath away as they walk, stretch and stand, there is one that sits on the floor, quietly. This is the plaster model of *The Couple*. In my research before travelling to Paris, I'd found a photograph of a young Giacometti in his studio the year he made *The Couple*.[4] He's seated, and

behind him, on a desk surrounded by tacked-up photographs, boxes and piles of paper, stands a Bakota reliquary figure. Now known as Kota reliquary figures, thought to have been commissioned by the Kota peoples to the north of Gabon in today's Republic of the Congo, these figures acted as guardians of the remains of important chiefs or ancestors, standing above the caskets or reliquary baskets. For the Kota, these reliquary figures are called mbulu ngulu.

Paris at this time was awash with works from the French and Belgian colonies, most notably in West and Central Africa. To understand why, we have to go back a few years, to the opening of the Palais du Trocadéro in 1878, and the establishment of the Musée d'Ethnographie within its walls. We are well versed in the mythology and romance of Paris in these decades: Henri Toulouse-Lautrec painting Vincent van Gogh's portrait in illuminating pastels, a critic decrying the exhibition of a group of independent artists as 'impressionist', a term he thought was insulting. The city was a cauldron of creativity and activity, with artists, writers and thinkers looking to free themselves from the shackles of the staid and bourgeois, open to new ideas and ways of seeing the world.

But within this avant-garde moment, now memorialised in postcards and magnets in museum shops, there was something darker. Because Paris was also the capital city of a vast imperial power. The French had been active in Africa since the seventeenth century, and their rule had been bolstered by colonial incursions such as the 1830 invasion of Ottoman Algiers and the establishment of a protectorate in Tunisia in 1881. It was from here that many of the objects filling the cabinets and shelves of the Trocadéro were taken, shorn of their context, their makers anonymised, the specificity of their original location and purpose lost in a jumble sale of radical otherness.

Giacometti was not alone in owning such an object. There was an established trade in them, and they were sold and bartered between dealers and artists, collectors and writers. At first we might think there is a clashing disconnect between what brought these objects to Paris, and the self-conception of so many artists who delighted in their own anti-bourgeois stance. How could artists professing to be reacting against the vapid rules of modern life be entranced by objects rooted so deeply in the imperial project?

But this entanglement is key. Around the time Picasso and his contemporaries first encountered these objects in Paris, around 1905–1907, the French press was ablaze with colonial scandals, including the Gaud-

Toqué Affair where two Frenchmen arbitrarily executed local people in what is now the Central African Republic. If you opposed colonialism, then, as Patricia Leighten writes, an interest in African aesthetics 'became associated with the anarchistic'.[5] You could be radical in both your politics and your art. This radicalism was liberating, giving freedom from the strictures of Western art, where centuries of establishment rules dictated taste and patronage.

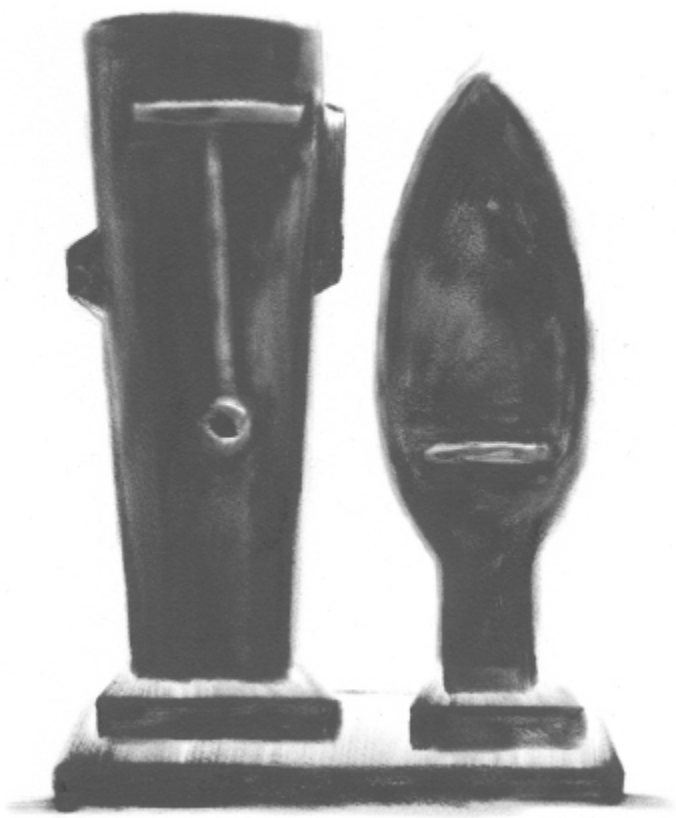
What strikes me most when reading about the objects of the Trocadéro, and other places like it, is the way in which they were posited as magical. There is a belief that they are not only art, but material openings to dream worlds of myth and mystery. Reading the ways in which contemporary critics describe these encounters is illuminating. An art history book published in 1912 positions Picasso as 'the apprentice sorcerer always consulting the Oceanic and African enchanters'[6]. The art dealer Paul Guillaume, who traded works by artists such as Henri Matisse and Amedeo Modigliani, and also sold African sculpture, wrote about its 'magic clay' which could 'reawaken in civilised man disapproved and primitive impulses'.[7] In his account of the Trocadéro, Picasso tells how the masks he saw were 'magic things'.[8] Here we see meaning conjured by Westerners who, while living in a bustling metropolis, felt handcuffed by modern rationality and searched for access to what they believed was a pre-industrial truth of life. These objects became sites of transformation and transition, or as John Warne Monroe writes, 'evocative portals into exotic, mysterious, imaginative universes'.[9]

The modes of display deployed heightened this rumbling of otherworldly knowledge and power. Within the gloaming of the Trocadéro swirled the sense that you might stumble upon a hidden magical treasure in one of its dark corners, like Aladdin finding the lamp. More than just demeaning and patronising, this feels dangerous. I hear the rippling echoes of John Long's use of the word superstition, and the delineation between 'them and us', 'civilisation and savage' that accompanied it. Simon Gikandi puts it most clearly when he notes that 'we forget the brutality that accompanied the arrival of the African art object to the West, the amount of African bodies that had to be destroyed so that the objects would arrive safely at the art museum'.[10]

As I walk through the rest of the Giacometti Institute, which is housed in an Art Deco mansion, replete with gold tiles and exquisite furniture, I find the bronze version of *The Couple*. Only the recreation of his studio is protected by security glass, and now that I can get up close to this sculpture

(close enough to be told off by a security guard) I'm intrigued by the markings and indentations on the wide, plain surface. Shapes such as the exaggerated oval of the Kota figure's face reappear not only in the figure of the woman, but in her vulva, and the lone eye of the man, which is drawn horizontally across his face. I want to see a Kota reliquary figure in person to learn more, and so later in the afternoon I head over to the Musée du Quai Branly, which now houses some of the old Trocadéro collection.

Even though the Musée du Quai Branly opened in Paris in 2006, there are still theatrical curtains marking the entrance to dark alcoves within its exhibition spaces, reminiscent of the shadowed corners of the Trocadéro. I pull back the drapery of one and find a wall of faces, some with mouths open wide, silenced and waiting. These are initiation masks taken from the Congo Basin. When I cross over into the 'Americas' section, I'm not surprised to see a totem pole attributed to the Nisga'a of British Columbia, Canada.



Alberto Giacometti, *The Couple*, 1926, bronze (back view)



Reliquary figure in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly, Gabon, nineteenth century, wood and copper

I find the Kota figures within the museum, and soon realise that the photograph I saw of Giacometti and his Kota figure didn't give a sense of the depth and hollowness of their shapes. Large oval faces curve like the receptacle of a spoon. In fact, Giacometti exhibited *The Couple* at the Salon des Tuileries in 1927, alongside another sculpture called *Spoon Woman*, which once again recalls the face of the Kota figure. Experimental in style and silhouette, Giacometti's sculpture from this period draws clear inspiration from non-Western sources. In addition to the Kota figure, he also owned a head of the ancient Sumerarian ruler Gudea from what was Southern Mesopotamia.[11]

Perhaps this is why the Guggenheim Museum identified *The Couple*, with its decorative details so different from the tradition of Western art history, as 'totemic'. But why describe the two figures of his sculpture as 'totemic idols'? Whenever I've read about ideas of totem, particularly in the histories of this part of the twentieth century in Europe, it's usually accompanied by two other words: 'idol' and 'fetish', their meanings mixed

together. I double-check the dictionary definition of idol, and find that it is 'an image or representation of a god used as an object of worship'.[12] We know that the Bible warns us against making and worshipping idols, and that idolatry is condemned as a sin. But a fetish? Perhaps like me, your first reaction to that word is that it is sexual, more likely to appear as a surprising detail in a politician's kiss-and-tell than a book about sculpture. However, the Oxford English Dictionary confirms that the fetish is also 'an inanimate object worshipped for its supposed magical powers or because it is considered to be inhabited by a spirit'.

When Picasso first visited the Trocadéro, he spoke of looking 'at fetishes', with the dark corners of the museum also home to 'unknown, threatening spirits'.[13] The concept of the idol and the fetish creates a division, similar to the 'them and us' of John Long's account of the Ojibwe and his new word, totem. It also reminds me of the display of the *Star House Totem Pole* at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. As John Warne Monroe notes, the way in which Western eyes viewed and labelled the fetish puts the 'external observer' in a superior position, able to see the reality of the object, which the 'allegedly backward mind' of the people who made it 'cannot yet perceive'.[14]

The displays of sculpted objects made by Indigenous peoples also reveal this division. We can see it clearly in the Liverpool Museum in the northwest of England. In 1894, a man named Dr Henry Ogg Forbes became director of the museum. It was Forbes's stated intention to trace a developmental journey for the visitor. He believed his display would demonstrate man's 'intellectual history tracing its rise and progress through the barbarous or less civilized peoples'. In the same piece of writing he compares his racial display to showing 'different groups of birds by specimens of the different species, then structure, then eggs, then habits'.[15]

He soon set to work, and began to classify the works in his care. He began with the 'black races', designated 'Melanian', with works from Africa and the Pacific. Then came the 'yellow races', labelled the 'Mongolian' section, before coming to the 'caucasian' department, with European objects including those from ancient Greece and Rome.[16] The department of the 'black races' was in the basement, while the 'caucasian' was in the main hall, its sculptures also enjoying an impressive classical balcony. Here the material culture of peoples and nations is ranked, with the Europeans – on their balcony – at the top.

Sculpture is at the very core of these horrifying displays; shown as stepping stones on the journey to enlightenment, like the way in which the

twentieth-century psychoanalyst and paediatrician D.W. Winnicott described children's toys as 'transitional objects' on the way to adulthood. As Forbes himself wrote, his plan was 'to present to the visitor the lowest forms of life in the Animal or Vegetable kingdoms on his entrance, gradually introducing him from room to room those of nearest affinity, in ascending order till the highest are reached'.[17] Louise Tythacott has written about the Liverpool Museum, and argues that Forbes's layout 'followed a late nineteenth-century tendency to adapt Darwin's theory of biological evolution to human societies in accordance with widespread Euro-centric discourse of cultural and racial hierarchy'.[18]

Here Indigenous carved and modelled objects are exhibited and discussed in the way we saw at the beginning of this story: that there was a 'division of humanity into those who know and decide, and those who are known and decided for'.[19] Art historian Same Mdluli could be writing about the Liverpool Museum when she tells us that 'Black subjects [were seen] as primitive and somewhat naïve, but also more adversely as no different from fauna and flora … This perception has persisted'.[20] Nana Oforiatta Ayim concurs that 'old colonial mechanisms' linger in our museum displays today.[21]

We are once again in the in-between space created by sculpture, but this time the space is between the bodies who made the objects, and those who concluded they were 'superstitious and irrational'.[22] And between these bodies there is an unconsenting distinction, voices unheard in those museum labels, lost to violence, brutality and arrogance.

These are the thorns of totem, the ones I was warned against. But they are not consigned to the past. I want to show you how they still shape our world, how those coils of violence, brutality and arrogance wrap around ideals of beauty, between the bodies displayed in the basement, and those on the balcony.

Today the phrase 'sculpting the body' is more likely to be used by gym-goers than artists. In fact, if you type those words into an internet search engine, what turns up is intriguing. Nothing about sculpture. It is all tips and tricks to 'get the perfect body', 'nine of the best arm sculpting exercises' or even a 'body sculpting' tool which promises significant 'fat reduction'. This idea of sculpting perfection reminds me of the ancient Greek myth of the sculptor Pygmalion, who carved his ideal woman and then prayed to the Gods to bring her to life.

In fact, the links between the sculpted bodies of the ancient Greeks and our ideals of the perfect body are clear. In London's British Museum there is a classical sculpture of a muscular man labelled 'God, or Athlete'.[23] This tells us so much; that supreme athleticism is about more than just the body, it raises you up above the rest of us mere mortals, according moral, as well as physical, superiority. The classicist Nigel Spivey argues that in ancient Greece, 'the beautiful was charged with the good; the Greek phrase kalos kagathos is an equation which signifies beauty as a moral quality'.[24]

The nineteenth century saw the advent of bodybuilding as a sport, with classical Greek sculpture, and its Roman copies, once again at its core. One of the key proponents of bodybuilding, a German named Eugen Sandow, wrote a training guide in 1894, where he attributes his inspiration to seeing Greco-Roman sculpture as a young boy and wanting to achieve the 'ancient ideal of physical power and beauty'.[25] Sandow was photographed replicating the poses of ancient sculpture, such as the *Farnese Hercules*. The *Farnese Hercules* shows the mythic hero resting on his club, the skin of the Nemean lion he had just bested casually draped over his weapon. The first of his labours complete; sinew, muscle and superiority ripple through time. This sculpture also influenced the body of a bodybuilder far better known than Eugen Sandow. A coach called Joe Weider described seeing the *Farnese Hercules* as 'a revelation – a turning point in my life. It became the ideal I held in my head of what a bodybuilder should look like, and I don't know any other piece of art that personifies power so effectively'.[26] The bodybuilder that Weider trained was a young Austrian named Arnold Schwarzenegger. In a memorial to Weider written after his death, Schwarzenegger revealed that it was Weider who also helped to get him his first acting job.[27] The role he played?

Hercules.

This connection between both moral virtue and the perfect body is associated with a very specific type of sculpture, the one which was placed at the apex of human civilisation in Forbes's project; the sculpture of the ancient Greeks. It is white, European bodies which are glorified and idealised, their fellow humans languishing in the basement in Liverpool, or hidden behind curtains in Paris, ready to be revealed to a waiting audience like a circus trick, designed to titillate and amuse.

The same year that Henry Ogg Forbes joined the Liverpool Museum, a Frenchman named Baron Pierre de Coubertin founded the International Olympic Committee, with the aim of recreating the sporting contests held

in Olympia, a town on the Peloponnese peninsula in Greece. The first of the modern games was held in 1896. Today we are all familiar with the opening ceremony of the Olympics, the visual pizzazz conjured by the host nation, judged by the watching world as if it were the men's one hundred metres itself. But we have always used visual imagery to tell a wider story of nationhood.

In her film *Olympics Part 1 – Festival of Nations*, conceived for the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin, Germany, the director Leni Riefenstahl draws a direct line from the sculpture of ancient Greece to Adolf Hitler's Germany. The film begins in the shadows of classical architectural ruins, until slowly faces and bodies emerge. The camera pans in on these unmoving, unseeing objects. And then we are shown a sculpture known as *Discobulus* (*Discus Thrower*). The Greek original, made in the fifth century BCE no longer survives, and is known to us from its many copies. In Riefenstahl's film, as smoke swirls around his muscular body, the discus thrower comes to life. The narrative is clear. The values of ancient Greece have lain dormant, until now. Just as Pygmalion created his ideal woman, the National Socialists are creating the ideal citizen. In 1937, a man began negotiations to acquire a Roman copy of the *Discobulus* executed in glistening marble. A year later, he completed the purchase, and it went on proud display in Munich. The man's name was Adolf Hitler.

By the time I left the Giacometti Institute, it was still early evening, and I had time to visit the Louvre. Walking through the elaborate architecture, where the embellishments of painted ceilings glint with pride and light pours in among the crowds, I think of how so much of what we see is mediated not only through our own beliefs and backgrounds, but through their presentation to us; Forbes's plan at the Liverpool Museum, the dark corners of the Trocadéro, Riefenstahl's cinematic propaganda.

Within the golden galleries of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, I consider the bodies all around us. The ancestral bodies of the Kota that were guarded by the mbulu ngulu which ended up in the Trocadéro, and the bodies made by Giacometti in his Paris studio. The bodies of those ancient Greek athletes, or gods, with their sculptural flourishes drawing admiring gasps as we marvel at marble made flesh. Between these bodies, there is a space, where the meanings we place on material can be lost, removed and altered; where some bodies are portrayed as irrational and primitive, and others a site of the moral and the perfect.

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9

Custard Apple

At the end of the thirteenth century, a church dedicated to St Augustine was built in East London, in what is now known as Hackney. At this time, the Knights Templar owned much of the land here, but after their suppression in 1308, with King Edward II acting on a command from the Pope, their land passed to the Knights Hospitaller. Over the following centuries, Hackney was home to many wealthy Londoners, who enjoyed its fields, open countryside and close proximity to the commerce of the City of London.

In 1798, the church was demolished, but its tower was left standing. St Augustine's Tower has overseen many peoples and changes, from the Tudor horologists who built the clock in its turret, to the slum clearances of Hackney in the 1930s. Today, its ancient shadow falls across three objects, sitting upon the flagstones over which so many feet have travelled. Rather like a scene from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, these objects are huge: oversized pieces of food, their textures glistening, inviting our touch and curiosity. But instead of cakes, potions and the detritus of the Mad Hatter's tea party, these are fruit and vegetables made of bronze and marble, lying alone on the ground, within the shouting sirens of urban life.

★ ★ ★

After that trip to Paris, I continue my day job as normal, planning upcoming exhibitions and artist talks. Although ideas of what we are told, and how objects are shown to us, are fresh in my mind after visiting those museums in

Paris, I'm not sure where to go next, and worry that perhaps I have hit a dead end.

A few days later, I arrange a meeting with the sculptor Veronica Ryan. Born on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, she now divides her time between New York and London. During our conversation we talk about her art education in Britain, and she notes that something 'which has been on my mind for a long time now is how we were trained within a Western canon'.[1] Used in this context, the 'canon' refers to works of art which are revered and accepted as part of our artistic trajectory over centuries, from the Renaissance masters to the Impressionists. More recently we've begun to question it, asking who has been left out from our narratives and museums, and why. My ears prick up when Ryan says that as a student she realised she was seeing things through the vision of Western artists and curators, and that 'so much of those influences were aesthetic, rather than understanding the cultural premise that the works came from'.[2]

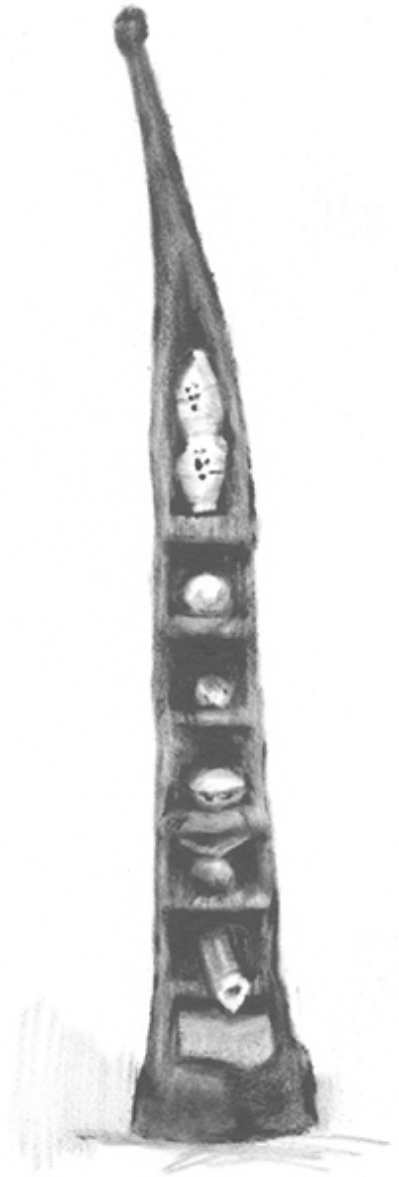
Ryan explains that her 'early interest in African art meant that I started to look beyond the Western notion of art because of course in non-Western culture there often wasn't a word for art. Objects were made very much for ceremonial purposes or in a very specific cultural context'.[3] As a student she had been fascinated by the objects at London's Museum of Mankind, where the British Museum's collections from the Americas, Africa and Oceania were kept separately from the rest of their holdings until 2004. 'I visited the Museum of Mankind as it was then,' Ryan continues, 'and I saw a lot of objects with labels of the regions they came from, but there wasn't any other explanation'.[4] Of particular interest to her were the works that were unseen, left undocumented in storage shelves. These shelves, utilitarian and industrial, chosen for their economy rather than beauty, still appear in some of her sculptures today.

At the Slade School of Art in London in 1980, Ryan won a Boise Scholarship to travel to Nigeria, 'to look at other undocumented items in museums'.[5] She went to museums in Lagos, Jos and Ibadan, keen to see works with her own eyes, unmediated by Western museum displays. In Nigeria, Ryan was drawn to objects which were bound, wrapped and stitched: the reliquary works; or, as she says, using her hands to make the sign for inverted commas, objects labelled as 'fetishes'.

This all feels relevant, and I tell her about my book, asking what totem might mean to her, if anything. Perhaps there is no connection, but she refers me back to her early trips to the Museum of Mankind in London, and tells me that the objects she found on those storage shelves were 'a kind of totem

to histories that hadn't been documented'.[6] She also suggests that I look at her sculpture *Shelves with Fragments*, which she made in the mid-1980s. This is a tall vertical sculpture which teeters towards the sky, with internal alcoves stacked one on top of another, like a narrow set of shelves. Within these small interiors, Ryan has placed objects for us to see. We don't know what they are; there is no clear symbolism to read here, no narrative hooks to cling on to. Maybe they are repositories of memory, holders of traces of the past; as Ryan says, totems of undocumented histories.

Many years ago, Ryan told an interviewer that 'there are keywords which are important for me … residues, traces, memories, deposits'.[7] Perhaps in these carefully placed objects, we might see traces of the past, whispers of bodies, echoing across time. It is a different form of historical documentation than Western museum-goers are used to – no grand sculptural gestures, no grappling wrestlers or laurel-covered victories. Instead we can only see what she lets us. Some of the objects poke out; others hide within the cavities. Some are dark, barely visible, and others are bright blue, like a flash of sun-blazed sky. Looking at it from a distance, these shelves, with their sculpted, bound, stitched objects stacked within them, whether symbols or stories, act like the vertical layers of a totem pole.



Veronica Ryan, *Shelves with Fragments*, 1985–1986, plaster, pigment

After her trip to Nigeria, Ryan began to bind her own sculptures, but I can't draw a neat line from those undocumented objects she saw to the weaving, wrapping, winding binds of her own sculptures. Because Ryan also draws inspiration from her mother, stitching together personal and wider contexts, the memories of maternal 'herbs and wool fabrics and threads' left around the house. She tells me that it is through her mother's 'particular belief systems that I felt I had some connection with West Africa'.[8] We all have those markers of the past, the scent of a perfume or favourite food, associative objects and activities, which bring us back to our childhood. We

carry them around with us like sediment, always there, waiting to come up to the surface once more.

That wasn't the first time I'd interviewed Veronica Ryan. I had spoken to her back in 2021, the year after she had been announced as one of two artists selected to make new public artwork in Hackney, London. In 1948, a ship called the HMT *Empire Windrush* docked just outside London at Tilbury, carrying passengers from the Caribbean to help rebuild a post-war Britain suffering labour shortages. This was the first arrival of what became known as the Windrush Generation, when people responded to the British government's advertisements and over half a million people arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1973. But in April 2018, changes to the British immigration system meant that they, and their descendants, were seen as 'illegal immigrants', stripped of their rights to work and live in a country that had been their home, and to which they had been invited. In the ensuing scandal, politicians obfuscated and misled, until the eventual apologies and resignations.

Hackney was one of the London boroughs in which members of the Windrush Generation had settled and become embedded into the community, working and raising families, and so the council worked to celebrate them by commissioning new pieces of public sculpture. The selected artists were announced in 2020, the year when, as we all know, statues were felled like trees, a cipher of criminality or culture, to be wrecked or saved, hauled down or protected, depending on your view. When I spoke to Ryan in 2021, we were in Bristol, a port city in southwest England, sitting in the education studio of an art gallery. The gallery is housed in a former tea factory, itself a site with a complicated history of colonialism and commerce. But there were more glaring histories to face in Bristol. Decades of debate over a statue of Edward Colston, a Bristol-born merchant who had made his money in the transatlantic slave trade, boiled over into physical protest. Writing engraved into the bronze of Colston's body told Bristolians that he was 'one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city' but in that hot June of 2020, the bronze figure of the man who had been involved in the transportation of eighty-four thousand enslaved men, women and children, of whom nineteen thousand died in the transatlantic crossings, was toppled, then pushed into the waiting arms of the river.

It was at that time that Ryan began to think about her Windrush commission. How do you even begin to make public sculpture within that kind of fervour and heat? Perched on the little chairs meant for children in

the education studio in Bristol, we talked about this. She said that she 'was a bit reluctant at first' with a 'lot of complicated feelings … but I think one way to address and overcome some of the issues is to have a variety of public works, involve artists in making works, which just has a different kind of representation'.[9] Chatting to Ryan in that stuffy room, as sunlight streamed through the windows, it was clear that she felt revulsion over the past, but her belief is that it is through representation that we can repair. In this I am reminded of the use of sewing and stitching in her work. In our bodies the stitch is the site of the wound, but also the point of repair. It is both rupture, and suture.

In this duality I think also of Ryan's own histories. She came to Britain as a baby with her parents in the 1950s, part of that Windrush Generation. But, as with all of us, her identity is more complex, memories layered not neatly but pushing up alongside one another like the fault lines of geological plates. She gets 'frustrated that when people first find trauma in my work, they necessarily think that I am talking about historical slavery trauma, in terms of what you inherit from one generation to the next. But I have never felt that could be only what I talk about'.[10] Her birthplace, the island of Montserrat in the Caribbean, looms large in her mind. Aged around ten, she returned there and stayed for 'probably nine months'.[11] In interviews, Ryan discusses the discombobulating feeling of returning to a home country that felt alien to her. What strikes me most is a story she tells of being at school: 'A girl asked me if I wanted some sweets, which she offered in a brown paper bag. I said "yes" and tried to get a sweet from the bag. But there was a snake in the bag. It was not large, but it was a terrible experience.'[12]

Ryan has never returned to Montserrat, but was planning to when, in 1995, there was a volcanic eruption. The capital city, Plymouth, was destroyed, and in the years that followed two thirds of the population fled their island home.[13] She says that 'when I saw images of the volcano – Plymouth is the only town and it's the town where I was born – it's completely covered in ash, so you only see mostly the roofs of houses. And the only landmark I remembered was the clock tower in the town … all you could see in photographs was just the clock face and the tower … it made me think a lot about loss and the end of things'.[14] But of course, volcanic ash, cause of destruction, death, and the end of things, is also fertile. In the galleries across the corridor from where we sat in Bristol, lay Ryan's sculpture of the soursop fruit, its protective glaze made using volcanic ash gathered from Montserrat. Repairing and rebuilding. We begin again.

By now it is early March. In England this is a time of cold shadows, with sudden bursts of warmth as startling as that snake in the sweet bag. In the graveyard in which I walk, daffodils mark the change in seasons, springing up between the stones of ancient tombs. I'm on my way to see Ryan's Windrush sculpture. When I spoke to her and discussed the idea of work being a totem of undocumented histories, I wondered if this public sculpture was also a way of bringing those histories out into the open.

I look up at the clock face on St Augustine's Tower. It has kept the time in this part of London for over five hundred years, and I think of Ryan's description of the clock tower in Plymouth, still standing above the ash and chaos. Turning the corner, I see the three sculptures, placed directly onto the old flagstones. No plinths here, announcing greatness. Instead, a *Custard Apple (Annonaceae), Breadfruit (Moraceae)* and *Soursop (Annonaceae)* balance on the ground. There is nothing to protect them from us, we can touch them, sit on them, even scuff them with our feet as we walk past. They look alive, and their organic natural forms morph in my imagination. The breadfruit glistens like the turquoise of a sea, while in the dark green ridges of the soursop I see a crocodile; crouching, waiting. The custard apple is carved in a white marble which in its lustre recalls so much classical sculpture; perhaps that is why I read its undulating shape as grapes packed together on a vine, held by the Roman god Dionysus. But I realise later that my mind is trying to make sense of fruit and vegetables which are new to me, converting them into visual references I understand. I wonder what you would see in these three sculptures, their patinated bronze and marble glowing in the March shadows? For Ryan, these foodstuffs relate to some of her earliest memories.

As a child, she remembers shopping in London's markets with her mother and sister, and the foods her mother bought – their tastes, textures and smells – are central to Ryan's sense of belonging, both personally and to a wider community. The noise of these markets, that hubbub of people, of food, of haggling and inspecting, is shared the world over. Food as a gateway to memory is something we all understand, whether we remember a heavy-scented kitchen, the nourishment given by a much-loved grandmother, or a recipe we learned as a child. As I stand by St Augustine's Tower to watch the sculptures, I see a little girl run over to the soursop – the spikiest of the three – and clamber on it, trying to find somewhere to sit. The texture amuses her, providing little footholds to help the climb, until she slides back to the ground. There is fun here too. From a purely visual viewpoint, Ryan's sculptures are playful, encouraging interaction and touch. She says that this aspect of play was very important to her because children are also 'learning

about structures and sculpture and about foods from the place that their parents came from, so they connect with them on lots of different levels'.[15]



Veronica Ryan, Hackney Windrush Commission, *Custard Apple (Annonaceae), Breadfruit (Moraceae)* and *Soursop (Annonaceae)*, 2021, marble and bronze

Within this public sculpture, these different layers of meaning glisten. They are personal, with Ryan revealing that the fruit and vegetables she chose were those her mother ate when she was pregnant with her.[16] They are communal, a connection to the Windrush Generation who came to Britain and built their lives here. They are also global, hinting at a wider story of migration and assimilation, and the histories of growth and agriculture.

The stories of all our lives. I think of the different ways in which we mark these lives. Around the flagstones where Ryan's sculptures sit there are tombs and graves, and in the churchyard stands a grand mausoleum for the Rowe family, who were, quite literally, the Lords of the Manor. On the stones beneath my feet, worn down by time, there is an engraving announcing the death of someone in 1685, but I can't make out his name, only his title: Sir. I think about who is memorialised and why. Ryan's sculptures are in stark contrast to that mausoleum, and the lives of those with the money to be remembered.

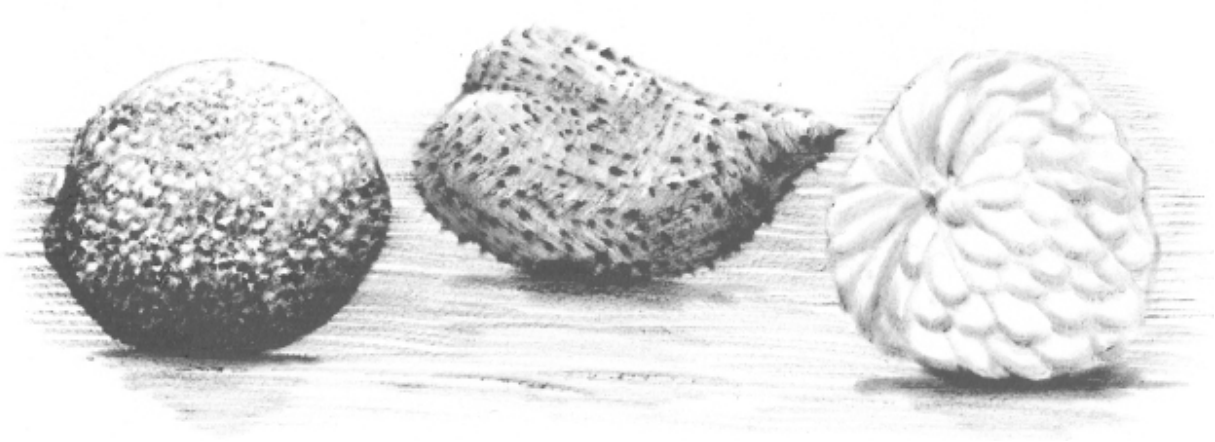
Ultimately, food suggests shared meals, a coming together of people, highlighting the humanity we share. But of course food is also complex; it rots and decays, it can both nourish and poison. When she first ate a custard apple, its sweet creamy texture made Ryan sick. There can be both belonging and difference, and this should be celebrated. As Ryan tells me, while the older generation will recognise these fruits and vegetables, perhaps for the younger ones 'it might not be part of their cuisine'.[17] There are no simple moments of representation, no easy wins. When we discussed what totem meant to her, Ryan also told me that it was both a formal reference through its shape, and a metaphor. Here in London, these organic forms also act as a metaphor, and remind me of the way in which the Ojibwe used markers of the natural world to identify individual groups within the wider community. We can be different, and the same. We dwell together.

The way in which Veronica Ryan deployed fruit and vegetables instead of the human body to represent us, their spiky, glistening shapes a cipher of community and connection, made me think of the other ways in which sculpture lives in a place between our human bodies, and those of the natural world around us.

A few miles from Hackney lies the rarefied air of London's Kensington Gardens. Here you will find tree-lined vistas, Italianate planting and cascading fountains. The writer J.M. Barrie lived close by, and his stories of a little boy who didn't want to grow up were partly inspired by these grounds. Barrie commissioned a sculpture of his creation, and today Peter Pan still dances beside the water, his pipe forever encased in bronze.

For a short time, Peter Pan had company. Beside the Round Pond, an ornamental lake created by George II and Queen Caroline in 1730, a pumpkin sprouted. But this wasn't a magical object, dropped by Cinderella's coachmen on her way from a ball at nearby Kensington Palace. It was a sculpture of a bronze pumpkin, measuring six metres high, by the Japanese

artist Yayoi Kusama. Kusama is famed for her pumpkins. The pumpkin first appeared in her work when she was still in her early twenties and before she went to art school in Kyoto. She returned to the pumpkin in the 1970s, and it is now one of the most recognisable motifs in contemporary art, on permanent display the world over, from Naoshima in the Kagawa Prefecture, South Japan to a sculpture park in Australia's Mornington Peninsula.



Veronica Ryan, *Custard Apple (Annonaceae), Breadfruit (Moraceae) and Soursop (Annonaceae)*



Veronica Ryan, *Breadfruit (Moraceae)*

Kusama tells us she sees the pumpkin, or the kabocha, the Japanese pumpkin, as alive. 'The first time I ever saw a pumpkin was when I was in elementary school and went with my grandfather to visit a big seed-harvesting ground. Here and there along a path between fields of zinnias,

periwinkles and nasturtiums I caught glimpses of the yellow flowers and baby fruit of pumpkin vines. I stopped to lean in for a closer look, and there it was: a pumpkin the size of a man's head … It immediately began speaking to me in a most animated manner'.[18]

Most readings position Kusama's sculpted pumpkins as anthropomorphic in this way, with different personalities based on their appearance, colour and size.[19] Their juicy plumpness is undeniably appealing, furnished with bright colours and dazzling patterns of polka dots which draw our eyes up and over the undulating grooves of their surfaces. They are in no way naturalistic depictions of the pumpkin. Instead its fleshy form is enlarged and hardened into bronze, its natural colours enlivened and brightened. But rather than just a playful dotty presence reminiscent of a child's cartoon character, I think Kusama's *Pumpkin* sculptures are a more psychic engagement with the self.

Whereas Veronica Ryan's sculptures of the custard apple, breadfruit and soursop are representative of selfhood in its many forms, I see Kusama's *Pumpkin*s as an exorcism of the self. She links her obsessive repetition of dots and shapes to hallucinations which began in childhood. She describes these hallucinations as 'dissolving and accumulating, proliferating and separating' during a process in which the self was 'eliminated'.[20] As a young woman living with a haiku poet and his wife in Kyoto, she would wake before dawn, lay out her brushes 'and then sit in Zen meditation. When the sun came up over Mount Higashiyama, I would confront the spirit of the pumpkin, forgetting everything else and concentrating my mind entirely upon the form before me. Just as Bodhidharma spent ten years facing a stone wall, I spent as much as a month facing a single pumpkin. I regretted even having to take time to sleep.'[21]

In a later poem, Kusama described the pumpkin as 'my spiritual home since childhood'.[22] We may scoff at this, but how many of us have a favourite flower, or tree? The loss of self in nature is not an obliteration, it is a comfort, an awe and appreciation of beauty. We understand that we are part of something greater than ourselves. Here then, Kusama's sculpture becomes a spiritual self-portrait, a portrait in which she transcends the ego and the body to acknowledge the shared life of living things, 'a living shared by all of humankind on the earth'.[23]

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10

Maman

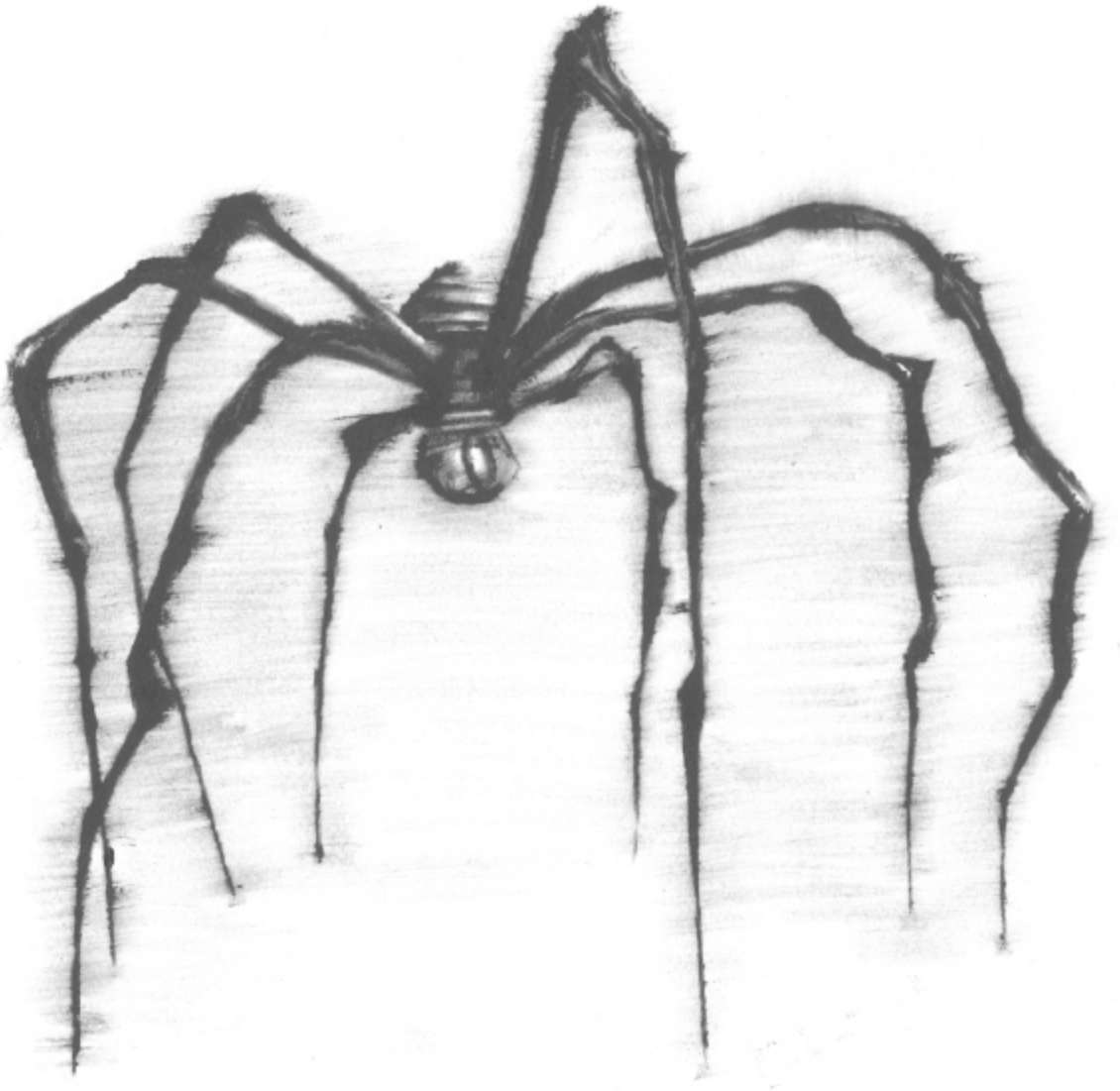
In the land of Lydia, there was a young woman whose supple fingers wove magic. In her hands, cloth came alive and tapestries sang. Such was her fame that nymphs left their flowing streams and abundant vineyards to watch her work. Her name was Arachne, and one day word of her skill reached Minerva. Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom, and art, and herself a dexterous weaver. She was intrigued by this mortal boasting celestial skill. Disguising herself as an old lady, and walking with a stick, she approached Arachne, advising her to ask Minerva's forgiveness for her talent. But Arachne refused, instead issuing a challenge to Minerva for a weaving contest. At this, Minerva threw off her disguise and accepted the challenge. Both Arachne and Minerva wove stories of power and violence. Arachne's tapestry illustrated the capricious nature of the gods, their flawed behaviour illustrated with deft use of her shuttle. The tapestry was audacious, but perfect, and finding no fault in it, Minerva tore it up in anger. Arachne, shamed, hanged herself.

But just at the last moment, Minerva doused the young mortal in herbs from Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft and magic. Arachne began to change; her slim fingers became spindle-like legs, she lost her hair, and her abdomen grew spinnerets full of silk. The goddess had turned her into a spider, destined to weave for eternity.

★ ★ ★

Both Veronica Ryan and Yayoi Kusama use the natural forms of fruit and vegetables to ask questions about our lives, and our connection to the living world around us. That we don't need the human body to represent ourselves in sculpture led me to another sculptor, one whose most famous work also lives between bodies: that of the human, and the animal. This sculpture stalks our world, its legs balanced on exquisite tips like a ballerina en pointe, tensing for the next darting movement. And so, on a blustery day with rain pummeling all around, I went to the Guggenheim Bilbao in Spain. Even in the heaviness of a dark afternoon, the museum glows as you walk around it. Designed by the architect Frank Gehry, it is covered in luminous tiles which need only the tiniest glimpses of light to warm its walls. But still, the wind is strong, and I am the only person outside, walking around Gehry's organic lustre, on the hunt for something.

The Guggenheim sits on the banks of the River Nervión, surrounded by water, and I've always thought it looks like a giant fish, its titanium tiles like scales which curve and shimmer in the liquid light. I go over a small bridge. Close by there is an Yves Klein installation called *Fire Fountain*, in which five jets spray up water. Today the wind and rain push those jets towards the bridge, drenching anyone who dares to walk past. I pull my hood up further. And then I see it: a giant standing alone, like a sentry. This is Louise Bourgeois's sculpted spider. The path around the Guggenheim is an ordinary dark grey pavement, but the spider has been given a large square of golden yellow tiles in which to wait. Today's rain has created reflections on the surface of the floor. The legs cast shadows within this pooling water, making them seem much longer, and I don't know where the spider begins, or ends. What I do notice though is how natural it looks, in contrast to the architecture which surrounds it. Where I had first thought that Gehry used organic forms for the museum, his building now feels manufactured and synthetic compared to this animal presence.



Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 1998, bronze, stainless steel, marble

Going up close, I walk around the spider, and underneath it. The legs have a sensuality to them; I want to reach out and touch them. Each one is different, there is no formality to the structure. Some of the legs have pointed joints, others curve, some jolt, others seem to glide. It is poised for movement, weight transitioning between these legs, readying itself to skim away or towards us. Although not a correct anatomical representation of a spider, there are naturalistic touches, and welded veins seem to bubble up out of the bronze. And then we get to the most precious, intimate part of the sculpture, which hangs just above our heads. Held within the sac are the spider's eggs, realised in marble. Bourgeois makes the contents of the sac visible, and just like the crochet pattern of a net shopping bag, it is both

open and closed, held and revealed. The spider is called *Maman*, and these eggs are therefore its heart. I'm interested that Bourgeois chose marble for the eggs, a material used by sculptors across centuries to suggest power and purity. It also makes me think of other renditions of the mother and child in sculpture, a history which Bourgeois invokes and then pulls apart. One of the most famous articulations of the mother and child is Michelangelo's *Madonna della Pietà*, made between 1498 and 1499 and now on display at St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. Michelangelo uses marble to depict a young Mary weeping over her dead son, and she is lauded for her traditional feminine traits of innocence, fecundity and submission. In Michelangelo's hands, the mass of marble increases increases in the lower part of the sculpture, with legs and drapery creating a sense of enveloping volume. But with Bourgeois it is the opposite: the spider narrows into pointed tips which pierce the ground. Here the maternal is also malevolent.

The feeling of menace emanating from her spider is particularly prevalent today due to the presence of another sculpture. This is Japanese artist Fujiko Nakaya's *Fog Sculpture #08025 (F.O.G.)*, a water fog created by a thousand nozzles and which operates on the hour. As I am standing within the spider, the fog turns on, and the wind slices it across the ground like dry ice in a theatre. The sky is still dark, the air weighed down by the rain and fog. It feels as though I am on a Hollywood film set, and I half expect the spider to start crawling towards me like the denouement of a horror film. But then, the curves of the spider seem to lighten, casting imaginative shadows over the golden tiles, drawing me in once more. This idea of both repulsion and seduction makes me think of the term 'black widow', a reference to a species of venomous spider which is often used to describe those women who kill their lovers. Sex and violence; now we are fully in Louise Bourgeois territory.

Louise Bourgeois is famed for her giant sculptures of spiders. You may well have seen one of them on permanent display in Tokyo, Seoul or Doha, or in a temporary exhibition in Sydney, Buenos Aires or Havana. Bourgeois is a sculptor who takes the turmoil of her inner world and twists it into material expression, one who uses the body of an animal to represent human emotions to startling effect. But the idea of human character being represented in animal form is an archetype we understand. All over the world we find beliefs, myths and stories where protagonists are accompanied by animals which reveal their hidden world.

In European folk tales a witch often has a black cat, known as a familiar. Norse mythology gives us the fylgja, an animal companion imbued with human characteristics. We see it time and again. In the trilogy *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman, human characters have dæmons, which are external, physical manifestations of their innermost selves. These take the form of animals, and which of his readers didn't ask themselves what animal their own dæmon would be? Pullman says his inspiration came from art, including Leonardo da Vinci's sensuous painting *Lady with an Ermine*, where there was 'a psychological link between the person and the creature'.[1] It also goes the other way round, with humans given animal characteristics, negative as well as positive. In Japan, renegade families or clans that rebelled against the emperor during the Edo period were derided as earth spiders, tsuchigumo in Japanese, and appear in art and literature with demon-like capabilities and characteristics.[2]

As I read over these examples, I can't help but think of another. After his initiation ceremony, when the beaver was tattooed upon his chest, John Long was addressed by the Ojibwe as 'Beaver'.[3] As with the totem pole, a specific Ojibwe societal system has been overtaken, its meaning swamped by the attitudes and ideas of different cultures. Even today, you can answer numerous online quizzes to determine 'your totem animal', including one professing to be '100% reliable', which advises that knowing your totem animal 'is essential as it helps you find your true path and stretch yourself for personal growth'.[4] I don't know how the idea of a totem animal emerged, and, as I tried to untangle the tendrils of Long's account of his time spent with the Ojibwe on the shores of the Great Lakes, I'd been reading about the transformation of our bodies into those of animals.

It was here that I was reminded of the story of Arachne, told by the Roman writer Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, a narrative poem on the theme of transformation. What struck me was that the link between Arachne and Bourgeois goes beyond the spider. For the sculptor was born into a family of tapestry restorers, and she recalls how her mother 'would sit out in the sun and repair a tapestry' at the family's workshop in the Parisian suburb of Antony.[5] Bourgeois herself brought the twin threads of spider and tapestry together, noting that 'I come from a family of repairers. The spider is a repairer. If you bash the web of a spider, she doesn't get mad. She weaves and repairs it'.[6] As we saw with Veronica Ryan, Bourgeois views the stitch as a site of restoration, the point of both puncture and remedy. But while

some readings of Bourgeois stick to this narrative of restoration and repair, I'm more interested in the violence.

In 1922, when Bourgeois was still a young girl, her father employed a tutor for the family, an English woman named Sadie Richmond Gordon. Only six years older than the prepubescent Louise, Sadie had an affair with Louis Bourgeois, the father for whom Louise was named. This sexual relationship within the family home continued for several years, but its effects echoed in the mind of the artist for decades like the creak of old floorboards. Upon hearing of this arrangement today we might ask other questions, about power, and age, but when speaking about it in later life, Louise Bourgeois displayed no hint of sympathy towards the young girl in a foreign country. Instead she expressed a bitter rage against a sexual transgressor which never abated. 'I was betrayed not only by my father, damn it, but by her too. It was a double betrayal'.[7]

It went beyond that. Bourgeois revealed her violent fantasies against Sadie, admitting that 'as a child, after washing the tapestries in the river, I would turn and twist and wring them with three others or more to wring the water out. Later I would dream of getting rid of my father's mistress. I would do it in my dreams by wringing her neck'.[8] Most of us would keep these thoughts to ourselves, but for Bourgeois they were such a part of her work that she opened them up to the world. For her, sculpture was a place where those feelings could be wrested into the air, tipped into the light and perhaps repaired, like her mother mending those tapestries in the warm glow of the sun. In one interview, Bourgeois played with a piece of clay, shaping and reshaping it as she spoke. As she did so, she elucidated her thoughts on the difference between those who paint, and those who sculpt. 'When you go from painting to this [sculpting], it means you have an aggressive thought. You want to twist the neck of a person … I became a sculptor because it allowed me to express – this is terribly, terribly important – it allowed me to express what I was embarrassed to express before'.[9] And then, with a flourish, she 'wrung the neck of the figure she was creating'.[10]

Set against this story of Sadie and the sexually incontinent father, the artist's mother, Joséphine Fauriaux, looms large. When Bourgeois was still a child, Joséphine had fallen ill with the Spanish flu. Permanently weakened, Joséphine continued to run their tapestry atelier, but her health was precarious. And in a stark reversal of roles, Bourgeois became her mother's carer when she was still in her teens. Joséphine's death when Bourgeois was

twenty, combined with the betrayal of her father, engendered a lifelong awareness of loss, and abandonment. I think about this as I read over the literature, in which the tapestry and the mother are linked. There is a letter in the archive, dated 1929, where Joséphine tells of her plans for when Louise comes back home: 'on your return I am quite delighted to do tapestry together. You must not neglect that'.[11]

The archive also gives some fascinating titbits about her. In the tapestry studio, Joséphine used to cut the genitalia out of the tapestries that were to be exported to a more prudish American market, replacing them with flowers. Bourgeois claimed that 'my mother saved all of the pictures of the genitals over the years, and one day she sewed them all together as a quilt and then she gave the quilt to me'.[12] Such a dismembering in material makes me think once again of Arachne and her tapestry, in which the opposite occurs. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid gives a detailed description of Arachne's tapestry, dedicating twenty-one lines to her scenes of the rapes committed upon mortals by gods such as Apollo and Neptune. For Arachne, the world is a place of sexual violence, where power takes what it wants. It is no surprise that Bourgeois remembers her mother cutting out the genitals from tapestries destined for American consumers; her analyst was probably thrilled. In this act we might see Joséphine as an avenger: in removing the genitals there can be no further transgression; she is the destroyer of sexual potential. There is uncertainty here too. Joséphine was her children's protector, but she did not protect the young Louise from the unsettling situation created by her husband. This ambiguity towards the role of motherhood finds its expression in Bourgeois's spider, which is both mother and murderer.

Bourgeois first represented the spider in her drawings in the late 1940s, and then did not return to it until 1994 when she was in her eighties.[13] Beyond the use of 'Maman' in the title, Bourgeois often compared her mother to a spider in her writing and interviews. In an illustrated book she titled *Ode à Ma Mère*, she wrote in a mixture of French and English that 'my best friend was my mother and she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat and useful as an araignée [spider]'.[14] Just as Minerva turns Arachne into a spider, Bourgeois does the same for Joséphine. But occasionally Bourgeois spits that seeing the spider as her mother is 'reductive' and that she herself is the spider. She also brings it back to sex. In a passage in French in *Ode à Ma Mère* she states that 'This endless analysis is exhausting, and visually it can be reductive … For once,

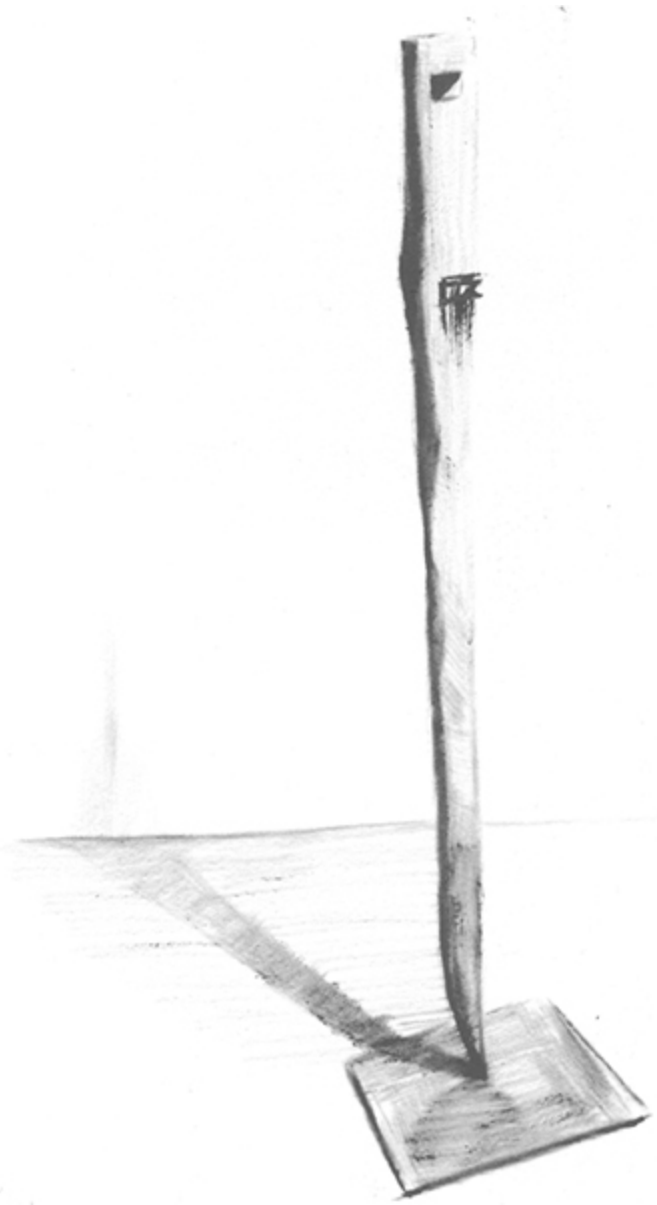
this spider admits to being tired. She leans against the wall (see the prostitute who eyes her client from the shadow of the doorway, against the door of the years)'.[15]

In 1938, Bourgeois was in her late twenties and had set up her own art gallery in her father's tapestry sales gallery in Paris. It was there she met the American art historian Robert Goldwater. By the end of that year they were married and she was on her way to set up home in New York. Around this time she made a painting called *The Runaway Girl*, a title which hints at her motives for leaving her family. Bourgeois liked to cast her own web of biography, telling a later interviewer that 'I was in effect a runaway girl. I was a runaway girl who turned out alright'.[16]

By June 1941, the couple were renting an apartment at 142 East 18th Street in Manhattan, a building known as Stuyvesant's Folly. This building had a flat roof upon which Bourgeois could work in the open air, and there are some extraordinary photographs which show the artist up there with the Manhattan skyline as the backdrop for her makeshift studio. Even for visitors today, the ambitious verticality of the city is breathtaking, and the art historian and critic Marina Warner reminds us of the contrast between this architecture and the 'well-planted, elegant and horizontal amplitude of her family villa near Paris'.[17] In fact many art historians have looked to the architecture unfolding around her on the roof to explain the first sculptures Bourgeois made. These were tall, narrow, vertical sculptures whose shapes reflected those of the New York skyline.[18] But I think there is another way in which the Manhattan cityscape impacted Bourgeois. If we are feeling lonely, there is something about a big city, all those windows revealing postcards of other lives, that exacerbates that emotion. We see those lives being lived, and make up stories of how full they are in comparison to our own. Alone on that roof, now a mother herself in a foreign country, Bourgeois explained that 'suddenly I had this huge sky space to myself, and I began doing these standing figures. A friend asked me what I was doing. I told him, "I feel so lonely that I am rebuilding these people around me".'[19] She called these sculptures her *Personages* and revealed that they 'represented the people I had left behind – that is to say, my father, my brother, and their family, my cousins, all the people I had left in France. I had come to this country alone. It was a kind of memorial'.[20]

The *Personages* are tall, upright carvings in wood, and these formal qualities have led to them being described as 'totemic'[21] or 'totems'.[22] I can

understand why. The rough wooden surfaces are evocative of carved totem poles, and during the period she made the *Personages* Bourgeois was exhibiting in New York alongside artists such as Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. Rothko's work of this time includes a painting titled *Totem Sign*, circa 1946, and Pollock's 1953 painting *Easter and the Totem* is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Indeed, one Bourgeois scholar, Robert Storr, identifies the *Personages* as 'closest to fulfilling Freud's definition of the "totemic".'[23] By this he means that objects are imbued with more than just recognisable features, becoming instead vessels of identity and meaning'.[24] I look once more at the photographs of a young Bourgeois on that roof, her sculptures a surrogate family balancing in the wind. As I think of our own vulnerability within those soaring skyscrapers, I am reminded again of the origins of John Long's version of odoodeman or ototeman, meaning 'his clan' or 'he is a relative of mine'. Here Bourgeois created her own clan within the dynamism of modern life. How many of us try to do the same?



Louise Bourgeois, *Portrait of C.Y.*, 1947–1949, painted wood, nails and stainless steel

But in my research, I can't find Bourgeois herself using the word totem. There is even a typed note held in her archive where she seems keen to exorcise any connection of the *Personages* to wood, writing that, 'I avoid the grain and polish of the wood because its romantic associations are disturbing'.[25] To cover up the wood she painted these sculptures in colours such as blue and 'venetian red'.[26] I get in touch with the Easton Foundation, the organisation that manages her estate, and they confirm that Bourgeois avoided using the word totem.[27] This was deliberate; her husband Robert

Goldwater was an expert in what was known as 'primitive' art, and Bourgeois insisted upon her own artistic independence, free of any influence from those around her. Paulo Herkenhoff notes that while we can see 'the totemic allure of African sculpture' in the forms of her *Personages*, Bourgeois disliked the 'fetishistic qualities' of such objects.[28] And when asked if she 'was interested in African sculpture' she replied, 'Not at all, I was haunted by the dialogue of people'.[29]

For Bourgeois, these early sculptures 'are the expression, in abstract terms, of emotions and states of awareness'.[30] Storr writes that she 'frequently made pieces in response to particular individuals at whose hands she felt she had suffered or with whom lesser complications arose'.[31] Some of the *Personages*, such as *Portrait of C.Y.*, whose wooden body Bourgeois pierced with nails in a violent imagined retribution, refer to specific people. It is what Bourgeois called this 'tension of their relations' which led her to group the *Personages* together on the floor 'the way people would place themselves in the street to talk to each other'.[32] Perhaps this is what makes her sculpture so compelling. It does not present idealised versions of loved ones. Instead it holds emotions we recognise; in the crevices of the spider, and the shadows cast by her totem-like *Personages*. She does not need the human body to reference the pain and ambiguity of life. As Bourgeois said, 'we are all wounded. We are all flawed. We are all violent. We all want to be loved'.[33]

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11

Water Woman

In the early part of the seventeenth century, a man named Scipione Borghese began a building project in Rome. Extensive gardens were laid out, and within their elegant pathways and fountains, Borghese created a private country-style villa in the heart of the Eternal City. He was already part of a powerful family, but when his uncle was elected as Pope Paul V in 1605 the wealth and prestige flowed, and Scipione Borghese became a cardinal. He filled his property with extraordinary artworks, and today we can visit the Galleria Borghese and admire the luscious paintwork of artists such as Titian, Raphael and Caravaggio.

In 1622, Cardinal Borghese commissioned the young Gian Lorenzo Bernini to make what is now considered one of the most important sculptures of the seventeenth century, his *Apollo and Daphne*. Struck by Cupid's arrow, Apollo fell madly in love with Daphne, who fled from his ardour. In desperation she asked her father, the river god Peneus, to help her evade Apollo; he turned her into a laurel tree. Bernini chose this moment of transformation for his sculpture. As limbs fly and clothes billow in the wind, Bernini turns marble into motion. We watch as Daphne becomes part of the natural world, her fingers lightening into leaves as the braids of her hair branch towards the sun.

★ ★ ★

Rome is a city of sculpture, filled with ancient orators addressing the populus, triumph and glory carved into stone, brought to life once more by the hot

sun. Even when the stories etched in arches are rubbed and faded, history feels only a footstep behind us, our place on this shared wheel of fortune just a few spokes ahead. I am on my way to the Galleria Borghese, and amidst the coins and the crowds, I stop for a moment at the Trevi Fountain. On either side of its cascading waters two sculpted animals catch my attention. These are half-horse, half-fish, a creature known in Greek mythology as the hippocampus, and linked to the sea god Poseidon. Within the water, their flailing heads move in different directions, mirroring the mercurial moods of the sea. The front portions are those of a horse, all mane and hooves, but then the equine body transforms into a muscular tail, the tip an echo of Poseidon's trident. We see powerful structured wings, ready to rise from the water like a mounting wave.

And there, with the whistles of the Trevi Fountain security guards punching the air (and tourists still throwing their coins for luck), I understand what I have missed. In my research into sculpted bodies, I had forgotten one of the key parts of the puzzle; those hybrid bodies which exist between the boundaries of reality and imagination. The stories we have told of these hybrid bodies recur over the centuries, and they are some of the most famous images in the world, such as the Great Sphinx of Giza. With the body of a lion and the head of a human, the Sphinx is as enigmatic as the *Mona Lisa*. Although it was carved over four thousand years ago from limestone found in the Giza plateau, it is part of our global visual vernacular, the inspiration for countless tales of adventure and legend. Even today, we are still fascinated by tales of werewolves and mermaids, or men who turn into bats to save the world.

As I think of these hybrid bodies in cultures and myths across the globe, so enduring across time and place, I flick through all the sculptures I've come across which are hybrids of different bodies, whether animal or human. In ancient Mesopotamia, where the rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates created a lush landscape for one of the cradles of human civilisation, we find hybrid sculptures known as urmahlullu. These are protective figures who guard the entrances to temples. They have the legs and torso of a lion, and the upper body and head of a male human. They are similar to the lamassu, winged lions or bulls with human heads, which were excavated in the nineteenth century, and are believed to have stood watch along the gateways of the ancient palace at Nineveh, built by the Assyrian King Sennacherib, who ruled between 704 and 681 BCE, and whose kingdom covered swathes of present-day Iraq and Turkey. In India, in the western state of Gujarat, there are magnificent Solanki temples built around the eleventh century

which showcase human–animal sculptures such as nāgas, a race of half-human half-serpents which live in the underworld.[1] And in Japan, there are the karura (迦楼羅), divinities with the head of a bird and the body of a human, derived from the Hindu deity Garuda. Greco-Roman tradition gives us creatures such as the harpy. These were also half-human and half-bird, and in Homer's *Odyssey* they are the winds upon which people are swept away. I realise that all of these sculptures are found in transition spaces, and in the case of the harpy, their images are found on tombs, sites which of course mark our ultimate passage, between life and death.

In Rome, time stills as I think back to one of the starting points for this book, the *Lion Man*, or *Löwenmensch*. It was during the last ice age, forty-three thousand years ago, that *Homo sapiens* first arrived in Europe. One of the places they settled was the Swabian Jura, or Swabian Alps, in Baden-Württemberg, a mountainous region in southern Germany, and it was in a cave here that the *Lion Man*, a human–animal hybrid, was discovered. That the *Lion Man* was carved up to forty thousand years ago is astounding, a material link to the past hands which held it, and the imagination and creativity of the minds which could both envisage it and bring it into form. Suddenly the sculpted wonders of Rome seem gaspingly contemporary, the glories and losses of what we call 'antiquity' only a heartbeat away.

What is intriguing about the *Lion Man* is that it is not the only example of a human–animal hybrid made by early humans. The British archaeologist David Wengrow writes that such 'composite figures are found throughout the Upper Palaeolithic art tradition that flourished among hunter-gatherers of the last ice age between around 40,000 and 10,000 years ago'.[2] But I can't get too excited, and have to be wary of seeking to interpret objects from past millennia through our contemporary lens. The dangers of this approach became all too apparent when the earliest known carving of a fully human form was found in another German cave in 2008. Known as the *Venus of Hohle Fels* and carved from mammoth tusk, scientists believe that she is around thirty-five to forty thousand years old. Her primary features are large, weighty breasts, squashy tactile folds over a fabulously corpulent torso, and a clearly incised vulva.

When she was discovered in all her fleshy glory, the press went wild. 'The World's First Page 3 Girl' the *Sun* exclaimed, while *The Economist* gave us 'Smut carved from mammoth tusk'. An article in the *Register* entitled 'Archaeologists Unearth Oldest 3-D Pornography' quoted a respected

palaeolithic archaeologist who confirmed that the *Venus of Hohle Fels* was 'sexually exaggerated to the point of being pornographic … There's all this sexual symbolism bubbling up in that period. They were sex-mad'.[3] I don't think it's necessarily our palaeolithic ancestors who were sex mad.

The scholar Jean Clottes identifies this temptation to place our own classifications upon things drawn, painted and modelled in millennia long past, when he writes about how it has impacted the number of human–animal hybrid figures which have been discovered. He notes that 'one can see how the expectations of researchers for the ordering of the Palaeolithic world have closely – too closely! – reflected the categories of the modern western world in which there are animals divided into biological categories, and there are humans – in every way distinct from the animals'.[4] Previously, researchers concluded that some of the hybrid figures were 'willfully or accidentally deformed', their animalistic attributes considered a mistake, perhaps attributed to a lack of representative skill, and were therefore not classified as human–animal hybrids. But this has now been redressed, and Clottes states that 'discoveries of recent years reinforce the idea that the number of what we refer to as composite creatures is much greater than we thought'.[5]

Even in their representation these bodies are ambiguous, the porous borders between the breathing bodies of animals and early humans suggestive of the shimmering thinness of the membranes between all living things. This aspect has been drawn out by many of the academics working in the field, where animal-human hybrids are known as therianthropes. In his research on the San rock art of South Africa, the earliest instance of which was drawn around thirty thousand years ago, Pieter Jolly writes that 'the resistance that many of the therianthropes in San art appear to offer to any form of categorisation was at first a source of frustration as I attempted to order and make sense of the wide range of forms taken by these beings. It was only at a later stage that it occurred to me that this fluidity and lack of structure is in fact the key to understanding'.[6] Jolly concurs with the arguments of academics such as Mathias Guenther who identifies 'fluidity, ambiguity, ambivalence and liminality' as key to San belief, and notes that 'these characteristics find their most concentrated form in the therianthropes, which are archetypally ambiguous, liminal beings'.[7]

Some academics argue that these early images even suggest a hinterland of altered consciousness, the animal heads on human bodies identifying these figures as shamans who move between states of being. One of the scholars who proposes this theory is the archaeologist David Lewis-Williams. He believes that the places in which therianthropes are often found – not only in

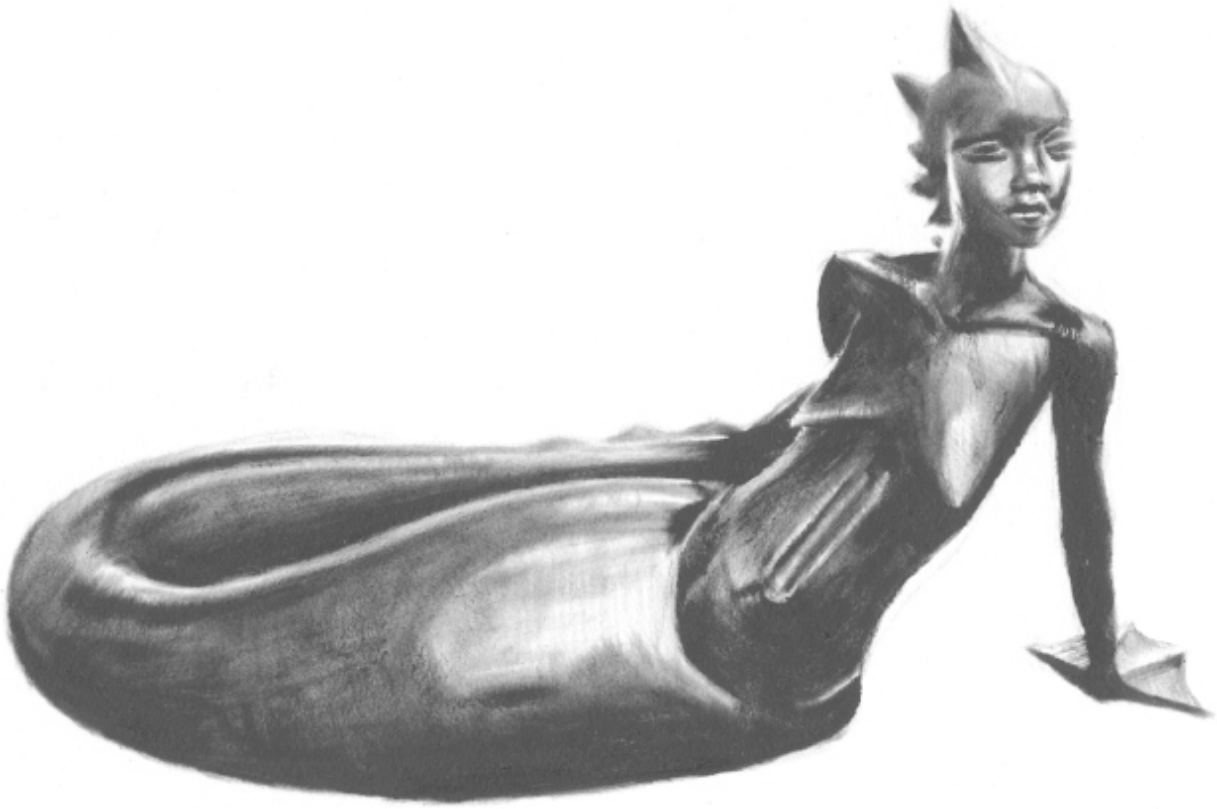
the rock art of the San of South Africa, but in the Cave of Altamira in Spain and the Cave of the Trois-Frères in southwestern France – are sites of transformation, entry points to worlds which exist at the tip of our consciousness, and which live between the corporeal and the spiritual, between life and death.[8] While there are arguments over the extent of the rituals proposed by Lewis-Williams, and the hallucinatory visions evoked by trance and dance that he suggests, there seem to be a good number of respected academic experts who agree that therianthropes are, in the words of Dušan Borić, 'an attempt to open up a nether world, or the reality that lies beyond and beneath the superficial world of appearances'.[9]

While we can never know what these images meant to those who have gone before us, there are some clues which may give us a trail to follow. One of these is an important archaeological site called Lepenski Vir, situated along the Danube in Serbia, close to the border with Romania. Researchers believe that the settlement's earliest inhabitants began to build there around nine and a half thousand years ago, making it millennia later than the Upper Palaeolithic therianthropes such as the *Lion Man*. Here at Lepenski Vir, one of the most important centres of prehistoric culture in Europe, we also find hybrid bodies evoked in material, and once again in transition spaces. These are boulders which have been carved to reveal bodies which are half-human, half-fish. Dušan Borić points out that the positioning of these boulders on thresholds, such as grand hearths or burial areas, suggests some element of metamorphic belief.[10] Some of the boulders have scales which shimmer in the sandstone, their shape following the outline of a fish gliding through water, perhaps echoing the migratory fish flowing through the nearby Danube. At the top of their bodies, we see human faces, expressions we recognise, open mouths speaking silently across time.

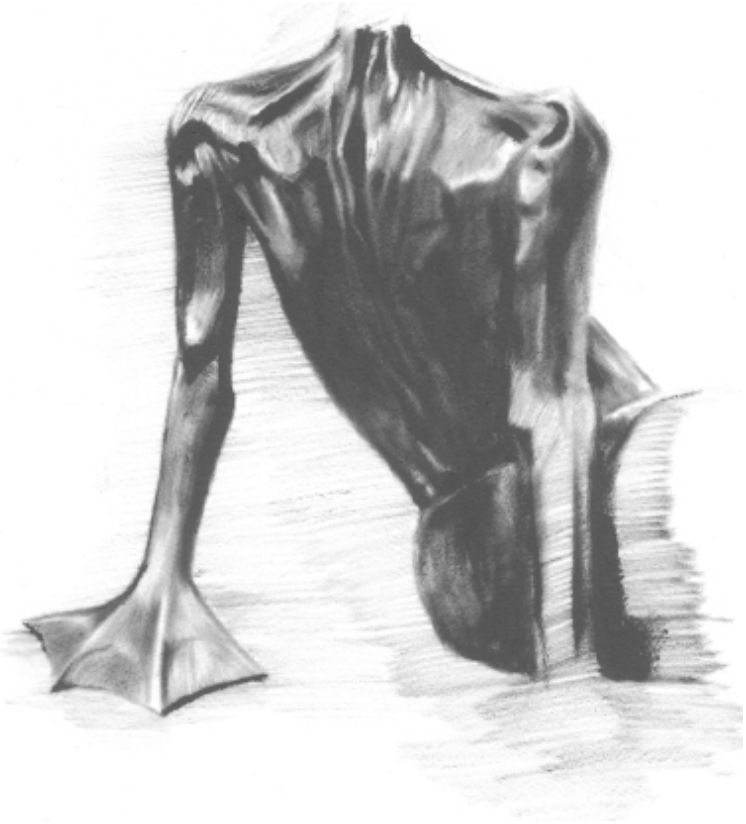
Later in the afternoon, I arrive at the Galleria Borghese, the grand historic building sitting at the end of a long vista of parkway, where Roman statues line the path like a guard of honour. At the entrance porch of the museum I pass a sculpture, a second-century Roman copy of an original made in Hellenistic Greece. It shows the muscular torso of a male human, all sinew and strength, morphing into the legs of a goat, while at his head, horns crest through locks of hair. This is Pan, the half-human half-goat demigod, and one of many hybrids in Greek mythology. The classical scholar Helen King has suggested we make these hybrids because 'in a variety of cultures throughout history, one of the most common ways of defining what it is to be human is to draw comparisons with the animal kingdom'.[11]

By creating human–animal hybrids and imbuing them with characteristics which may frighten or thrill us, we explore what it means to be human, our deepest desires, and the behaviours which may thrust us out of society. King points out that many hybrids 'tend to live at the margins of the known world … between the living and the dead, between the known and the unknown, between the permitted and the forbidden'.[12] Pan lives beyond civilisation in the wilderness of Arcadia, and while the music from his pipes could enchant, he was also known to terrify those who either heard or saw him, causing them to flee in fright. It is from this we get our word panic, coming from the Greek panikos, meaning 'relating to Pan'. In the entrance porch of the Galleria Borghese, the sculpture of Pan has an unsettling venality; his huge hands at odds with the hooves, and small teeth which growl within a matchbox mouth.

The grounds of the Galleria Borghese enclose secret gardens, separate to the parkland still enjoyed by Romans today. In these gardens, orange nasturtiums bow towards the sun between citrus trees of lime and lemon, and geometric gravel walkways criss-cross dry fountains. And it is here that I find another human–animal body. But this isn't centuries old; it is a contemporary sculpture called *Water Woman* by the Kenyan-American sculptor Wangechi Mutu. It looks like a mermaid, and as the half-light of early evening gathers shadows, I see delicate arms which seep into webbed feet, while a tail coils with latent power, ready to disappear under the water once more. Mutu uses the tactility of her material, the slippery bronze suggesting a body moving between air and water, like the liquid sheen left on a dolphin. The bronze is black, and the sculpture has such beauty it must be deliberate; a sensuous rendering of collarbone, nipples and languid belly recalling the most seductive of sea myths, that of the sirens, whose alluring song draws sailors to their death. The scholar Emma Aston, an expert on classical hybridity, notes that human–animal hybrids 'appeal while they appall' and that 'female hybrids have dangerous erotic allure, as with the Sirens'.[13] They give us the thrill of terror; the panic of Pan while being drawn in by his entrancing pipes.



Wangechi Mutu, *Water Woman*, 2017, bronze



Water Woman (detail)

Of course the siren, like the mermaid, lives in another threshold space, transgressing our own boundaries of land and sea. Mutu notes that her *Water Woman* is 'a version of the mythical nguva of East African lore, a creature with the power to delight us, to instruct or destroy us, who speaks directly to sea creatures and the water itself'.[14] The nguva is a half-woman half-sea creature, similar to a mermaid and, like the siren, is filled with erotic danger. Mutu has confirmed the 'sexual aspect' to the nguva, saying that 'men who catch a Nguva – this is a very Muslim area, the coast of Kenya – are advised to go to the mosque, to purify themselves and to swear that they didn't have any sexual relation with this creature.'[15] This tension in the nguva goes beyond the erotic. Mutu remembers a babysitter once telling her that there was going to be an nguva at a local agricultural show in Kenya. 'And I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Oh, she's there, with her tail. And the thing about this one is that she talks to people." So I'm asking her, "So you've seen her?" She's like, "Yeah. She's scary. I wouldn't take the kids there"'.[16]

Mutu tells us that she is 'fascinated by Nguvas and fascinated by this kind of creature' because for her, they represent the gap between 'Western

scientific rationality' and a 'belief system that actually works and is intact'. She doesn't say that either is correct, or incorrect, but that there are 'other things … other ways of understanding our universe, and our world, and our humanity'.[17] The word nguva is from the Kiswahili language, and has been translated as siren, but there is more to its watery depths. It has two meanings; referring to both a siren-like water woman and to the dugong, a large sea mammal similar to a manatee. As I look up the dugong, I find that its classification is in the *Sirenia* order. The scientific flickers with the mythical.

My time slot at the Galleria Borghese is over, and I am ushered out past Bernini's grand marble of Daphne the water nymph fleeing from Apollo, her eternal destiny lying in the place between life and the laurel tree. Finally leaving Cardinal Scipione's treasure house I head out into the early summer evening. It's that moment before dusk where promise hangs in heavy air. Retracing my steps I end up back at the hippocampi of the Trevi Fountain, who are forever jumping out of the water onto land. I remember all those hybrid bodies who live in transitional spaces: the urmahlullu of ancient Mesopotamia guarding temple entrances, the demigod Pan in his Arcadian wilderness.

But I am most preoccupied by the sensuous evocation of women whose bodies flow over the boundaries of land and water. As I think about the nguva and Mutu's *Water Woman*, I am reminded of an African water deity named Mami Wata, a compelling mermaid-like figure whose origins are as hard to trace as the sand on the shore. As she moves between land and sea like the water snakes she is often depicted with, Mami Wata embraces duality. The academic John Henry Drewal notes that it is the mutability of Mami Wata that makes her so fascinating; she can be male and female, bring both luck and misfortune, and her rich and complex identities range from seducer to suppressor.[18] Mami Wata is never just one thing, and her different versions have travelled along the coasts of Africa, from the east in Kenya to the west in Nigeria. Her name is mostly attributed to the colonial incursions, the Europeans who brought their own languages, with Mami Wata (and its various alternate spellings) being derived from the pidgin variations of the English 'Mother Water'.[19] Tales of this half-human half-fish went across the Atlantic with enslaved Africans, and we now find versions of Mami Wata in South America and the Caribbean.

The historian William Pietz identifies another pidgin word that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, alongside Mami Wata. This is a

word we have already encountered: 'fetish'. Pietz traces it from fetisso, a version of the Portuguese ieticio, meaning 'magical practice', or 'witchcraft'.[20] This word developed along the West African coast between, as Pietz writes, 'cultures so radically different as to be mutually incomprehensible'.[21] Here the Christian Europeans, brought up to fear the power of idolatry, could not fathom a culture which assigned value and meaning in different ways. Beliefs were considered irrational, objects magical; all part of the terrifying thrill of 'the other', just as in those hybrid myths. And it is through this lens that so many other bodies were seen. Wangechi Mutu says that the black female body has for centuries been 'prepared for display as an artefact, a totem, a specimen. Even in this state of containment and capture, our body is valued and worshipped – yet feared and reviled'.[22] I look again at my photographs of her *Water Woman* in the Galleria Borghese. Now I see her as both beautiful and powerful, thrumming with the energy of the seas, but realise she is cast adrift onto the shore, unable to move, exoticised and observed.

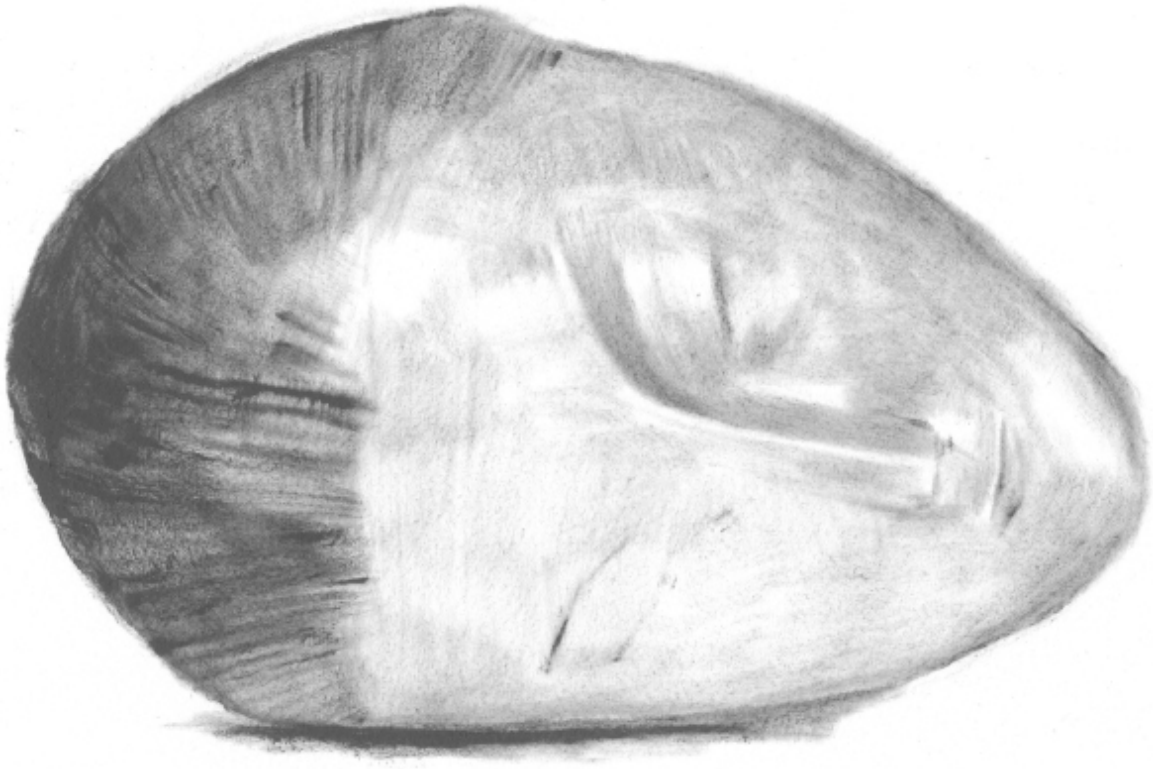
In the same year she made *Water Woman*, Mutu also created a smaller sculpture called *This second Dreamer*. It is the head of a woman lying sideways on a simple wooden plinth, her eyes closed, undulating braids of bronze glistening like a crown. The bronze is highly polished, evoking the surface of gold, and bringing all the associations of value and status we place upon that metal. *This second Dreamer* refers directly to a sculpture by Constantin Brâncuşi called *Sleeping Muse*. Brâncuşi first carved his *Sleeping Muse* in marble in 1909, and it was cast in its golden bronze the following year. When Brâncuşi made it, he was already in Paris, the place where, as we have seen, the artworks and objects traded and taken from Africa were swallowed by the avant-garde, hidden behind the dusty curtains of the Palais de Trocadéro or sold and swapped in elegant salons. At this time, Brâncuşi became friends with the artist Amedeo Modigliani, who lived nearby. The art historian Katherine Jánsky Michaelsen writes that together the pair 'saw the collection of Baule sculpture owned by Dr Paul Alexandre'.[23] The Baule people live on the Ivory Coast in West Africa, descended from the Akan of Ghana, and enjoy a culture rich in visual language, where sculpture lives alongside tradition. In my research, I find an extraordinary Baule portrait face mask, which is on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.[24] It is from a tradition known as mblo, in which masked dancers and actors perform for the community.



Portrait face mask from Gbagba, Baule artist, Baoulé, circa 1900, wood



This second Dreamer, 2017, bronze



Constantin Brâncuşi, *Sleeping Muse*, 1910, bronze

When I learn that the exact mask now in the Met was in Paris by 1913, appearing in an important exhibition, I wonder if Brâncuşi may have seen it earlier, at the time he made his *Sleeping Muse*.[25] Because looking at them side by side, the similarities are extraordinary: an elongated line of a nose reaching down to a barely articulated mouth, generous arches which sweep above their eyes, and hair elucidated in simple lines drawn into material like a sharp pencil mark. And of course the most obvious point: both are just heads, stripped of their bodies, and share an elliptical outline. It is this confluence of shape and style that Wangechi Mutu mines in *This second Dreamer*. But in Mutu's hands, this black female body has become a site of reclamation. She is no longer a mute muse, asleep for a watching other. Although her eyes are still closed, the focus is internal, and the message is clear:

Sleeping is passive, dreaming is active.

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Part Four

Between Places

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12

Oma Totem

Soon after midday on 30 April 1975, tanks rolled through the ornate gates of the Independence Palace, the command centre of the South Vietnamese government in what was then known as Saigon (renamed the following year as Ho Chi Minh City). Later the same afternoon the North Vietnamese flag was flying overhead. Depending on your allegiances, this event is known either as 'The Fall of Saigon' or 'The Independence of Vietnam'. But regardless of the name, that day in April marked the official end of twenty years of carnage in Vietnam, a war which pockmarked the world.

The death toll was catastrophic. In 1995 the Vietnamese government released their estimates: two million civilians and one million, one hundred thousand North Vietnamese soldiers and Viet Cong fighters. The United States believes that up to two hundred and fifty thousand South Vietnamese troops were killed, in addition to fifty-eight thousand American servicemen. In the years which followed, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fled their home country. Around eight hundred thousand people took to the seas, boarding vessels which held both the promise of a new life, and the spectre of death. One family left in 1979 aboard a handmade boat, which also carried the hopes of over one hundred other migrants. Rescued by a Danish ship, the family was taken to a refugee camp in Singapore, before finally settling in Denmark. One of the youngest passengers on that makeshift boat leaving Vietnam was that family's son, a four-year-old boy, born only a few months after the first T-54 tank from Brigade 203 entered the Independence Palace, ushering in a new world along its tracks.

★ ★ ★

After leaving the Galleria Borghese, I stay the night in Rome. At the airport the next morning, people gather their belongings, checking passports are in pockets ready for the immigration controls. How freely some of us can move between places. I imagine the people I watch in the airport having enjoyed the pleasure of Italian skies, the lingering ghosts of the Colosseum just a shadow away. After the grandeur of Rome it feels a disappointment to be back amidst the spritzed perfumes of the Duty Free. But soon I am occupied by something else. In the secret gardens of the Galleria Borghese, as the loosening light announced dusk, I felt as though I had been given a clue. But today I can't quite put my finger on it.

I find a seat to look over my photographs. There are two other sculptures by Wangechi Mutu, which dazzle even through the screen of my phone. Like *Water Woman* and *This second Dreamer* these are also bronze, and the high polish of the surface illuminates their heads, creating a golden glow. The colour then darkens as it runs into coils of material which fold around their seated bodies, like the bark of a tree. I remember feeling as though those coils were alive, as if they would run over the ground towards me, or slip carelessly over the other elements within the garden. These two sculptures are *The Seated I*, and *The Seated IV*, created by Mutu for a temporary installation in the exterior architectural niches of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.[1] These niches had been empty for over a century. In filling them in 2019, Mutu delved into the histories of sculpture, referencing the caryatids, women whose carved bodies are used in place of pillars to hold up the great and the grand, women who take the weight of the world. The most famous are found in the ancient Acropolis of Athens, and the lines of their drapery echo across the millennia in the curving coils of Mutu's bronzes. But Mutu has ensured that her modern caryatids are no longer load-bearing. Instead, they gaze upon us as regnant monarchs.



Wangechi Mutu, *The Seated I*, 2019, bronze

Mutu has brought in other details, from other histories. The art historian Kellie Jones identifies the coils curving around their bodies as 'those of the Sande women's society masks among the Mende of Sierra Leone, symbols of flourishing ascribed to water spirits that preceded Nguva and Mami Wata'.[2] The many stories of womanhood pulse within these sculptures. Her seated women also have polished circles adorning their heads. Mutu tells us that these come from 'traditional African adornment: Ethiopian, Sudanese tribes that have these incredible lip plates. They're mostly worn by women of status'.[3] In the bright Roman light these circular discs became orbs as blinding as the sun, more luminous than the jewels of the richest of kings. When the weather clouded over, the discs acted as mirrors, as if we might appear in the bronze. These are modern deities who reflect our stories back to us.

They are humanoid in their appearance, and this is deliberate; they do not represent us exactly. As she was making them, Mutu was drawn to the name that the United States government gives to foreign nationals: 'aliens'. She noted that 'I think that in this moment – with all of the migrants moving

around, looking for a life that is better for them and their families – it's so important to think about what it is that makes us uncomfortable about others.'[4] What is useful about sculpture is that it can reveal thoughts we might otherwise keep hidden. Bronze is usually reserved for history's winners. So if we feel a jolt when we see someone or something else gazing down upon us from a pedestal – or the proud niches of the Metropolitan Museum of Art – we might ask ourselves why. In creating these fantastical, imaginary bodies with elements of the human, Mutu is drawing back the curtains on what we hold within. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen tells us that our word 'monster' comes from the Latin monstrum, meaning something which reveals or warns and, 'like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received'.[5]

And it's then, looking at these photographs of Mutu's sculpture in the din of the airport, that I realise. If sculpture signifies place, then it must also be a marker of *displacement*, that there cannot be one without the other. This reminds me of the two faces of the Roman deity Janus I saw gazing back at me from gates and doorframes in Rome. When I am at my boarding gate I do a quick internet search on Janus, and feel a slight chill when I discover that he is the Roman god of gateways. He also represents endings and beginnings, and our transitions in between. So much of sculpture announces place; a physical manifestation of community and belonging. I think back to the *Star House Totem Pole*, raised to celebrate the arrival of a child, or Eduardo Chillida's *The Comb of the Wind,* which could only exist on that outcrop of dark Basque rock, water and spray gushing over its surfaces. Even the original translation of the Ojibwe word traduced by John Long speaks to people and place: 'we dwell together'. So how can sculpture mark the opposite, those whose dwellings are displaced?

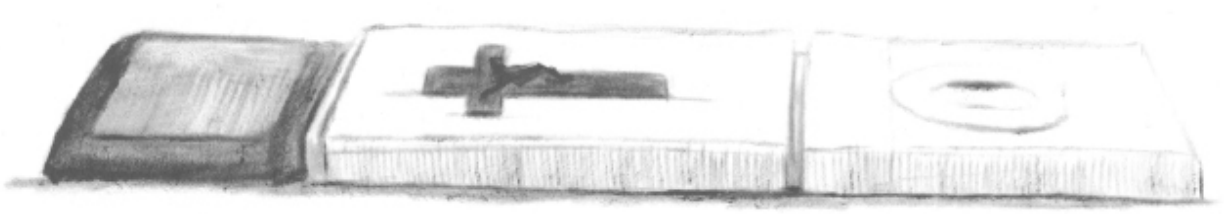
Back in 2018, I visited the exhibition Take My Breath Away at the Guggenheim Museum on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, New York, by the artist Danh Võ. Within the sweeping lines of the building I found an enormous chandelier which was dropped close to the ground, its shadows cast onto the floor like a fisherman's net. Ephemera of history, such as certificates and pens which belonged to presidents, were displayed alongside other works, including sculptures which had been sliced open. Embarrassingly, my photos of the exhibition also include various selfies in one of Vo's mirrored text pieces; I was apparently more concerned with inserting myself into the exhibition than with much else. But there was something very specific about the show that I do remember. The catalogue

tells us that when Vo was four years old he arrived in Denmark with his family as refugees, and the officials processing them misunderstood the way in which Vietnamese names are ordered. He was recorded incorrectly as 'Trung Ky-Danh Võ', placing his middle name first, followed by his given and then family name.[6] Even today, Danh Võ has his name listed incorrectly by the Danish state. That subtle but telling error stuck with me, and when I get home from Rome, my head full of new ideas, I dig out my Guggenheim catalogue to learn more.

What I didn't remember was that the exhibition included a sculpture he made in 2009, *Oma Totem*. This sculpture is made up of three large household objects, each stacked one upon the other. At the bottom is a washing machine, the middle is a refrigerator, and at the top, a Philips television. Placed across the white surface of the refrigerator is a large crucifix. Vo described this sculpture as a 'beautiful portrait of my grandmother'.[7] But how can such impersonal goods be a portrait? In sculpted portraits we are used to elegant busts of sitters, heads which look like the subject, almost playing the role of a photograph in their representational ability. Of course – as we have seen – we can cipher the human body in other ways, but here there are only stacked consumer goods, and a wooden crucifix.



Danh Võ, *Oma Totem*, 2009, Philips television, Gorenje washing machine, Bomann refrigerator, casino entry pass and wooden crucifix



Danh Võ, *Tombstone for Nguyen Thi Ty*, 2009, marble

The trio of objects which balance upon one another – washing machine, refrigerator and television – were all presented to his maternal grandmother, Nguyễn Thị Ty, by the Immigrant Relief Programme when she arrived in Germany as a refugee from Vietnam. The crucifix was given to her by the Catholic Church.[8] Vo tells us that these gifts 'tell so much about the projection for what a society thinks that foreigners need'.[9] You could read this sculpture as a crude criticism of the West, the expectation on refugees to celebrate their arrival into a new world of entertainment and ease. But I wonder if there is more. For where in this portrait is the woman she had

been in Vietnam? A woman who had birthed children, and seen her grandchildren born, who built a life she had to leave behind. In an interview, Vo noted that for most migrants there is a 'psychological imperative to accept where you are as the only possibility', saying that his father never felt able to return to Vietnam.[10] In this portrait of his grandmother we see only her future. A woman who had to begin again, aged fifty-five, 'with no language skills and at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder'.[11] There can be no searching after the past. As Vo says, 'She couldn't afford to look back'.[12] The only hint at her internal world is an object secreted within the sculpture that we cannot see: her casino entry pass, symbolic of Nguyễn Thị Ty's lifelong enjoyment of gambling.[13]

Shortly after he made *Oma Totem*, Vo's grandmother died, and the family agreed to use *Oma Totem* as the basis for her tombstone. Vo took the shape of his sculpture and created a relief, a flat object made of granite and marble which could be laid flat across her gravesite. In the photographs of it, it looks as though the front face of *Oma Totem* has just been sliced away and placed on the ground, each of the three stacked objects and the crucifix retaining their original colour, position and size. Some might see this as inappropriate; how can the outline of a Philips television and a couple of white goods placed upon a grave be anything other than disrespectful? But Vo says that this work 'is about the impossibility and absurdity of representing the experience of life in a single object'.[14] Our identities can never be fixed. We are not a rigid construct readily understandable to others. We are changeable, different with different people, sometimes shy, other times ebullient, and we are all keepers of our own secrets, separate from the faces we present to the world, just like the two faces of the Roman god Janus. No one object can ever summarise a life. What I think Vo is suggesting here is not a bland critique of the West, but the simple absurdity of seeing refugees as a collective mass, with no thought to the individuals such as Nguyễn Thị Ty, who can cherish her Catholicism as well as her casino entry card.

One of the key differences between *Oma Totem* and most of the other sculptures we have seen so far is that this work is made up of objects already in existence. There was no moulding, no modelling, no carving, no molten bronze taking shape in a cauldron-like furnace. The objects in *Oma Totem* are the ones which belonged to his grandmother, not replicas, and Vo had to buy her new ones to replace those he had taken. As I imagine the patience and perhaps bemusement of his grandmother handing over her goods, what

strikes me is how long she had them. The dates given for Nguyễn Thị Ty's arrival vary, but most concur that by 1980 she was in Germany, and Vo made the work in 2009. Over the course of nearly thirty years she had not changed her refrigerator, washing machine or television. How many of us can say the same thing?

Of course I want to know what it was about the totem which appealed to Vo, and why he used it for this work about his grandmother. In one interview he shrugs off the associations of the word, stating that he was just drawn to its shape. He was 'playing around' with the objects, and discovered that the most practical and aesthetic way to group them 'was to just stack them on top of each other'.[15] In its shape, tall and slim, with three separate sections recalling the stacked animals of the *Star House Totem Pole*, it no doubt echoes the forms of those totems carved by First Nation peoples such as the Tlingit and Kwakwaka'wakw. But the fact that Vo uses it in his title suggests more than an aesthetic component.

In his work more generally, Vo uses objects of specific historic importance, such as the chandelier which hung in a grand hotel in Paris, the Hotel Majestic. This was the chandelier I had seen on display in New York, and it was also one of three under which, on 23 January 1973, the Paris Peace Accord was signed, heralding a rickety ceasefire which enabled the United States of America to leave Vietnam. But by March 1973, when the final American troops departed, conflict between North and South had already resumed. I find a photograph of the gathered dignitaries, underneath the glinting chandeliers, ready to sign. They are sitting around a large table, covered in green baize, and within the dramatic ballroom, flashes of ornate gilded walls shimmer between elegant tapestries. This Parisian ballroom has a beauty which sings of languid leisure and careless dances, and is an incongruent counterpoint to the devastation of war, the lives scarred, scattered and lost. When the hotel changed hands, Vo took the opportunity to buy the chandelier, and brought his father to the hotel to see it. He remembers that his South Vietnamese father was 'cursing and swearing during the cab ride and talking about going to the room of death … What happened was that when he stepped into the room … The only thing he could say was that the Queen of Denmark should have one of these in one of her castles. I think that's really important because … that's what chandeliers are. They make you forget things'.[16] I don't think Vo is saying that the chandelier is just a dazzling distraction, like a mobile in a baby's cot. Rather he is reminding us that an object can hold many contradictions. This chandelier can be a symbol of the faded grandeur of Western powers, rooms in which

decisions are made that kill the disenfranchised and those without voices. But it can also be an object of beauty, glorious in its promise, refracting light into the darkest of places.

The provenance of the objects Vo uses matters. He hunts things down through online auction sites or traces the whereabouts of historic objects with the tenacity of a detective, drawn to the story an object can tell. *Oma Totem* is more than some consumer goods stacked on top of each other; for Vo, it is a life. We all know that things are more than they seem. Going through the belongings of a loved one who has died is a traumatic rite of passage. A hairbrush can transport us back to childhood, the care and caresses of our mother held within its bristles. It's why I cannot bring myself to throw away my children's first tiny shoes, their bright colours a kaleidoscopic portal to another – past – life. The writer Dominic Eichler notes that the objects in Vo's work are more than the sum of their parts. In a conversation with the artist, Eichler says that he made a list of things that the object could be for Vo: 'symbol, artefact, evidence, sculpture, product, souvenir, clue, remnant, totem, memorial, or even … a kind of voodoo doll.'[17] Vo agrees that for him, the object can be all of those things and that 'one of the exquisite qualities of an object is that it makes space for possible meanings.'[18]

By calling his sculpture a totem, Vo is opening up that space for many meanings. I can't help but think of those totem poles in museums, denuded of their origins and placed as exhibits, labelled and judged. There is a lingering exoticism of the 'other' in Western thought and I wonder if Vo is playing on that with his *Oma Totem*. But I am drawn back to the Haida word for the totem pole, GyaGang.aay, translated as 'your history is now standing'. For Vo this stacked sculpture represents his grandmother's 'big dream of coming to the West and starting a new "prosperous" life without worrying about the consequences and the difficulties of starting fresh at the age of fifty-five'.[19] *Oma Totem* is a family's history, and its intersection with the geopolitics of world history. It asks us to remember all the individual, complex stories of those so-called 'boat people' who left Vietnam in the years after that chandelier glinted in Paris, illuminating the ballroom where a few men put pen to paper.

One day, Vo and his mother decided to go back to Vietnam to search for the grave of one of his dead brothers. As they walked through a cemetery, Vo grew unnerved. He saw his own name, inverted and with an accent, on many of the tombstones: Vô Danh.[20] Vô Danh is translated as 'Anonymous',

a reminder of the nameless dead left in the wake of war, each one a personal tragedy. How odd it must be to see your name – already inverted by Danish authorities – rearranged once more, this time to signify those lost to history. I think again of his grandmother's tombstone, how we choose to mark those who have gone before us, and the stories we tell of them.

Vietnam is a country whose people have undergone so much, from the French conquest in the mid-nineteenth century, to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia at the tail end of the twentieth century. It is therefore no surprise to see the many state-sanctioned memorials to the dead. Of course sculpture has long been used for war memorials, its physical presence a permanent reminder of the past. But to seek finality in that permanence is a fool's game. Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài, a historian of Vietnam, has written evocatively on the material culture of Vietnam, its buildings, war memorials and the scarred battlefields which now play host to tourists. She tells of an official history made manifest in material, a history in which, as the anthropologist Christina Schwenkel summarises, 'state domination of commemoration works to erase other subjugated memories and experiences'.[21] It's not a story that can be simply told. Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài explains the complexities of memory and memorial in Vietnam when she writes that 'gains and losses, triumph and tragedy, however, do not align neatly and predictably on either side of the national divide'.[22]

As I read Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài's work, I understand now why Vo becomes irritated by those who seek to fix his story, cement his identity as a refugee. There can be no rigidity in our personal stories, just as in our national stories, where things change like shifting sands. The historian Jennifer Dickey reminds us that in Ho Chi Minh City there is a museum called the War Remnants Museum where visitors can see items such as the American Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopter, synonymous with the American presence in Vietnam. The museum was given that name in 1995, just as Vietnam resumed diplomatic relations with the United States of America. It was thought that the huge numbers of anticipated tourists flooding in from the West would not appreciate the previous name: the Exhibition House for Crimes of War and Aggression.[23] In the memorials for this twenty-year war in both Vietnam and the United States we see how, in the words of historian Clayton D. Brown, 'memorials do not simply present objective history'.[24] The stories we tell in memorials can be moulded like wax in a candle, then melted, and remade once again in a different form.

It is this multiplicity of viewpoints which Vo mines in his sculpture, and which he invites us in to see. As he says, 'I don't really believe in my own

story, not as a singular thing anyway. It weaves in and out of other people's private stories of local history and geopolitical history. I see myself, like any other person, as a container that has inherited these infinite traces of history'.[25] In *Oma Totem*, he asks us to look at his grandmother's life, both as an individual and as it intersects with world events. We are presented with the external perception, and her hidden interior. But I think he is also asking us to look at our own lives. Vo's story as a refugee, moving between places, eventually rescued by the Danish ship, is ever present in his work. But only, perhaps, as a mirror. In looking at his story, we might find our own. How are we seen? How do we see? What lives did our grandparents live? In his discussions with art galleries and museums, he says that 'they always talk about a responsibility to the public, as if the public is one entity. I prefer the idea of believing in the possibility of just one person out there, someone very distanced from you, a stranger who feels connected to the work, that's my public'.[26]

In seeking connections beyond the walls of the gallery, Vo is opening up something he calls the 'third space'.[27] This is the space of encounter, of meeting. In his work, Vo uses his own personal histories to evoke our own, to strike a chord with something in us. There is humour and subtlety; no sledgehammer lectures on our treatment of refugees and migrants. We are invited into a shared understanding of who we are in this world. He says that 'I was raised to share my fears, my sorrows and love with other people.'[28] His art is about the individual, and our encounters with the sweeping narratives of history. We are shown the ambiguity in memorial and memory, and that creates a space for each of us; a space identified by Vo, who recognises the meaning held in the in-between.[29] Even in displacement, sculpture gives us a place to see ourselves, in all our myriad glory (and casino cards).

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13

Wind-Stone

The opening sequence of the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* begins in a landscape of red rock and blue sky. A group of young Boy Scouts are on horseback, their trail taking them through some of the most cinematic of American views. As they pass through natural arches cast from sandstone, which flame a burnt-orange in the desert heat, the camera lingers on boulders balancing high in the air. These look as precarious as a tower of bricks built by a child, but they have somehow withstood the years, standing as solidly as the red cliffs which surround them.

One of the boys is a young Indiana Jones, who soon finds himself at the heart of the action. Leaving the safety of his group, he witnesses some villains unearthing a historical treasure, the fictional Cross of Coronado. As they laugh in true 1980s movie-baddie glee, Indy gets hot under the collar, declaring that the crucifix they have found 'is an important artefact and belongs in a museum'. He retrieves it from their clutches, and, after a chase involving snakes, lions and an eye-watering escape from a rhinoceros tusk, the camera cuts to present-day Indy, still trying to rescue the cross from his nefarious enemies. Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, Indiana tells us three times that it should be 'in a museum'. Our hero's devotion to the museum, and to the preservation of objects for the public good, speaks to our modern-day understanding of museums as important repositories of the stories of human life.

★ ★ ★

From the very beginning of this journey, I've been thinking about institutional histories, about whose voices are included, and whose are not. For our museums are not unbiased reflections of our world. They hold unheard voices within their storied walls. Those totem poles we find labelled and exhibited in Western museums are perhaps some of the most evocative of those voices, but I remember the open-mouthed masks waiting behind the dark drapery of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. I think also of the British Museum, where I went to see the ancient Assyrian lamassu, those grand hybrid gatekeepers discovered in the nineteenth century in what is present-day Iraq. But there are other ways in which voices remain muffled in institutional histories and, as with all things in human life, it is not simple.

Over the course of my career, I've long been interested in how artistic reputations are made. In the many years I worked in the commercial art world, I saw reputations glisten and break, artists swept to sudden fame and then discarded. For me, though, it is those artists for whom recognition feels like a slow burn, and who then seem to blaze into our consciousness with the suddenness of a comet coming into view, who are most intriguing. Because just as comets were made over four billion years ago from leftovers as the sun and planets in our solar system were formed, some of the artists who might seem to have come from nowhere have been working out of view for decades. We love to romanticise these artists, imagining them as something out of a nineteenth-century French novel, all garrets and consumption. Of course there are many webs to untangle in each of their individual stories, but it was when I was looking at the work of Danh Võ, and his questions around how we see and how we might judge, that I thought of an artist whose sculpture had entranced me for years, but who had been left out of our formal institutional histories. This is the artist Kim Lim.

Kim Lim was born in Singapore to Chinese parents in 1936. Her childhood was spent in Singapore, as well as Penang and Malacca in what was then Malaya, now Malaysia. In 1954, when she was only seventeen, she moved to London to study art at Saint Martin's, and then the Slade School of Art. We might think of the London art scene of the 1950s as Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud falling out in – and of – Soho pubs, their bohemianism a necessary precursor to the culture-changing decade of the Swinging Sixties that followed. But it was also a place of world-leading sculpture. In 1952 a group of British sculptors exhibited together at that year's Venice Biennale, the contemporary art exhibition showcasing the best of each nation's artistic output. Their display was admired by taste-makers

such as Alfred Barr, the director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, who declared it 'the most distinguished national showing of the whole exhibition'.[1] And a few years later, at the 1956 Venice Biennale, the British sculptor Lynn Chadwick beat Alberto Giacometti to the International Prize for Sculpture. It was at this heady moment that Kim Lim arrived in London.

Graduating from the Slade in 1960, Lim had her first solo exhibition in 1966, and in the following decade enjoyed more solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, and the Tate Gallery, London, among others.[2] She was successful according to the criteria we might set our artists: good museum shows, well collected, and written about by the critics. In fact, the art historian Hammad Nasar has calculated that there are more than eighty works by Kim Lim in British public collections – galleries and museums – and that Lim is therefore the second most collected artist of Asian and African descent in British public institutions.[3] But Lim is hardly a household name, and her brief starry acclaim returned to the darkness of the night sky after her early death at only sixty-one. What is interesting about Lim's career is that she wasn't ignored; her work was recognised and collected. But somehow she was left out of our formal art histories, those stories of creativity we are told in exhibitions and books, and which over time assume an authority, becoming an accepted narrative of people, place and paint. Why?

It's not easy to unravel, but as I read more, clues start to appear. In a published review of her first solo exhibition, where Lim began to articulate her own language of sculpture, painting steel forms which curve and bow with the fluidity of a ballet dancer, the writer also decided to include his review of her physical appearance, describing Lim as 'tiny, pretty, relaxed … exactly what one expects of a sophisticated Oriental woman.'[4] Even on paper and decades later this feels creepy. To me it still has a reek of the nineteenth-century Western vogue for Orientalism, where paintings of barely dressed women were displayed in the grand salons of Western powers, brushstrokes slipping gauzy material off shoulders, as odalisques in their harems were both looked down upon and desired.

Kim Lim was a woman who travelled across the world at the age of only seventeen to fulfil her dream of being an artist. She was not a woman to be cowed by others, nor deviated from her course. It is important to note that hers is not a story of displacement, like that of Danh Võ and his family. Instead, Lim came from a 'liberal, upper-middle class family' in Singapore,

and she had both the means and the desire to move countries and continents.[5] But like Võ, Lim still occupies a space which lingers in the in-between.

The art historian Joleen Loh notes that the time Lim arrived in London was a significant moment after the Second World War when 'many artists from the former Commonwealth territories and British colonies' also reached London, and that, like them, 'Lim was perceived as an outsider'.[6] This feeling of being on the outside of the citadel was also evident in what was taught at art school. Lim noted later that the history of art had become an easily digested timeline going from, as she described it, the 'primitive arts, leading up to the kind of epitome of Western art, which is the Renaissance'.[7] This felt unsatisfactory to her, and she wrote that 'there were other things equally good which you can't kind of equate it that way. So, in the end you just have to go according to your instincts'.[8] Lim's instincts were to avoid categorisation and definition, and her sense of not belonging to one specific place is seen throughout her life, in her writings, and answers given to various journalists or curators. Her parents were Chinese, and she travelled to China in 1985 but felt 'as foreign as some of her foreign friends in China'.[9] And earlier she told a journalist that 'I've lived in England a long time and I love London, but I don't feel British. I suppose I don't feel specifically Chinese either'.[10] But this doesn't feel particularly unusual. I think of the recent developments which allow us to send off our DNA for testing, and the glee with which we respond to our newly discovered multivalent ancestries. There are many of us whose parents were born abroad, giving us both a dual passport and a fluid cultural heritage. We move for work or love, and, once our original family passes, who or what then constitutes our 'homeland'?

What is instructive is that Kim Lim absolutely resisted any attempts by art historians to categorise her by race, gender or nationality. When, in 1988, she was asked to participate in a British exhibition which attempted to correct institutional histories which had excluded and erased, she refused. It was called The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-war Britain, and she wrote that 'to participate would be to self-consciously place myself in a situation of "otherness"'.[11] Perhaps it was this refusal to be pigeonholed, her lack of a solid place of belonging and an easily understood nationality, which contributed to her invisibility within the official art histories. The art world is a place still run on steadfastly nationalist grounds. Walking through a major museum is also a geography lesson, with works neatly divided along borders. When I wrote earlier about the British sculptors at the Venice

Biennale, I thought of the extraordinary nature of that gathering, where the grand national pavilions still reveal the intricacies of power and money within which the art world is wrapped. In not being easily claimed as 'Chinese' or 'British', Lim could not be packaged up for a world which loves a label. As Joleen Loh puts it, 'the either-or binaries of nationalist perspectives have no room to perceive or value the condition of having multiple belongings – or un-belonging – as well as the fluidity of social and cultural connections'.[12]

But Lim saw the value in having multiple belongings and connections. In an undated entry in one of her notebooks, she writes that 'being "female and foreign" was never a problem … what was important in the end was what I did, and not where I came from … The sense of not "belonging" felt a little isolating at times but it had the compensating element of freedom – a certain feeling of detachment from which one could view both East and West'.[13] What intrigues me is that she seemed to seek out this in-between place, realising that being between geographies and cultures gave her the space she needed to follow her instincts. The academic Ming Tiampo writes that as Lim resisted both the Eurocentric art narrative she was given, and the various attempts to situate her within a history of Chinese art, she was free to explore 'the geographic, cultural, artistic, historic, and temporal spaces between London and Singapore'.[14]

And it is in these spaces, between the usual binaries of East and West, that we see her sculpture take flight.

In Kim Lim's studio she had a wall upon which she pinned various images: photographs, postcards and other ephemera which appealed to her. I remember going to an exhibition of artist studios at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 2022 and seeing a photographic reproduction of this wall.[15] I enjoyed trying to identify the sculptures, architectural details and buildings which appeared like imaginative clouds across the sky. There were also photographs of her children interspersed within this visual diary, a reminder that Lim never sought to distance her family from her work life. In fact her children, Alex and Johnny Turnbull, remember her making skateboards for them out of studio scraps, using wood and sometimes even metal flooring.[16] They have many memories of their mum working, and Alex tells me that 'from when we were kids, we would be in her studio'. He remembers that she had a huge printing press there, and that he and his brother were encouraged 'from quite a young age to participate in that process'. What the

brothers repeatedly emphasise is that she never had any studio assistants, a rarity for a sculptor who handled large, heavy and hard materials. Alex recalls that 'she was always out in the back garden. She'd be wrapped up in her boiler suit with her bandana and her face mask and just sitting there, just chiselling away, rain or shine, [in] winter in the freezing cold'.[17]



Detail of one of the *Riace bronzes*, circa 460–450 BCE, bronze

Just as she never sought to differentiate her identity along national lines, or to separate her life as a mother and an artist, Lim's visual influences were myriad. On her studio wall I recognise two figures known as the *Riace bronzes*. These were discovered in 1972, when a diver found them on the seabed off the coast of Riace in Calabria, Italy, where they had lain for over two thousand years. Their athleticism gleams across time, all sinew and strength, and their curling beards recall the imagery of Neptune rising from the deep. Most experts believe these are rare examples of full-body bronzes made by the ancient Greeks in around 460 to 450 BCE. These classical references were pinned up by Lim beside photographs of shadow playing through trees, architectural details and stone carvings. Alongside these she

has a simple leaf, an example of those natural forms in which we find great beauty when we just take the time to look.

Kim Lim travelled widely with her husband, fellow artist William Turnbull, and her archive contains decades of her travel photographs. These provide visual clues for us to follow, and I learn that in 1962 she visited Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the vast temple complex built in the twelfth century CE by the ruler of the Khmer empire, King Suryavarman II. Close to Angkor Wat lies the town of Angkor Thom, built by Jayavarman VII, and here we see giant heads carved into stone within the Buddhist temple of Bayon. Lim's photograph of one of these heads shows a face articulated in stone, with eyes closed, and a nose and lips carved so softly that we recognise the plump pulse of life. The photograph also reveals a play of sky and light across form and shadow, the emphasis on crevice and space suggesting an elusive temporality; we feel the head might soon recede back into the landscape from where it came.

As she travelled between London and Singapore, Lim would stop to visit other ancient archaeological sites, in China, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, India and elsewhere.[18] She explained later that 'in those days if you had a ticket from A to B, you were allowed to stop off en route for a couple days and catch the next convenient flight onwards – you were even allowed to make small deviations so long as it was in the direction of the destination. The result was I saw a lot of extraordinary, breathtaking paintings, sculpture and architecture first hand. I felt like a sponge soaking up everything'.[19] Within Chinese art, Lim was drawn to early Shang bronzes, extraordinary examples of craftsmanship made during the Shang Dynasty, which was one of the 'most advanced and literate cultures of the time', and whose power ran from circa 1600 to 1046 BCE.[20] She also found inspiration in the sculpture of the Han Dynasty, which ruled for four centuries between 206 BCE to 220 CE, interested in its 'simplicity, lack of embellishment and direct use of materials'.[21] It was her travels that gave her, as she put it, her 'real visual education'.[22]





Based on photographs by Kim Lim of Angkor Wat, Cambodia, 1962. Collection of the estate of Kim Lim

Within her travel photographs, I find some she took in Japan which intrigue me. These are images of the Hōryū-ji Temple in Nara, Japan's ancient capital. This is a designated World Heritage Site and considered to be the world's oldest surviving wooden structure. What I find in Lim's photograph of the site are not sculptures, but architecture, where rhythm and pattern, light and shade, dapple in black and white across her picture plane. We see it again in photographs of columns she took at Ninnaji Temple, Kyoto, where the space between is as important in the structure as the columns themselves. She said that over the course of her travels, she had learned that 'the obvious differences, subject matter and superficial treatment, often hide important similarities and sympathies. For me, the experiences of sculpture, West and East, taught me what sculpture was about'.[23]

What had she learned? Perhaps we already know. As I look over her photographs of a dry landscape garden, known as a karesansui, at Daisen-in Temple, Kyoto, one of the most important and celebrated of Japanese Zen

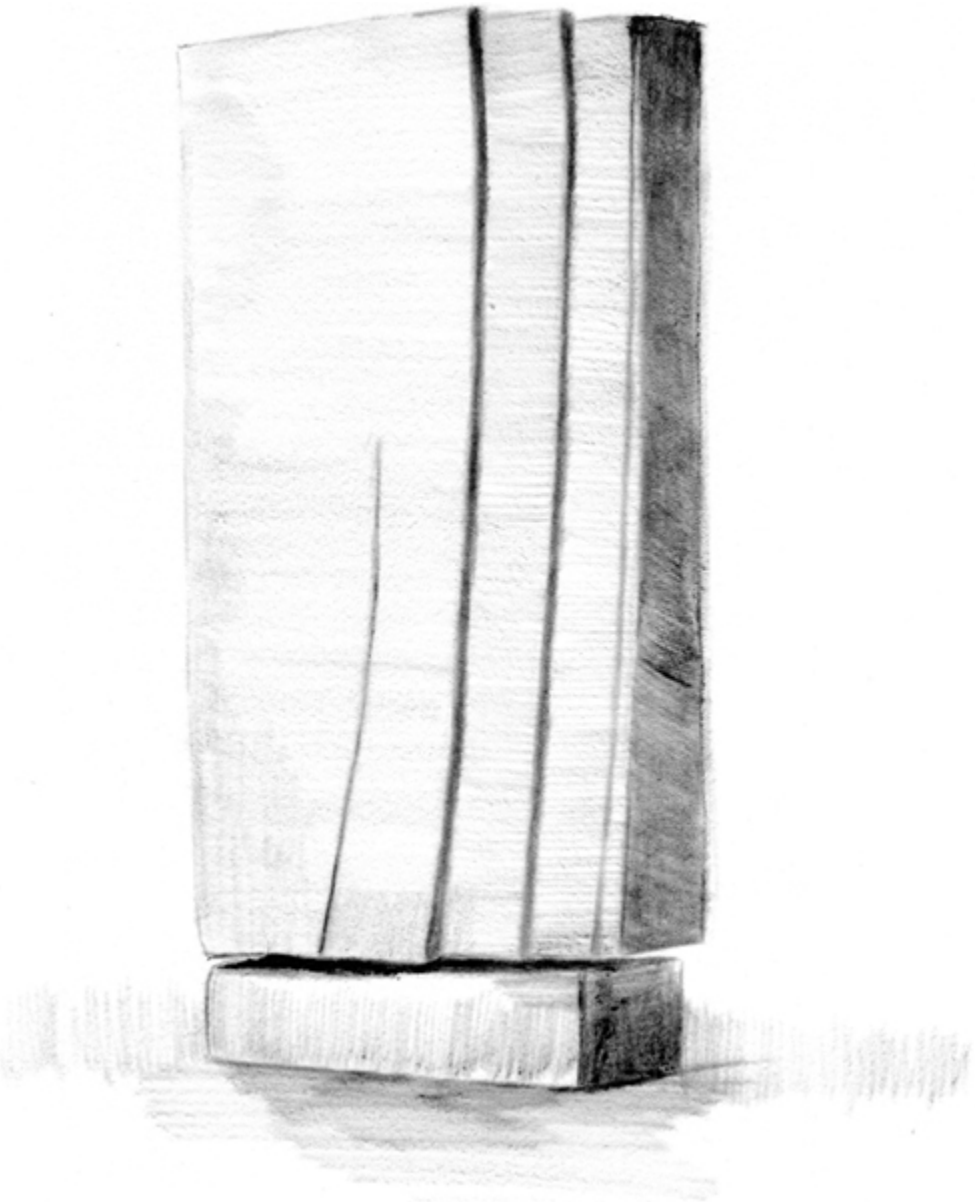
temples, I see fine seeds of gravel raked into lines. These rise up like the ridges of a mountain range, creating undulations of volume and void which, like a crack in the surface of the earth, open up a space in between.

In 1993 Kim Lim carved a sculpture she called *Wind-Stone*. At first glance its tall elegance evokes the columns we might see in the grandest of buildings. It is not just its shape which is reminiscent of architecture; Lim chose to use Hoptonwood stone, a limestone quarried from Derbyshire in the East Midlands of England. Hoptonwood stone is the colour of luscious cream and adorns some of England's most illustrious historic buildings, such as Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament. But here Lim strips the stone of its societal grandeur. She has cut lines into the surface, drawing shadow into the spaces she has incised for us. There is a gentleness to the sculpture, and in the waves of stone which roll across the surface I feel the ripple of a light wind over water. It also suggests the soft curves of a seabed, or the crests and curls of wet sand left as the sea retreats with the tide. I am transported once again to that place between land and sea, wanting to press my own footprints into the sand, the way in which we mark our lives for a brief moment before the waves come back to wash away our traces.

Here sculpture transcends our usual boundaries and binaries to sit in a place we all recognise. It is an invitation to close our eyes and remember how it feels when the wind touches our face, hands lifted up to feel our fingers loosen in its path. Using only the physical properties of stone, and her chisel, Lim has articulated sensations we all share. But as I write this, I'm wary of telling you how to feel, or what you might remember when you close your eyes and sense the wind rushing over your face. Perhaps instead you recall the graceful ripple of a pond, or white breakers over the ocean, maybe even the undulations of a dry riverbed cracking in the heat of a summer long past. I read over my notes and am reminded that Lim was not prescriptive in her meanings, acknowledging that, as she put it, 'everyone sees something different, but at the same time, we all carry a mental pin-board, things we have seen and loved'.[24]

She had moved to stone carving in 1979, and from then until her death in 1996 she made what the curator Abi Shapiro describes as 'totemic sculptures from marble, Portland stone and granite'.[25] Looking over these stone sculptures I see abstract forms which stand tall, some of which are made up of delineated stacked sections. What they share are incised lines over the surface, giving a rhythm to the structure, and a silent musicality.

Music was an important part of Lim's life. She had a background in ballet, and her son Johnny Turnbull remembers his parents having 'an eclectic music collection, from classical Indian ragas and Far Eastern music such as Balinese Gamelan or Japanese Shakuhachi to Jazz and avant-garde music by Karlheinz Stockhausen, Steve Reich, and John Cage'.[26] Lim and her husband also loved dance, and Johnny recalls seeing 'Balinese dances and this Kathakali dance with them'.[27]



Kim Lim, *Wind-Stone*, 1993, Hoptonwood stone

Lim uses the metaphor of music to explain the importance of spacing, noting that 'the spaces in between are as important as the things themselves, like the spaces between musical notes. Without them it would be chaos. There are certain things in the physical world that we can't see but are important, like a pulse'.[28] I think back to those sculptors we have seen who elucidate that space; Barbara Hepworth creating interior worlds full of mystery and promise like the caves discovered over centuries by sea-salted waves. These spaces in between punctuate our lives. The pace and rhythm of music is set by the silence between the sound we hear. There would be no music without the intervals between notes, no dance without the pause between movements, no stars without the inky blackness in which they blaze.

Over the course of her travels, Kim Lim was drawn to this space. The art historian Wenny Teo shows that Lim found it all over the world, from 'standing between the pillars of the Acropolis in Athens' to the freestanding gateways in Japan which 'give you such a specific feeling of entering although all you have around you is open space'.[29] This reminds me of the torii gate at the Hakone Shrine in Japan. Standing on the shores of Lake Ashi, a lake formed thousands of years ago after a volcanic eruption, the gate does not mark the entrance to a building, or take you into a fixed, fenced-off area. Instead it welcomes visitors in the transition from water to land, as you walk up through timeworn steps and into open spaces marked only by ancient cedar trees until you reach the shrine itself.

Kim Lim may have been left out of the history books, disappearing from sight in our museums, but she is now recognised once more, and was the subject of a major retrospective at the National Gallery of Singapore.[30] I smile when I hear its title: The Space Between. For Kim Lim, sculpture is not a physical representation of people or place, but an invitation to another way of experiencing the world. In her hands, sculpture opens up a world of sensation, of feeling beyond that which we can see. I look over her travel photographs once more, repeatedly drawn to her images of the karesansui, or dry garden, of the Daisen-in Temple in Kyoto. Below the stones and sky there are grooves on the ground elucidated only by shadow and light, and I try to follow their pattern and shape. I see the white gravel turn into rivulets of space which flow forever in time, like the lines echoing across her *Wind-Stone*. I think of something Kim Lim said about sculpture, that 'my interest is to give the experience of more than is there'.[31] And I know just where to go next.

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14

Situations

In Japan, the cherry blossom season is known as sakura. Changes in temperature across the country mean that the blossoms usually sweep from the south to the north of Japan over a period of a few weeks during March and April. Local meteorological observatories monitor sample trees like expectant parents, and the kaika yosō, or blooming forecast, is an international event. When the first light colours of a cherry blossom are confirmed, an official announcement heralds the arrival of sakura, and it is reported on the radio and in the newspapers like the birth of a royal baby.

For centuries, the Japanese have enjoyed hanami, or flower-watching, when friends and family gather together to eat within the dappling shade of the cherry blossoms. Sakura coincides with the end of the Japanese school year, when children say goodbye to their friends, and ready themselves for what lies ahead. The luscious blooms of the cherry blossom signal this moment between endings and beginnings, a moment which cannot last. Here the transience of life is held in the petals which dance on dark boughs until they shower onto the ground like shooting stars. There is poetry in hanami, as we acknowledge the ever-changing world in which we live, savouring the shades of pink and white as they curl open into sudden life. And then one day, flying on a spring breeze, they are gone.

★ ★ ★

In my research for this book, I kept coming across the Japanese artist Kishio Suga. I'd first seen his work back in 2008 at an exhibition in London. At that

time, I couldn't really grasp where his interest lay. The work felt as elusive as those first blooms of the Japanese sakura. For Suga, art is not about representing the world around us; you won't find Baroque veins pulsing through marble thighs in a feat of superb craftsmanship. Instead, he takes familiar materials such as stone, wood, glass, and puts them in unfamiliar situations. In Suga's world, objects balance, lie and hang in ways which challenge our perception. It is not a world of fixed meanings and didactic readings. He is drawn to questions, asking us to forget what we think we know and what we've been taught, and to look again.

Suga is associated with a group known as Mono-ha which emerged in Tokyo in the late 1960s. This is a label applied to a number of artists who disregarded making, choosing instead to work with things which already existed. Rather than carving stone or moulding with plaster, they took things like blocks of stone, bricks, string, sand, glass and wood. Mono-ha has been translated as 'School of Things' but that is too straightforward a reading. In Japanese it is a stickier play on words, and the scholar Andrew Maerkle suggests that 'Thing-ists' is a better English translation, capturing the uncomfortable jostling of the original Japanese characters. The key point of Mono-ha is that they rejected the idea of the artist as creator and raised deeper questions about the properties of materials, asking us to let go of the meanings we give things, and just observe. Within this, each artist had different investigations and made different work. But it is Kishio Suga, with his interest in the unknown and uncertain, in the boundaries and thresholds all around us, whose work feels most relevant to our journey, and I want to find out more.

After a few dead ends I finally get in touch with Ashley Rawlings, who is one of the pre-eminent Suga scholars. Rawlings will be in Japan in April, and can take me to meet Suga. We arrange to meet at Tokyo Station early one morning, and from there will take the Saphir Odoriko train which travels south along the Izu Peninsula to the artist's studio. The Saphir Ordoriko is a glamorous train, sleek as a dolphin, and is known as one of Japan's 'joyful trains' where the journey itself is the pleasure and purpose of travel. It takes in a volcanic coastline, passing sights such as Mount Fuji and the palm trees of old seaside towns. As the sea glistens blue through the windows, I understand why the name Sapphire was given to the train. Relaxing into my seat, I ask Rawlings about Mono-ha and Suga. It's not my area of expertise and I worry I might have misunderstood something. Over a strong coffee, he tells me that 'one of the problems with the term Mono-ha is that it implies a focus on a specific thing, or object. Of course things are important, but for Suga it's

more about the situation, known in Japanese as jōkyō.'[1] Rawlings explains that '*jōkyō* is a word that Suga uses repeatedly to describe his work. He sees the work as situations, rather than objects.'[2] What does this mean? Perhaps it is the coffee making me jittery, but I start to feel nervous about the interview ahead.

Our joyful train slides into the station and we meet up with the interpreter I've booked for the interview. Rawlings will be busy in the studio, and so can't translate the whole meeting, but has said he can help with specific words or ideas. Our car takes us from the shores of the sea up into the mountains in a few minutes. One of the local sights is an extinct volcano, and lush trees, fecund in green, sweep all around. The cherry blossoms are later here; today they are tight buds on bare branches but within days or even hours they will dazzle with their beauty. We arrive at Suga's studio to silence, only the sound of local birds piercing the mountain air. A swallow calls to the blossoms to open, but there is another song I cannot identify. When Suga arrives, he tells me this is the Japanese bush warbler. This is a tiny bird which, due to its dancing voice, used to be known as the Japanese nightingale.

As we walk towards his studio, things are stacked up all round, with planks of wood and boxes full of offcuts. Plants in pots and watering cans sit quietly to one side. The air smells heavier after a recent rainfall. We head inside. Artists' studios are one of my favourite places. It's like being in a beautiful old library, where the light streaming in from the windows reveals the motes of dust in a sunbeam; the world is shown to us anew through the creative vision of others. In Suga's studio there is a small table for us to sit around, surrounded by bookshelves. In the corner the walls have been painted white to create a gallery in which he has placed work on the walls and floors in an elegant design. Racks behind us are full of work ready to be shipped for international display, and there is what looks like a little doll's house on the floor. This is actually a scale model of a major exhibition he is preparing for in the United States.

Suga wears a light brown gilet splattered with dots of light-coloured paint, and a green checked shirt. A sunny yellow silk cravat studded with stars is tied around his neck. One of the first questions I want to ask is about mono, or things. If you are an artist that has been labelled as part of the Mono-ha movement, the group of artists interested in things, what exactly does mono mean? How can we understand it? Suga smiles. He tells me he wants us to look at the things which create our world, such as 'grass, wood and trees'.[3] I nod, and smile back, in that encouraging way we do when we

don't understand one another's language. I wait for the interpreter to continue Suga's definition of mono. She translates his next sentence as 'for me mono also includes things like water, smoke and also our feelings. Everything is a thing.'[4] As I wonder how our feelings can be things, Rawlings, who has been listening while working, says that the Japanese word Suga used – seishin – encompasses more than just feelings. He wants me to understand the full range of its meaning. At a basic level it might be translated as 'spirit' or 'feelings' as my interpreter chose, but there is more to discover within its characters. We pause. Even though the interview has only just begun, it is clear there is a problem. My interpreter is used to business meetings, high-level negotiations, and not art. Especially the art of Kishio Suga, for whom words and titles are chosen with exquisite care, as signposts for the viewer, clues for us to follow. In my investigation into the in-between, I squirm at the irony as I realise that here in Suga's studio, we are stuck in the in-between of language. Encouraging smiles can't help that much.

Back in my hotel that night, I look up seishin and find that it is a compound of two characters, which each bring a sea of association and meaning. The first part of the word, sei, is 'commonly used in words that denote something refined or distilled to its most authentic essence. This is often associated with concepts of meticulousness and detail, capturing the idea of something that has been worked on to reach a perfect and unblemished state'. Sei can be used, for example, to refer to the stars in the night sky. The second part of the word, shin, 'when used in compound words, tends to bring forth spiritual or divine aspects, adding a layer of spiritual significance to the term'. There is one final use of seishin which intrigues me. It is used in psychoanalysis, a word that is a 'bridge that connects to the human unconscious'.[5] Seishin is the thread between mind and body, between the visible and invisible, between what we know and what we sense. Is this where Suga's sculpture is situated?

If you've seen cherry blossoms just before they fall, you'll know that there is a time when they are so full that a simple breath could release them from the bough's embrace. It is this moment, like the pause of an actor on stage which draws us towards them in anticipation, that we find repeated in sculpture. We saw it in the silent pulse of Kim Lim's rhythmic lines, echoing the undulating forms she found at the karesansui at Daisen-in Temple and the cadence of space and shadow between the architectural columns of Ninnaji Temple, Kyoto.

In Japan this concept is called ma, which is translated as 'interval/space between'.[6] On our train journey to see Suga I'd asked Rawlings about ma, and he explained that, depending on the context, it 'broadly signifies space, but can also mean specifically the in-between'.[7] But there was something else he mentioned, that the idea of the in-between was also 'signified in the Japanese character. When you write it out, it looks like two forms split in two, and there's a division in the middle of the character that indicates the notion of two things coming together and there being an entity in-between'. He also notes that 'specifically, the character ma is a composite of two other characters, one meaning "gateway" and the other meaning "sun". The combination conveys an expanded sense of space that encompasses light and time.'[8] So the way in which ma is drawn on the page also conveys meaning, and through this I start to see ma as a site where the physical meets the philosophical, just as in sculpture.

Although I'm excited, ideas bumping off one another, I'm keen not to mould my understanding of ma to suit this book, and so I read as much as I can find. The scholar Richard Pilgrim describes ma as a 'way of seeing' although he warns that 'for some, Japanese ma is a deep and living word that cannot even be discussed, much less analyzed and interpreted across the boundaries of culture and language'.[9] But he does give another reading of ma which might help us understand Suga's work. Pilgrim suggests that ma also stands for 'among' and can have 'a relational meaning – a dynamic sense of standing in, with, among, or between'.[10] This idea of the in-between as something experiential, not just intellectual speaks to what I have long believed about sculpture. We need to stand among it, within it, to feel and understand. It provokes an individual response, conjuring our own stories and memories.

Back in Suga's studio, surrounded by props and objects stacked and packed like potions in an alchemist's laboratory, I ask him about the in-between in his sculpture. In his work, he seems drawn to the in-between, to the thresholds and boundaries which populate our world. We can see this in the things he uses, such as windows. These are of course a man-made threshold between the inside and the outside that we encounter every day. But Suga asks us to reflect upon this boundary, and how we see things.

In 1970, he exhibited a work called *Infinite Situation I (window)* at the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto. A black and white photograph of it on Suga's website tells me so much. Unlike almost every other photograph of a museum installation I've seen, there is no interior detail. The foreground is black, devoid of interest. Instead the visual emphasis is on the geometric

outlines of the window frames. They are sash windows, made up of two panes which slide up and down. Suga has opened the lower pane. It hangs in mid-motion, held in place by a solid block of wood placed diagonally across the window. While we are drawn to the view being framed for us like a painting, it is also blocked to us. The art historian Simon Groom points out that 'the wood propping open the window both reveals and conceals the view'.[11] There is an ambiguity here which extends to the use of wood. Window frames are usually made of wood, and we are so used to them that we barely see them. It's only when the wood is moved – in this case placed across the view – that we notice them. This is what Suga wants for us, to look again, to question the materials and things of our world.



Kishio Suga, *Infinite Situation I (window)*, 1970, wood, window frame, landscape

Looking over my research, I see that Groom also notes something I had missed; in the cataloguing for *Infinite Situation I (window)* Suga lists the view through the window as a material in the work.[12] Perhaps this is why he has used the word infinite in the title, for the landscape outside is ever changing, infinite in its variety. Light glances over rooftops and trees, throwing shadows

into shapes which both disappear and lengthen. Clouds huddle together and then dissipate. Everything is always in flux. As the bush warbler sings outside his studio, heralding the scent of spring in the air, Suga tells me that 'there is no beginning and no end. Only the in-between exists'.[13]

In the eastern part of Venice you'll find the Arsenale, a historical complex of armouries and shipyards which tell of the power and military might of the former Venetian Republic. Today it is also one of the sites of the global art jamboree that is the Venice Biennale, where contemporary art is presented across the city in both official and fringe exhibitions. In 2017, Kishio Suga's work *Law of Situation* was displayed within the waters of the Gaggiandre shipyard in the Arsenale. Built between 1568 and 1573, the arches of this shipyard look more like those of a glorious palazzo than a dock, and were designed by an architect, Jacopo Sansovino, best known for the Marciana Library in Saint Mark's Square. Water laps at the beauty of its stone structure and it is here that Suga's work lay partly submerged, with a line of stones just visible like the spine of a sea creature coming up for air.

Law of Situation was first presented as part of the 4th Modern Japanese Sculpture Exhibition, at the Ube City Open-Air Museum, Ube, in 1971. Ten stones were placed on a long rectangle of clear fibreglass within a nearby lake. The weight of the stone pushed this bed underneath the surface of the water, leaving the sculpture balancing between two states of matter, water and air. In Japan, I asked Suga about the origins of this piece. He tells me that when thinking through his ideas, he waded into the lake water, interested in how things float and in what lies beneath. He is drawing our attention to the things of our world and how we see them. Water both reveals and conceals. The refraction of light rays within water affects our vision, things just below the surface become, as Suga says, 'visible but deformed'.[14] It seems obvious now that the work would travel to Venice, a place synonymous with water, where tiny dark canals whisper their history and secrets are forever kept in liquid shadows.



Kishio Suga, *Law of Situation*, 1971, stones, fibreglass, water

In *Law of Situation*, Suga has once again listed something outside of his control – this time the water – as a material of the work. Working with water in the open air means being subject to the vagaries of weather. The curator Mika Yoshitake notes that 'for Suga, the work "begins" after the artist has arranged his materials'.[15] Suga confides that he loves seeing what happens when the wind blows, making patterns on the surface of water which ripple out in neat concentric circles. When gales are stronger, we see a rougher, wilder surface, with water pushing up and over the stone. Birds visit, and Suga smiles when he recalls the herons who enjoyed resting on his sculpture within the elegant shipyards of Venice.[16] And water also gives us different viewpoints. Reflections dance off the water in blazing sunlight, and hide in the dark depths of night. All these factors – light, weather, wind – gather together to create a myriad of ways to see the work. It is this potential which

interests Suga, the infinite ways in which, as he writes, 'all the details overlap with each other' to create 'a particular situation'.[17] Perhaps this is the law referred to in the title; that no situation can ever be the same, and that the world exists in a state of flux.

I think back to when Ashley Rawlings first identified the idea of 'situation', or jōkyō, on the train, with the sapphire sea beyond the windows. I now understand that what is key to these situations is interdependence. When Suga is showing us a situation he is showing us the interconnectedness of our world, and everything within it. Mami Kataoka, the curator and museum director, identifies this interdependence as linked to Suga's interest in the Middle Way of Madhyamaka Buddhism, which 'makes an elaborate argument for the fact that all things only exist as a result of a relationship or mutual interdependence with one's surroundings and the other'.[18]

Chatting to Suga in his studio, he'd been insistent that art can never have an agreed, unchanging meaning. How we perceive things is of course subjective, dependent on our experiences, and our capacity to question. I think it's also as basic as our mood. We are less open to new ways of seeing if we are hungry or tired, impatient or hot. When I ask him what he wants his viewers to find in his sculpture, Suga tells me he cannot know, that 'it depends on the human beings who see the sculpture'.[19] But we do know one thing. In Suga's world we are all connected; the wind combing over your face, that sculpture in the Venetian lagoon, the birds singing outside his studio. As Simon Groom writes of Kishio Suga, 'we are always to this extent ourselves part of the work, because we exist in this world'.[20]

After visiting Suga, I stay for a few extra days in Japan, hoping to see Mount Fuji. Some lucky travellers might catch it from the Saphir Odoriko train we took to his studio, but descending mists in the distance had hidden it from view. And so I take another train with a romantic name, this time the Fuji Excursion. I arrive around sixty miles southwest of Tokyo to find some of the most beautiful lakes in Japan, which were created by the ancient volcanic eruptions of this now sleeping giant.

When the train pulls in, Mount Fuji is visible, its symmetrical cone as perfect as a diagram in a school textbook, and I head to one of the most popular viewing points, beside the Arakura Sengen Shrine. To get there, you walk up four hundred steps by the shrine, until you arrive at a picture-postcard view of the five-storeyed Chureita Pagoda. It is painted a glorious red, which blazes against the sky. But by the time I reach the pagoda, where a wave of pink and white cherry blossom trees cover the valley, the clouds

have moved in, and Mount Fuji is no longer visible. As crowds of tourists wait for the clouds to clear, I think of Suga's work, which also glides between the visible and invisible. As Ashley Rawlings writes, Suga shows us a 'mix of mystery and matter-of-factness'.[21] That view through the window frame which we take for granted can also be an imaginative portal to another world, one where the wind might whisper as clouds dance before our eyes, and where a thunderstorm evokes the drama of the opera.

Rawlings continues that 'Perhaps what makes Suga's practice so compelling is that as monumental and totemic as his installations can be, and as solid as the small assemblages are, none of them insist on physical permanence.'[22] The idea of the constantly shifting moment is key to Suga's work. Suga says that he is 'always wandering between existence and non-existence'.[23] He understands that permanence is impossible, and that things are always situated on the thresholds of being and non-being, of the seen and unseen, of life and death. As I walk down the steps from the Chureita Pagoda, the blossoms on the boughs reach across the pathway, casting beautiful shadows. These shadows will not last the hour. I think of hanami, that custom of picnicking in the shadows of the cherry blossoms before they disappear on the breeze. It is these moments, untethered from time, that Suga is helping us to find.

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15

Sky Totem

The Maya were one of the great civilisations of the ancient world. Occupying grand swathes of Mesoamerica, including areas of present-day Mexico, Belize and Guatemala, they developed advanced social, intellectual and agricultural systems, with the earliest settlements believed to date from 1500 BCE. Their people, from astronomers to architects, mathematicians to maize farmers, planned, built and lived in vast ceremonial cities and centres. These buildings were quarried from local stones. One of the most famous of these is Chichén Itzá, a site of military and political power, which lies in what we now know as south-central Yucatan, Mexico.

Within the main plaza at Chichén Itzá, a pyramid of four sides rises up from the ground, like the tip of an iceberg slicing through the surface of the sea. This is the Pyramid of Kukulcan, designed and named for the Mayan serpent god, a creator deity with the powers of rain and wind whistling within his scales. Historians believe that this pyramid was built between 1050 and 1300 CE and even today, one thousand years of human life later, its limestone carvings open up a portal to another world. Each side of the pyramid has a central staircase, giving four pathways up the pyramid, each with ninety-one steps. If you multiply ninety-one by four that brings you to three hundred and sixty-four. Add one more step to reach the upper building atop the pyramid, and there is a step for every day of the Mayan solar calendar year. But what is most astonishing is that on both the spring and autumn equinox, those two days of the year when the length of day and night align, the pyramid is visited by Kukulcan. The geometric precision of the ancient architecture results in a play of light and shadow, as blocks of moving darkness flow silently down the stones, the stepped edges of the

stairways creating a river in the shape of a serpent, giving the illusion of Kukulcan having slipped his skin. As he slithers down the side of his pyramid, the shadow body reaches the head of a snake articulated in stone. Although now weathered, the skein of time riven into lines within the limestone, we can still make out his fangs, which drip from immense jaws. And then, as the pull of the equinox loosens, he disappears back into the shadows of the underground.

★ ★ ★

As my plane took off from Tokyo Airport, I saw the perfect cone of Mount Fuji through the stamp-sized window. From this vantage point, as we circled above the buildings which had seemed so tall and imposing from the ground, the volcano stood like an old statesman, impregnable and impassive. But it is not as still as it seems. There are low-frequency earthquakes occurring around it, and within its depths lie two – that we know of – deep magma reservoirs, hot pockets each filled with bubbling basalt. I think of all those people on the ground, the crowds of guides and tourists hoping for a glimpse of Mount Fuji, perhaps travelling at this moment on the Fuji Excursion train, just as I had done, with their cameras and kit. The snow-capped summit of the volcano will be shifting in and out of their view, as balloons of clouds gather below the peak, acting as opaque shields blocking it from sight. There is always an in-between floating just in front of our eyes, but perhaps I have never seen it so clearly as now from the plane, with the horizontal line of cloud dividing the white cone of Mount Fuji from those looking up below.

We soon leave Tokyo behind, and I take advantage of the long flight back to London to mull over what I have learned so far. From that first morning at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, with the broad shoulders of the *Star House Totem Pole* guiding the way, we have seen spirals in the salt-crusted lands of the Great American West, and totems built from televisions and white goods. But still there is something flickering in front of me, like a firefly at dusk. What is missing? Looking down at my hand on my laptop, I see it is cut through by light from the morning sun steaming through the plane's window. The silhouette of the shadow is cast in a half-moon shape, like the penumbra of an eclipse, and recalls the outline of a cityscape at night. I think immediately of the sculptor Louise Nevelson, who created

entire worlds of sculpture playing with silhouette and outline. For her, shadow and light were sculptural materials, as important in providing shape and tone as bronze or stone. And Nevelson was drawn to the shadows, seeing in their contours an otherworldliness, where things grow and curl into something else, and reality shifts before our eyes.

Louise Nevelson was born in Pereiaslav, Ukraine, in 1899, and moved across the world, emigrating to the rocky shores of Maine on the Atlantic coast of the United States when she was still a child. Nevelson was the artist whose words first sparked something in me right at the start, the artist who identified her shadow worlds of sculpture as a conduit to 'the in-between places. The dawns and the dusks … the places between the land and sea'.[1] As I think about her work, I realise that I have only ever seen it in Venice, the city of land and sea where water scents the air, wending into blind alleys and grand campi, the canals a palimpsest of history lapping at our feet.

It was during the 2022 Venice Biennale, and across the historic rooms of the Procuratie Vecchie, that I was first introduced to her work. Even if the name of that building means nothing to you, you probably recognise its architecture. It runs along the north side of St Mark's Square, each level colonnaded with arches and windows like the elaborate tiers of a wedding cake. In its shadows are cafés where you can enjoy an espresso or aperitivo (with the view priced in). For the first time in its five-hundred-year history, the building was now open to the public, and stepping inside from the clear, almost geometric, sunlight of the square felt like entering a cave. It was cool and dark, with walls painted in umber hues, and windows shaded by blinds. Outlines of forms peered and climbed in odd ways, nearly impossible to make out, like the amorphous shape of a familiar object in your bedroom at night. This place of shadow and transformation was conjured into view by Louise Nevelson. It feels somehow serendipitous to have come face to face with her sculptural world in Venice, where the meniscus line of land and sea is porous, and the surface of the water is dotted with bulbs of shadow that glisten and entice like candles in evening light.

If you had walked through those rooms of the Procuratie Vecchie at that time, you would have found sculptures painted black, gold and white, pushing out from walls or growing up from the floor. Boxes with lids open just enough to suggest an interior beyond our reach, with surfaces covered in sinuous bends or crossed by lines as straight as Roman roads. These are sculptures collated from wood scraps and cast-offs, bits and pieces discarded

by others which have been sawn, stacked and shaped by Nevelson into imaginative installations. What is most striking, after the pastel and terracotta colours of Venetian architecture, is the monochrome of her world. So many works are painted black. But it is a very specific black, flat and uncompromising. As I search for words to describe it, I look up some domestic paint colour charts and find shades ranging from 'wrought iron' to – my personal favourite – 'raccoon fur'. But I still can't find the black Nevelson used. By painting her sculpture in this way, familiar forms morph and transform, like a black sheet draped over furniture.

In 1956 she made a sculpture called *Sky Totem*.[2] This is a vertical construction, marked by blocks which climb upwards, one on top of another. Within each block we see additions to the surface, each adding detail and interest. Small sections of wood curve and dive like the strokes of a paint brush, and circles draw our eye in further. Rectangles are cut into, as shapes of flickering flames find form in the wood. The entire sculpture is painted black. Nevelson said that the reason she 'originally started with black was to see the forms more clearly. Black seemed the strongest and clearest. But then somehow as I worked and worked and worked … it pleased me'.[3] But of course in black there is a duality. The blackness of the sea at night contains an abundance of life we can only imagine. And we know that when clouds cover the night skies there is a spectacular set waiting behind, ready to be revealed, like a curtain about to rise at the theatre. For Nevelson, black became such a site of transfiguration; it was 'the ultimate. You can be quiet and it contains the whole thing. There is no colour that will give you the feeling of totality. Of peace. Of greatness. Of quietness. Of excitement. I have seen things that were transformed into black, that took on just greatness … that means the essence of it is just what you call – alchemy'.[4] In choosing black paint, Nevelson wanted something that was beyond colour, where known meaning succumbs to the totality of the black. When that happens, and meanings are shut down for us, we are forced to move beyond what we know.

Her *Sky Totem* is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington DC, and in a short text on their website we are told that its 'monochromatic black surface echoes the awe-inspiring totemic forms of ancient Mayan, African, and Northwest Coast cultures'.[5] And it is not just in her *Sky Totem* that we find explicit references to such ancient sculpture. When I walked through the Procuratie Vecchie, the murmuring of the Venetian past felt somehow louder in those rooms darkened to a gloaming, but what I also noticed were Nevelson's sculpted columns. Some

were placed in shadow against translucent blinds through which the opposite side of St Mark's Square was just visible, as gauzy as the glass of an antique mirror. These columns were covered in patterns and shapes which recall the abstracted symbols carved into ancient Mayan columns. We know that Nevelson had seen casts of huge thirty-foot Mayan stelae in the American Museum of Natural History, New York.[6] These were replicas of stelae created in the eighth century, and found in the ancient Mayan city of Quiriguá, located in present-day Guatemala. Stelae is the name given to ancient stone carvings which are upright and vertical, like a totem pole. I look up the museum website and find old black and white photographs of the casts on display, and even on my screen the astounding detail shines through; heads flow in and out of view, weaving beside, above and below abstract symbols.[7] But it is not just human bodies which are fashioned in the curves and concaves of stone. We also see references to the celestial bodies and their movements. Nevelson was so enthralled by these replicas that she decided, along with her sister, to take a trip to Quiriguá to see the real stones for herself.



Louise Nevelson, *Sky Totem*, 1956, painted wood

In stories which sweep generations and even continents, taking in huge swathes of life and love, we sometimes get a 'cast list' in the prelims of the book. The more ambitious ones are even divided by time, place or family, and I often find myself referring back to these in order to make sense of proceedings. We don't need one here, but if we did there would be a surprising cameo appearance by Frida Kahlo. The famed Mexican painter and her husband, fellow artist Diego Rivera, hosted Louise Nevelson and her sister, Anita, when they visited Mexico City in the early 1950s.[8] According to Nevelson's biographer Laurie Wilson, she discussed her travel

plans with Kahlo and Rivera, who, with their 'extensive knowledge about the archaeology and art of ancient Central America', advised the sisters on where to go, and what to see.[9] In fact Nevelson had been friends with the couple for years. Back in 1933 she worked as an assistant to Rivera on his mural commission for the New York Workers School in New York City.

After seeing Kahlo and Rivera in Mexico City, the sisters travelled in Mexico and Guatemala, taking two trips over 1950 and 1951.[10] Mary Coffey, an art historian with a special interest in modern Mexican visual cultures, notes that the sculptor and her sister went to Uxmal and Chichén Itzá in the Yucatan, and Mitla and Monte Albán near Oaxaca.[11] They also visited Quiriguá in pilgrimage to the ancient stelae whose replicas had so dominated their imaginations in New York. At this time Quiriguá was nearly impossible to reach, and they stayed in a house deep within the broadleaf tropical trees of the Maya Forest, with staff and a private train to take them to the site. Later, Nevelson would eulogise these ancient cultures, announcing that 'the Yucatan was a world of forms that at once I felt was mine, a world where East and West met, a world of geometry and magic'.[12]

Working with Diego Rivera in the 1930s had given Nevelson perhaps not permission, but encouragement to embrace the pre-Columbian art she so admired. This was the term given to the art created by Indigenous peoples of South, Central and North America and the Caribbean until the arrival of the Europeans in the last years of the fifteenth century. At this time Rivera had been far more famous than Kahlo, securing important commissions in the United States, and references to the pre-Columbian art and artefacts in his collection fluttered throughout his own work, rather like the butterflies we see in his wife's celebrated self-portraits. But this interest in Indigenous culture had been bubbling in Nevelson since she was a child. In later life she recalled a family of Indigenous Americans that 'as a little girl in Maine … I somehow felt I knew these people as if they were as close, as close as can be, and I recognized them … I only know that when I look at them they're related to me; they're not apart; they are in me'.[13] And we know that she kept an edition of the periodical *Dyn* in her possession for decades. This particular copy had 'a long and illustrated article on "Totem Art" discussing 'the history and art of the Haida and Kwakiutl [Kwakwaka'wakw] tribes'.[14]

In her use of the word 'magic' when talking about the art of the Yucatan, and the almost possessive way she described that Indigenous family as being related to her, I feel a familiar tug; the same evocation of myth that we saw back at the old Trocadéro in Paris. How intriguing, then, that just as

in Paris, when an interest in African artefacts signalled a leftist, anti-colonial political allegiance, we also see the same confluence of art and politics in the inter-war period in the United States. Rivera was an avowedly socialist artist, and when making his murals in New York City in the 1930s he created around him a 'young and fervently leftist artist and intellectual community [that] saw him as a rallying point for the Communist cause and freedom of artistic expression'.[15] In 1933, just as Nevelson joined this enthusiastic company, the Museum of Modern Art, New York opened an exhibition titled American Sources of Modern Art.[16] I find the original press release which tells us that the display 'will show American art before the coming of Columbus' and even features 'at least one large stele from Guatemala which has never before been seen outside the tropical jungle'.[17] Here in Manhattan's concrete jungle these treasures were displayed alongside contemporary artworks, including those by Diego Rivera. For Rivera, and others like him, a celebration of pre-Columbian art was indivisible from post-revolutionary Mexico, where the visual language of Indigenous art swirled with anti-colonial rhetoric and national pride.[18]

In 1840, an American and an Englishman, John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, while traversing western Honduras near the border with Guatemala, found the ancient Mayan city of Copán. Lloyd Stephens later published his record of the journey, which, alongside Catherwood's detailed drawings, became a popular travelogue, and ignited popular interest in the history of the Maya. In his book on the site, Lloyd Stephens describes his guide hacking through vegetation to reach a stone monolith, and that its elaborate carvings, both figurative and hieroglyphic, proved 'like newly discovered historical records, that the people who once occupied the Continent of America were not savages'.[19] But Lloyd Stephens was also able to 'purchase' Copán for fifty dollars, and entertained a grand scheme of transporting the city to the United States to be viewed and marvelled at, like an exotic act at the circus. This plan was never realised, but perhaps hints at the ways in which these extraordinary sites, with their geometric precision and unknowable stories, were seen as something that could be owned, their meanings transposed or translated by one in possession of a rational modern mind.

Lloyd Stephens and Catherwood were also the pair who 'discovered' Quiriguá, and by the time Louise Nevelson visited the area in the following century, living in her jungle home with staff, taking a private train to the

site, Quiriguá was owned by the United Fruit Company.[20] The art historian Mary Coffey reminds us that Nevelson's time in Guatemala 'took place against a back-drop of civil war and colonial extraction that cannot be ignored for both the role it played in the excavations at Quiriguá that brought her to Guatemala and for the infrastructure that allowed her and Anita to "live like queens"'.[21]

At that time in the twentieth century, the United Fruit Company was the largest landowner in central America. In the company's archives are photographs of the archaeological sites they controlled, and the first one I see shows a man dressed in a white suit with a wide-brimmed hat. He has a casual pose, resting across an engraved stone circle, the head of a carved serpent flickering at the shotgun to his side. The scene is like that of a big-game hunter in Kenya, and, with his weapon in hand, body draped across the bested animal, it is infused with the same colonial scent.[22] The anthropologist Charlotte Williams is engaged in deep research on this topic, sifting through the layers of commodity and commerce, showing how the United Fruit Company used their ownership of these jewel-like Mayan cities to 'to accrue power and territory in Central America'.[23] So when Nevelson talks about the 'geometry and magic' she found in the Mayan worlds, we must also remember this hinterland, its legacy as potent as the formless outline of Kukulcan slipping down the steps of his pyramid.

In the shapes and forms of her sculpture, we can surely see the influence of Quiriguá, Chichén Itzá and the other places she travelled to and through. These then morphed into her own imagined landscape; silhouettes and shadows, columns and crevices. We all carry images around with us, like postcards in our memory which move in and out of focus. Nevelson knew this and had an ambition to make sculpture that was not static. 'I wanted to move around. And have things moving. And also that one person could have many images from one piece if they so wanted it. The "places" were where they travelled'.[24] That is why shadow and light intrigued her, their mutability giving movement to material. In a way which reminds me of Chillida and his architecture of the void, Nevelson called herself the 'Architect of Shadow' and in this I see the astronomical positioning of Mayan architecture, with its careful use of shadow, casting its own rays of influence over her work.[25] These she infused with her experiences of living in New York City, and in the black of her outlines we can also see the contours of a city at night, the ethereal bodies of unlit buildings dark against the horizon.

In 1959, Nevelson unveiled a new work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This was her multipiece sculpture *Dawn's Wedding Feast*. Her material was still wood, found objects which had been worked by human or machine hands, which had already had a previous life, and which Nevelson broke, sawed, glued and nailed into her sculptures. But this had one crucial difference. Instead of her customary black, everything in *Dawn's Wedding Feast* was painted white. In London, we rarely get a dawn which blisters and blinds, casting bright white nets of light over the cityscape. So I can only imagine the dawn of Nevelson's feast day, where the sculpted columns of a bride and groom, and their surroundings, are ablaze in white.



Louise Nevelson, *Dawn's Wedding Feast*, 1959, found objects and wood, painted white (detail)

As I look over the individual pieces of Nevelson's sculpture, I see that these are not a bridal white, no ivory or champagne cream. Instead the light they create is celestial, becoming otherworldly as it streams over the sculpture. Nevelson described the moment of the sculpture as 'early morning when you arise between night and dawn. When you've slept and the city has slept you get a psychic vision of an awakening'.[26] It is this awakening that Nevelson sought in her sculpture. Sculpture, she reminds us, is 'three-dimensional, but what it should do is bring you into the fourth'.[27] In the

right hands, sculpture can transcend material, evoking snakes which slither down temples and shadows which dance at the shift of the earth's axis. Just as music can access the soul, or poetry bring us to tears, sculpture can help us step into another world, where an incandescent dawn acts as a staging post between this life and what glistens just beyond.

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Part Five

Between Worlds

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16

Ancestor

In Hindu belief, the goddess Kali is a complex vision of womanhood. She is both creator and destroyer, worshipped and feared, and the vagaries of her power cast light and shadow as she goes. Kali is the feminine form of the Sanskrit word kala, meaning time. She is the goddess of transformation and death, and within her form lies the understanding that transition and change are the heartbeat of life.

Kali is a profound symbol throughout India, but is particularly venerated in Kashmir, Kerala, South India, Bengal and Assam.[1] In West Bengal, the religion of Bengali Shaktism is centred around her. Here once again we see her duality: her wild spectral appearance, adorned and decorated with the jewellery of severed heads, contrasts with the rebirth and redemption she can bring through death. The eighteenth-century Shakta poet and Bengal saint, Ramprasad Sen, wrote devotional songs for the goddess also known as Kali Ma, reflective of the deep maternal love he found in her. For Bengali Shaktas, Kali is the goddess who can ensure safe passage between life and death, and she appears in visionary form in cremation grounds. This form of Kali, Shamsham Kali, is considered the most powerful and dangerous manifestation of the goddess. For those who meet Kali in the burning ground, it can mean madness, or liberation. As fire and air meet, Kali rises beyond form, releasing us from our earthly bodies in a physical symbol of transcendence, and the bonds of the world are left dying in dark embers, until they become cold ashes. But they are not forgotten, and those who have died are honoured in sacred ceremonies known as shraddha, as they join the realm of the ancestors.

★ ★ ★

Within the dawn evoked by Louise Nevelson, her figures a glistening white like the icing of a wedding cake, we see a new beginning, just as we do every morning when sun and earth are brought together once more. It is also the new beginning signalled by a wedding, a coming together of a couple, and their families. As I consider these moments of passage and ceremony, I remember the churinga, those objects carved by the Indigenous Arrernte-language groups of Central Australia, so associated with initiation rites that their meaning is ineffable to those who have not passed through the veil. Later I discover that Arnold van Gennep, a twentieth-century scholar with an interest in totemism, was the first to identify and name the concept of liminality, that threshold space marked by ritual and symbolism in which we linger and wait. In his 1908 book *The Rites of Passage*, he noted that human life was marked by such transitions across cultures, those in-between moments where things teeter and shift, until we move forward into the next part of our lives. He chose his word for this, liminality, from the Latin word for threshold, limen.

Sculpture is a material marker of our final threshold moment: the place between life and death. This has a long history in sculpture, from the funerary sculpture of the ancient Egyptians, to the armies of Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, painstakingly moulded in terracotta in 210 to 209 BCE to protect him in the afterlife. But rather than tombs, where sculpted angels proclaim mammon with their silent trumpets, or winged chariots signify military prowess, I am drawn to the sculpture we make which lives forever in the in-between of life and death, and which acts as a symbol, or even a conduit, between the living and those who have gone before.

In 2022, on a September day in New York City, a sculpture was unveiled on the Upper East Side corner of Central Park, a green vista unfurling behind it. This was *Ancestor*, by the artist Bharti Kher. At eighteen feet tall, the sculpture recalls the grandness of historical statuary, military men enshrined forever in greatness as we stand in their perpetual shadow. But *Ancestor* is unusual. Rather than a marble plinth, inscribed with feats of glory, this figure rests upon what looks like a weathered base, with its black paint, lightened from years of sun and rain, appearing to peel off in places. As our gaze goes upwards, we see a woman imbued with Hindu iconography, the drapery of her faded red sari falling around her, and the long plait in her hair acting as a backbone as we walk around her. But what is most noticeable are

the heads of twenty-three children which spill out from her chest and torso. These heads all have individual faces looking in different directions, but are squashed together like squabbling puppies searching for milk. As with the base, the bronze of her body and these heads are painted in muted colours which suggest a past which blazed with jewel-like intensity, but where now the pigments are worn down by time, their hues dampened. Elements seem to flake off, giving the effect of an antique or ancient artefact rather than a contemporary sculpture.

What is intriguing is that the visual language on display in this sculpture resists categorisation. While the central figure appears to be imbued with the matriarchal power of the Indian mother goddess tradition, where the many iterations of maternal power are linked to the life-giving elements of the earth itself, she also sweeps a history of European classical sculpture to her chest. Kher notes that she found one of the central inspirations for the sculpture in the *Fontana Della Madre Natura* (*Foundain of Mother Nature*), within the sumptuous Renaissance gardens of the Villa d'Este, not far from Rome. Here a sixteenth-century image of the ancient Greek goddess Artemis sits in fecund glory, water spilling from her engorged breasts. Just as the many heads of *Ancestor* are barely contained on her figure, here multiple breasts cascade over the chest of Artemis, and water appears in a constant flow of nourishment, both for us as her children, and the land. This work at Villa d'Este is modelled on ancient imagery of Artemis at the temple created in her name in Ephesus, now modern-day Turkey. The Temple of Artemis, constructed in 550 BCE, was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. But to see *Ancestor* as simply a conflation of East and West is too easy, and when I interview Kher, she tells me that 'it needed to be more than a reference to a mythology, Greek mythology, and then here's an Indian mythology, and we put them together. For me it wasn't sophisticated enough, and it needed to talk about something that was much longer.'



Bharti Kher, *Ancestor*, 2022, bronze



Gillis van den Vliete, *Fontana Della Madre Natura (Fountain of Mother Nature)*, 1568, Villa d'Este, Rome

But what?

I first met Bharti Kher back in 2017. She was on a residency in Somerset, in southwest England. I remember that it was early autumn, one of those glorious September days which feels as though it may be the last of the summer, lazy heat flickering through overgrown hedgerows, the landscape sunbathing in stillness, the plump harvest lying untouched. At this tipping point between seasons, a group of curators, writers and art historians had been invited to Kher's studio to see how she was approaching the time she had in this countryside to think, write and make. As we walked into the studio, she was unpacking and laying out some golu dolls, brightly painted clay figurines from South India. Since 1993, Kher has lived and worked in New Delhi, where she had collected the golu dolls, drawn to the material aspect of the clay from which they were fired and their storytelling forms: gods and goddesses and characters from epic narratives or history. During the shipment from India to England, these fragile clay figures had broken, bodies

cracked and heads lolling, and it was these disfigured bodies which lay on the surfaces of Kher's studio.

But Kher was not disappointed. Instead she was almost enlivened by the damage, and as she explained to me several years later, the idea of 'rupture and repair constantly comes together throughout my entire practice. I break things or things break, I fix them, I repair them.' Kher used the brokenness of the golu dolls to create something entirely new, fusing their lost parts together to conjure up what she called her *Intermediaries*, hybrid bodies of conjoined elements that she refixed and remade into new objects. And just as the waters of Venice lap at the land, that city appears and reappears in this story of sculpture like a repeating reflection in the canals. Because it was in Venice that I saw Kher's *Intermediaries* in an exhibition, five years after meeting her in Somerset. They were in the upper rooms of one of the largest palazzos in Venice, the Palazzo Pisani a Santo Stefano. This palazzo is home to the Venice Conservatory, the sound of musicians practicing filtering through the glass of the windows along with the sunlight, and it is here that the *Intermediaries* sat below a frescoed ceiling.

They were in a room at the top of the palazzo, and after winding my way up amidst internal courtyards and elegant loggias I found the display. Looking at my photos now I see small painted figures full of life, laid out in a dramatic narrative of movement and music. Around them ancient sitars are cut in half, and elephant heads sit on human bodies, while the drape of a sari folds into something else, something unexpected, as jolting as the joins and joints left for us to see. Of course repair can never bring perfection, and that is not what Kher is seeking. Rather, she looks for what emerges from the cracks, what occupies the 'transitional space' that has opened up between what was and what will be.[2]

What struck me most when I saw the *Intermediaries* in Venice, was how many are split down the middle, and sometimes that split appears like a lightning strike, leaving a gap in between the conjoined forms for us to peer into and through. As she brought these broken bodies together, Kher emphasised their difference in shape, height and size. In these clay figures, Kher is drawing on a deep history of hybridity, in particular the concept of Ardhanarishvara, a Hindu deity that is half male, half female and split exactly down the middle. But any easy meaning or narrative is gone, perhaps following the source of that music in the Palazzo Pisani, and we are left in a place of ambiguity. There are no clear references for us, and we languish in narrative dissonance. Kher tells me that this is deliberate. 'I don't want you

to catch them in time engendered in race, in place, in space … they're all shapeshifters. They are constantly moving … you can't quite catch them'.[3] Kher compares them to djinns – shape-shifting spirits or genies. She also describes them to me as a 'family of in-betweens'.[4] Out of this family, Kher began to create a sculpture she called *Artemis*. It was back in Somerset, and among the broken forms of the golu dolls she found one which stood taller than the rest. Kher broke the heads of other dolls, and began to attach them, echoing the overflowing and tumbling breasts of the Greek goddess worshipped both for hunting and childbirth. It was this figure of *Artemis* which became the antecedent for her large-scale *Ancestor* in New York.



Bharti Kher, the *Intermediaries* (series), 2019, cement, clay, wax, brass, copper

Kher agrees to meet me to discuss this book, and in her studio in London I ask her about her family of *Intermediaries* from which *Ancestor* emerged. I want to know why so many are cut down the middle. She tells me that the reason she cuts things in half is because of the idea 'that we can be many things'.[5] The *Intermediaries*, she explains, are 'a medley of

unconventionality, ancestral complexity, and diasporic identity'.[6] In other words a mishmash, just like all of us.

The earliest civilisation to develop in South Asia, known for its remarkable urban planning, was the Indus civilisation, otherwise known as Harappan civilisation. Between 3300 and 1300 BCE, it extended over most of modern-day Pakistan and northwest India, with settlements growing along the fertile banks of the Indus River and its tributaries. Archaeologists call the 'Mature Harappan period' the time between 2600 and 1900 BCE, when advancements in urban living such as drainage, sanitation and the planning of cities along a grid system, created a flourishing culture within the principal cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. This culture, like the waters of the Indus, cascaded out from the centres, generating an autonomous civilisation which found expression in small clay-based sculptures of human, animal and hybrid forms which 'are among the earliest discoveries that helped scholars to determine that this society was very different from other contemporaneous civilizations in Afghanistan, Iran, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.'[7]

I find images of these figurines in books, but as I am in London, I decide to go to the British Museum to see some on display. It's always tourist season in this museum, and I wind my way through crowds to find the Indus Valley vitrines, but when I do it is quiet, and I am alone. It feels extraordinary to be beside imaginative works made many thousands of years ago. These silent repositories of past lives are just the right size to hold in your hand, and their tactility calls out to me through the glass. Elaborate headdresses are carefully built up, and tiny dots of terracotta are added on to breasts to create dainty nipples. Animal forms such as bulls are decorated with colours now faded, and elephant tusks curl forever in clay. We cannot know their meaning or purpose. Many were found broken, discarded after a use we can only guess at, but what we do know is that, in the words of archaeologists Sharri R. Clark and Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, 'the diversity of terracotta figurines and the unique construction by hand, with general similarities in form, decoration, and associated artefacts, undoubtedly reflects a complex Indus society, a coded embodiment of themselves and their ideals'.[8]



Figurines in the Collection of the British Museum, London, circa 200 BCE–CE 100, terracotta

Back in 2008, Bharti Kher was in the basement of a museum, and allowed to hold some Harappan figurines in her hand, 'and what I learned was that in that time the Harappans would blow a single breath into the hollow chamber of the figure'.[9] I can't find this confirmed in the literature, but what is not in doubt is that Kher felt both a thrumming material connection to the Harappan figurines, and an ancestral link. In a previously unpublished piece of writing that she shared with me, Kher remarks that 'I love that I can call from the past my ancestors: the Harappans'.[10] She also reveals that in the terracotta of the figurines she finds 'three of the essential elements of life: earth, water, fire'.[11] Terracotta is a clay-based material, and clay itself is drawn from the very core of the earth, created from the slow erosion over time of igneous rock, decomposing over millions of years until it becomes malleable, ready for a new life. The clay is mixed with water, moulded and baked in fire to create the terracotta. The importance of the material used by the Harappan in their figurines is also identified by Clark and Kenoyer who write that, 'although terracotta may have been a relatively

low-value material, the creation process of terracotta figurines could have been a re-enactment of the creation or birth of human beings or deities from clay or earth, symbolically and allegorically'. They also note that taking clay from the ground can 'represent tangible traces of locality and place'.[12] I remember the paint I had seen on some of the figurines in the British Museum, and even this has an intriguing deliberateness to it. Rather than mineral pigments which were easily available to the Harappan, and used on pottery and other decorative ceramics, the paint used on the figurines was conjured from burnt bone pigment. Clark and Kenoyer believe that 'this suggests that the use of bone pigment on figurines was a conscious, symbolic choice in the materialization of the Harappan body'.[13] The materials used in the Harappan figurines were drawn from life itself.

I go back to Kher's notes on the Harappan figurines and feel a connection between their intentional use of material, and the elemental alchemy that Kher sensed in their presence. As she writes of the breath blown into these sculptures made from earth, water and fire, a breath which works 'to animate them and give them power', she notes that 'the fourth essential element of air now completes the work'. It is this life force which, in Kher's words, activates the figure's 'potential as a totem, as a seer, as a spirit, and as a guide.'[14] As I read this, I am reminded once again of those stories we tell ourselves of how we humans were made, sculpted into being from mud found along riverbanks, or the deep seams in mythology, such as the ancient Mesopotamiam poem the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest known works of literature, where the goddess Aruru fashions the wild man Enkidu from clay. The concept of sculpture as a life-giving force is ancient, and ever present.

When *Ancestor* was unveiled in New York City on that early autumn day, it was unsurprising that comparisons were made to *Liberty Enlightening the World*, known as the Statue of Liberty. Both are large-scale sculpted figures of a mythical female, imbued with welcome and care. And both draw inspiration from classical sculpture: the breeding breasts of *Artemis* repeat across the chest of *Ancestor*, while the Statue of Liberty is a reworking of the sixth Wonder of the World, the Colossus of Rhodes completed in 280 BCE. The Colossus was erected to celebrate the city-state of Rhodes's victorious emergence from a long siege at the hands of the Macedonians. Fabricated from bronze over an iron framework, that ancient sculpture depicted the Greek sun god Helios, represented with a crown of sun rays, holding a torch

aloft. Foreshadowing the placement of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour, the Colossus of Rhodes was situated at the port of the Greek island, the enormous figure with its torch and headdress greeting both departing travellers and arriving citizens. The visual ancestry is clear.

In 1883, the American poet Emma Lazarus wrote a sonnet as part of a fundraising scheme for the Statue of Liberty, and her words were later engraved on a bronze plaque upon the pedestal. The title she chose, 'The New Colossus', references the Colossus of Rhodes. But Lazarus tells us that the ancient Greeks can keep their 'storied pomp' and their 'conquering limbs'.[15] Instead, within the drapery of what Lazarus calls the 'Mother of Exiles', the arriving tired and poor shall find solace, and respite. As the welcoming flame to the nearly fourteen million immigrants who arrived on the shores of the United States between 1886 and 1924, the Statue of Liberty became a material symbol of a receptive mother, ready to bring all within the folds of her skirts. I think back to the harbour at Cuxhaven in Germany, where so many left, some forcibly, from the Kai der Tränen during the first part of the twentieth century, arriving at destinations including New York. Sculpture, as we have seen, is about both place and displacement, but now I wonder if that duality is also signalled within the body itself.

What if the sculpted body can stand for a shared human kinship that transcends local, national and even historical borders?

Ancestor contains these ideas of multiple identities, with different heads assembled all over her body like gargantuan teats. Kher is mining the history of sculpted mothers and children, but changing it. Normally, as Kher notes, 'the mother is always young, and more often than not, the child is always a boy, especially in religious art. Even in Hindu mythology, there would always be the goddess with the son, the male child'.[16] But in Kher's sculpture the mother seems ageless, and surrounded by many children of indiscriminate race, age or gender. Here, in the multiple identities, bodies and histories, lies an empathetic, open understanding of human nature; a mother who sees the humanness of us all, and loves us anyway. There is also symbolism here, the multiple heads perhaps speaking to the multiple selves we all carry around within our own bodies: lover, parent, child. But more than the external roles we play, these heads can also symbolise our manifold moods: anger, shame, hope. I think of Kali, the goddess as changeable as the flames which rage and smoulder in the burning grounds on which she dances. As Kher reminds us, 'we change all the time, our bodies change all the time, nature changes all the time and it is the nature of evolution that we

are continuously in flow'.[17] The many children of *Ancestor* are all we have been, and all we will be: past, present and future held together in one body. We are many things, transforming all the time.

But within all this flux, what remains?

As I read over all my notes about Bharti Kher, one thing stands out. In a piece of writing, she notes how 'all of us artists, from way back, perhaps from when we put our first handprints on a cave wall, were trying to capture this thing called the human spirit. Like a will-o'-the-wisp, it's a hard thing to catch. You think you have it, and it slips out from the side of your studio and out the door. I am constantly trying to create the manifestations of different things, to find this enigmatic stone I've been searching for. It's probably in my pocket, and I don't know it's there'.[18]

The search for that enigmatic stone is perhaps what this journey has been about; the idea that art operates in a place without words, a place of transformation and transition that can lead us to a truth which is articulated in the stars above us or the roots of trees which speak to one another below the earth upon which we tread. It is held in the pebbles we touch on the beach, rolled over and tossed by the tides, and the fine softness of the sand they will become. It's no surprise, then, that when I ask her to describe *Ancestor*, Kher tells me, 'she's a totem'.[19] Our interview is over, and, as I turn to leave, I see that she is smiling, and her hands are in her pockets.

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Large Totem Head

In the early autumn of 1921, a young Yorkshireman was settling into his new digs in Chelsea, London. Enrolled at the Royal College of Art in London on a sculpture scholarship, he was a frequent visitor to the British Museum, where he was particularly drawn to the displays of non-Western art. Egyptian, Etruscan, Mexican and African sculpture all coalesced into a broad visual feast for the twenty-three-year-old Henry Moore, which also included the everyday and natural; 'don't forget pebbles on the beach' he would later scrawl onto the cover of a sketchbook.[1]

One weekend, Moore, on a whim, decided to take a train to Stonehenge. He arrived in the early evening and, having had supper, decided that he could not wait until the morning and set out on foot. It was a clear night, and when he arrived he was totally alone. The stones were lit by the moon's silver rays as though actors on a stage, and in the gaps between them, pockets of darkness pooled like ink. Revealing his sculptor's eye for shape and shadow, Moore explained later that because moonlight 'enlarges everything … the mysterious depths and distances' made Stonehenge 'seem enormous'. The following morning he went again, but it lacked the same secrecy in the daylight, and 'that first moonlight visit remained for years my idea of Stonehenge.'[2]

He was enthralled.

★ ★ ★

In art history, there is an accepted connection between painters and landscape. We admire the ways in which chalked-cliff shores or windblown deserts inspire brushstrokes which crash like waves, as skies skid over sand and storms strike beyond the canvas. Sculpture is often left out of this story, believed incapable of expressing our connection to the natural world in its cold, static forms. But that is a mistake.

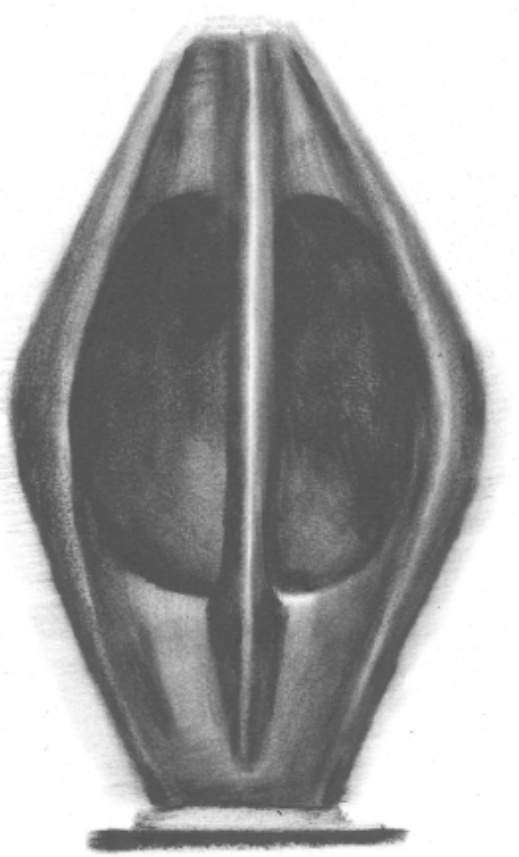
In Kher's *Ancestor*, we found the Hindu tradition of the mother goddess, which links the many female goddesses to the earth itself, where water and soil, river and mountain, become the forms of a life-giving mother.[3] In this link between land and body I thought of Henry Moore. Of course, Moore is one of the most ubiquitous of modern sculptors. The Henry Moore Foundation even has an interactive world map where you can get a sense of his geographical reach: from Honolulu to Tehran, Aundh to Auckland, Moore's bronzes bestride our world with an easy confidence. I'll admit that in this ubiquity I had forgotten how to see his work, walking past his sculptures outside hospitals and inside parks without looking at them, letting them fade like painted brickwork into the background of my days. But within Moore's sculpture is a deep connection to the magic of the natural world around us.

Moore was magpie-like in his collecting of interesting organic, natural objects. After walks his pockets would be bulging with bones, pebbles, branches. He kept his collection of found objects in the studio, often working up elements into sculptures, and drawing them. Around 1966, his friends Sir Julian Huxley and his wife Juliette gave Moore an elephant skull. Moore said of this skull that, 'by bringing the [elephant] skull very close to me and drawing various details I found so many contrasts of form and shape that I could begin to see in it great deserts and rocky landscapes, big caves in the sides of hills, great pieces of architecture, columns and dungeons'.[4] Moore sketched the skull in representational drawings, before moving into the internal cavities and spaces, revelling in their textures and shadows.

A couple of years later, in 1968, Moore made a sculpture he called *Large Totem Head*, a cast of which is on display at Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, Canada. Standing at nearly two and a half metres tall, a central beam acts as the spine of the sculpture, around which two hollow forms lie like shallow eye sockets. These interior chambers dominate, drawing our eyes to the parts hidden within, and in their imaginative terrain they remind me of his sketches of the elephant skull. In fact, Moore described *Large Totem Head* as 'a huge impassive face with eyes'.[5] But to me, *Large Totem Head* also looks like a small boat or canoe placed upright, its central beam a keel, the curves

of its body perfect for balancing within water. In fact, I find out later that it is a version of a sculpture called *Head: Boat Form* which Moore made a few years earlier.[6] *Head: Boat Form* is much smaller, and, unlike *Large Totem Head*, it is placed on its side. Displayed this way it recalls a seed pod burst open to reveal womb-like cavities, or perhaps a piece of fruit cut through and discarded on a table, empty of its bounty.

In *Large Totem Head*, the shapes of the natural and the human worlds seem to glide in and out ofafocush– is it a face, a skull, a seed pod or a boat? I can't yet grasp what is there. And so I contact the Henry Moore Foundation, to find out if there is anything in the archives relating to what the word totem might have meant to Moore, and why he used it in the title of this work. There is nothing, and certainly no neat diary entry explaining his understanding of the word, and how it relates to sculpture. But I am not too despondent, because in their reply lies a fascinating clue.



Henry Moore, *Large Totem Head*, 1968, bronze



A Parrying shield of the Dinka in South Sudan, acquired by the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, in 1936, wood and animal hide (detail)

In 2023, the owner of a Dinka hand shield alerted the Henry Moore Foundation to the likeness between this object and Moore's *Large Totem Head*.[7] The Dinka are a people who live around the basin of the Nile in Southern Sudan, and there are many of their carved wooden hand shields now in the possession of Western museums. I don't know what Dinka hand shields look like, but am sure I know a museum which might have one.

On the website of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, they describe a Dinka shield in their collection as a 'parrying shield' with a 'narrow, elongated body, swollen at the centre'.[8] Both the Dinka shield and *Large Totem Head* have the same outline, narrow at either end before billowing out in the middle. There is also a photograph of the back of the shield which stuns me. What looked in Henry Moore's sculpture like a spine or a boat keel is a handle, and the concave hollows are the space needed for a hand to hold the shield. There is nothing to confirm Moore had seen a Dinka hand shield,

but we know that at the time Moore was visiting the British Museum in the 1920s, the museum was acquiring them.[9] The visual links are already strong, but it's when I see the little plaster model for *Head: Boat Form*, the antecedent for *Large Totem Head,* that I am convinced. In its smaller scale it is hand-sized, ready for someone to slip their fingers in around the handle and carry it off.

Henry Moore certainly looked beyond the British Isles for inspiration. The art historian Dawn Ades tells us that 'Moore developed a view of world sculpture in which the Western, essentially Greco-Roman, tradition took a marginal role'.[10] We can see this in one of the most important motifs of Moore's career: the reclining figure. There is a deep seam of reclining figures in art history. My first thought is of Titian's Renaissance masterpiece the *Venus of Urbino*, whose painted curves seem to flow over the canvas, just as the silk sheets slip from her bed, but perhaps you have come up with something else, just as Henry Moore did. Towards the back of his 1968 Tate exhibition catalogue there are some black and white photographs listed under 'comparative material'. Amidst the reclining figures by Michelangelo, and classical sculptures from ancient Greece and Rome, there is another figure. This is a chacmool, a sculpture of ancient Mesoamerica which historians believe first appeared in the ninth century. Academics aren't sure exactly when or where Moore first saw a chacmool, but, unlike the Dinka shields, he acknowledged his debt to pre-Columbian art when he included an image of a chacmool found at Chichén Itzá, Mexico in that Tate Gallery exhibition catalogue.[11]

The most noticeable characteristics of the chacmool are a head turned towards us at a ninety-degree angle from the body, a reclined torso supporting itself on its elbows, and an upright bend of the knees. Moore carved one of his first reclining figures in 1929, and it is instructive to compare it to a chacmool.[12] The pose of the figures is remarkably similar, with their sturdy limbs and the head facing us. Although reclining, these bodies are not supine; they are alert, strong, grounded. The primary difference is the breasts. Chacmool are thought to be male warriors, whereas Moore has mined the history of reclining female figures in art.

The chacmool seem to be grounded in their stone, emerging from a single block. Moore was drawn to the material of the chacmool, admiring what he called their 'stoniness', which 'seemed to me true and right'.[13] This indicates Moore's deep connection to the natural elements of our world. The first time he published his thoughts on sculpture, Moore said that it should have 'something of the energy and power of great mountains'.[14] Mountains are immoveable. In sculpture, Moore dismissed what he called 'frisking,

dancing figures and so on … a sculpture jumping off a pedestal is something I greatly dislike'.[15] No pirouetting ballerinas here, showcasing a sculptor's flair and facility with material, an innate understanding of the sinews of the human body folded within the bronze. Instead, the detail and strength is held not in exquisite drapery or veins carved into marbled flesh, but in the stone itself.



Toltec-Mayan chacmool sculpture from Chichén Itzá, circa 900–1000 CE, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City



Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure*, 1929, Brown Hornton stone

His 1929 *Reclining Figure*, so similar to the chacmool, was carved from brown Hornton stone, chosen by Moore from Edgehill quarry in Warwickshire.[16] It is a Jurassic limestone, formed close to, or near, the surface of the earth. In some of his works carved from this stone you can even see fossils embedded into the surface of the carving. Moore uses these inherent properties to give the suggestion of forms who have surveyed this land far longer than us, weather-worn, shaped not by a sculptor's mallet and chisel, but by the rain and winds. Brown Hornton is aqueous, its supple muddiness helping Moore create flowing and tactile lines. The undulations of the carved figure mirror organic natural shapes, hills and peaks, dales and drops; body and landscape begin to coalesce in stone.

I decide to travel to Stonehenge to follow in Moore's footsteps. It's the holidays, midday, and a mistake. I'd only ever seen Stonehenge from the busy road that edges alongside this most historic of sites and was excited to see it up close, to fall in love with the Stonehenge of Moore's experience. Of course it's chaos, and even parking is difficult. To see the stones you are first funnelled through a visitor centre and then, if you don't fancy walking, you join the queue for the shuttle bus. This is not the experience I'd envisaged,

and I can only imagine what it must have felt like for Moore to be alone in Stonehenge, prehistory shimmering in the nocturnal rays. But even though his visit didn't end in a gift shop, I still find the story of his moonlit communion with the stones romanticised. When I read it, I think of Thomas Hardy's prescient 1914 poem, 'Channel Firing'. Written just before the outbreak of the First World War, Hardy writes of skeletons being woken by the rumblings of war, of warships firing their guns in the channel so loudly that they disturb even 'starlit Stonehenge'.[17]

Could Moore's starlit Stonehenge also have been disturbed by the rumblings of war?

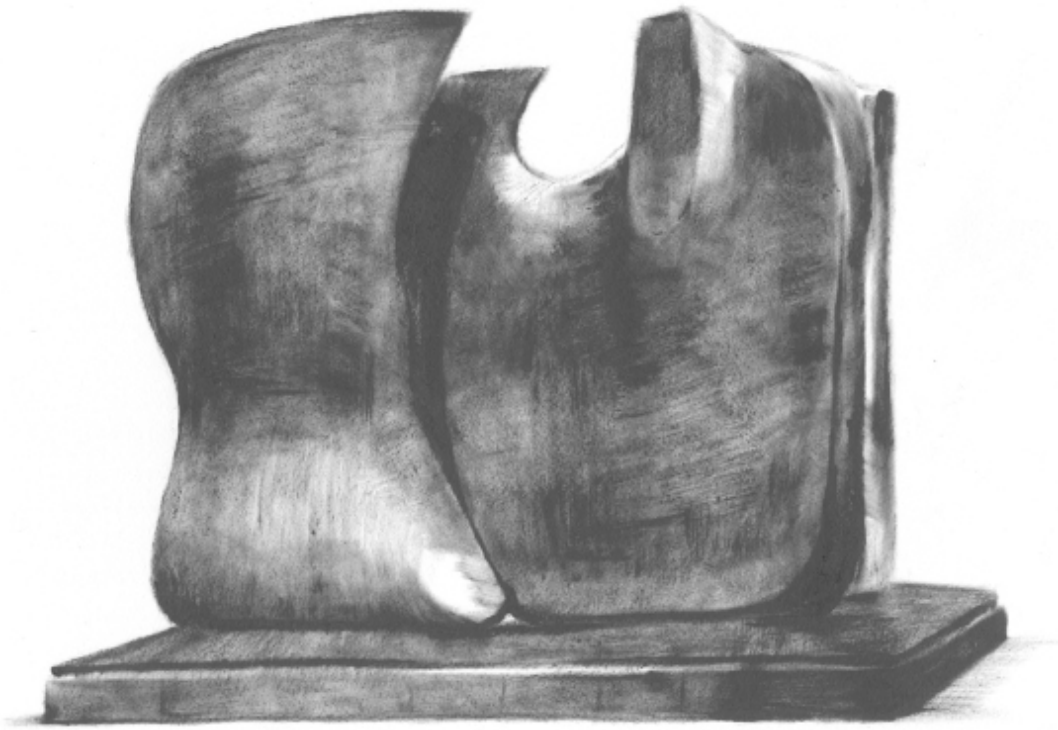
Only a few years before his visit, when he was nineteen years old, Moore had been in the Battle of Cambrai, France, which was notable for the first large-scale use of tanks in warfare. When it ended in December 1917 over eighty thousand British and German servicemen were wounded, missing or killed. Moore himself had been gassed and invalided back to England. A photograph of his convalescence shows him with a walking stick, drawn and pale. Afterwards, he returned to the front, having been redrafted as a bayonet instructor. It's hard to find direct references to his war service, but we can deduce enough from a letter he wrote to a friend in October 1939, saying that he'd been in the trenches for long enough in 'the last war … not to want it twice in a lifetime'.[18]

If Moore rarely mentioned the war, he eulogised his childhood in Yorkshire, where, growing up in Castleford, a small industrial town in Yorkshire, as the seventh of eight children born into a coal mining family, he likened 'the landscape of slag heaps to the pyramids'.[19] For Moore, Yorkshire was equal to one of the seven wonders of the world. He always referenced this landscape as his earliest inspiration, his artistic awakening prompted by his understanding of his native countryside.[20] But surely Moore's memory bank of images must also have contained his experiences in the war. The mechanisation of death, the tanks, the broken and desolate landscapes, nature decimated and destroyed, the 'rats' alley' of T.S. Eliot's wasted land, flitting through his consciousness. How to deal with this? How could an artist who had been in the trenches and smelt the rotting flesh of his compatriots, be able to present humanity as anything other than damaged, as broken? Other artists of the twentieth century ploughed into the violence, the stench of flesh emanating from canvases in screams of paint. Francis Bacon in particular met it head on, and it's a pointer to the violence in Moore's work that Bacon asked him for sculpture lessons.[21]

In fact, in 1963, Francis Bacon and Henry Moore shared an exhibition space at the Marlborough Gallery in London, both showing recent work.[22] It was here that Moore unveiled a sculpture he called *Knife Edge Two Piece*. There is now a cast of this work sitting in the gothic shadows of one of the most famous buildings in the world, London's Houses of Parliament, and so I go to see it. The sculpture is comprised of two abstract forms whose shapes, although separate, look as though they are about to lock together, like two giant doors of an ancient keep gliding shut. And it changes as you walk around it, the wide expanse of the curving forms of the front view becoming narrow and thin, a razor-sharp gap opening up between them like a violent rupture in the land mass after an earthquake. And, in a way that reminds me of those animal bones found at Göbekli Tepe that we saw at the beginning of our journey, Moore revealed that it had been the shape of a bird's breastbone that led him to 'using this knife-edge thinness'.[23]

Moore was intrigued by bones. He found them on walks, or saved them 'from the stew pot', and stuck them into plasticine to create miniature sculptures he would dot around the studio. [24] Drawn to their previous life, the fact that they had been useful, and had, as he put it 'experienced tensions', he would work up their shapes into large-scale bronzes.[25] Of course, our bones are in use right now; performing a function, carrying weight, experiencing tension. The bone held in the sculptor's hand, on his studio shelf, is a metaphor for human life. But a bird's breastbone is just one of the natural references fluttering within this sculpture. The landscape is here not only in the rock-like chasm between the two shapes, but in its surfaces. Moore is no longer carving stone for this sculpture, but he works its surface, even using a kitchen cheese grater, to elucidate that feeling of weathered, scratched stone skin. And of course the upright forms evoke standing stones, their proximity to one another and the movement of the sun and shadow around them playing with our visual vernacular. Ancient stones become part of the origin myths of a nation, whether carried by giants, thrown by titans or illuminated by druids on midsummer's eve.

But these shapes also come out of the human figure. Since his first reclining figure, so influenced by the ancient stone chacmool of Mesoamerica, Moore had begun to exaggerate the arches and hollows of the body, until he opened them up totally to leave separate forms, like a rock stack left in the sea once the top of a cliff arch has finally collapsed.



Henry Moore, *Knife Edge Two Piece*, 1962–1965, bronze



Stonehenge

A short walk away from *Knife Edge Two Piece* lies Parliament Square, where grand figures of the past stand proud, like chess pieces cast into bronze

and left to be admired. We look up to Churchill, Mandela, Lincoln, their positioning on a plinth both physical and metaphorical; these are humans to emulate. But unlike its statuary cousins up the road in Parliament Square, *Knife Edge Two Piece* isn't a memorial, or easily read as representative of a person or a cause. Instead its abstract forms curl over something deeper; sculpture becomes a signifier of nationhood, of the origin stories we tell ourselves and our connection to the natural world we inhabit.

Moore returned to Stonehenge around twenty or thirty times throughout his life, in particular when his daughter Mary was at school nearby, taking photographs and making sketches, but by 1973 he complained that it had been 'spoiled by crowds'.[26] I wonder what he would make of it now. As I walk around the upright sarsen stones and weather-worn horizontal lintels, the noonday sun lets only short shadows emerge and Moore's first moonlit visit feels a world away. Today there are even photography tips, little signs marking spots where, with a trick of perspective, you can capture yourself holding these eternal stones in the palm of your hand.

In the queue for the shuttle bus back to the car park, I think of Moore coming here as a young war veteran, the primal energy of the prehistoric washing over him. But although he managed to come here alone, he was not alone in his connection to these stones. In the years following the First World War they became a source of fascination for artists. The enigmatic structures at Stonehenge and Avebury in England, and other sites such as the standing stones of Carnac in France, captured the imagination of those seeking to connect with elemental forces. Artists, including those associated with the Surrealists (with whom Moore was linked in the 1930s), saw them as portals to the subconscious, conduits to an exploration of the human psyche with their ancient knowledge layered within landscape, forgotten by the modern world.

In the 1930s Moore had made a number of drawings of standing stones. While recognisably sculptural, they are eerie and ambiguous. In one of these drawings, *Stones in a Landscape*, we see a standing stone with a human face; a jutting forehead above eye sockets, a nose and a chin. Land and body are starting to morph together in the artist's imagination.

Moore's mind was still occupied by Stonehenge nearly fifty years after his first visit, when he made a suite of lithographs of the stones.[27] This time however it was not stones in a landscape, uncertain and ambiguous, rather he titled the suite an emphatic *Stonehenge*.

These lithographs tell us about Moore's mind when engaging with Stonehenge. We begin with the familiar shapes that are imprinted on the English sense of island nationhood, and these titles are descriptive renderings of the site: *Balancing Lintel*; *Sarsens and Lintel*; *Inside the Circle*. Here you get the sense of the sculptor's interest in the formal qualities of the stones, their shapes, the sky. But these lithographs aren't landscapes as such – the sky has no detail, it is a grey haze in the background, and some of the works have no horizon line. We have no reference point. It is all about the stones, their 'mysterious depths and differences'.[28] He conveys their volume and weightiness. Here I am reminded of Mary Moore's story about how her father's party trick was to guess the weight of her friends at childhood birthday parties.[29] Sculptors have an understanding of weight, mass and volume, of balance and the laws of physics (but perhaps not of little girls' sensitivities).

Then the lithographs metamorphose into deeper mysteries, into the supernatural and the poetic. Titles become *Fallen Giant, Head of Giant* and *Cyclops*, conjuring the legend that a supernatural race of giants carried the stones from Ireland to Salisbury Plain. *Moonlit Blackness* is an oxymoron of a title, but tells us so much about the fullness of Moore's interiors and holes. The blackness dances; it is full, not empty, a counterbalance to the rays of moonlight which, instead of illuminating the forms of the stones, illuminate the darkness, showing us infinity. I see the parallel with Moore's sculptures where the space between and within his shapes is as full of meaning and value as the forms he brings to life. This is what I think Moore took from Stonehenge, the understanding that solid mass and 'empty' space in relation to one another create meaning. And that the dual aspects of the descriptive and the imaginative, the formal and the metaphorical, coexist in sculpture.

As he travelled out of London on the train towards Stonehenge that afternoon in 1921, Moore would not have been captivated by a book. Instead, he was looking at the views speeding past. 'I can never read on a train – I have to look out of the window in case I miss something'.[30] Natural forms all around were a source of interest. He loved cloud formations and shifting landscapes in addition to 'tree trunks, the growth of branches from the trunk, each finding its individual airspace, the texture and variety of grasses, the shape of shells, of pebbles, etc.'[31]

When you next see a Henry Moore sculpture, think of walking along a beach and finding a particularly entrancing pebble, or a rock that you

collected as a child. Be encouraged to look again at the tree trunk, or branch tossed to the ground by the wind. Think of those objects just underneath the ground, their nominal usefulness gone, disintegrating and decaying, given new prominence and life. Remember that the objects all around us have an importance, and an interest. That the shapes and forms of nature are endless, and we are simply part of the cycle.

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18

Infinity

On a cool night in May 2022, the monied of Manhattan gathered in the glass building of Phillips auction house. It was the flagship evening sale of twentieth-century and contemporary art, where works by the biggest names and brightest stars of the art world are offered like lots on the forecourt of a car dealership, ready to be bartered and sold. Glitz and glamour abound on nights like this, alongside the gossip. Designer trainers snake through storied New York architecture on their way to the sale, and buyers around the world await calls from the art advisors feigning anonymity at the back of the room. Journalists, drawn by the smell of wealth and theatre, hope for a bidding war between famous names. This is the modern equivalent of a duel, where, instead of a sword or a gun, it is cash and chutzpah which is king.

Early in the sale, a work by the artist Yayoi Kusama comes onto the block. It is lot eleven, an oil on canvas painted in 1959. Delicate dots shimmer across the picture plane, and depending on where the light falls, their colours veer between a silvery sheen and an incandescent blue-grey, like catching sight of a spider's web in the gleam of the early morning sun. There is a fragility to the vision shown in the painting which belies the heavy atmosphere of the auction room. But this is no museum, and we don't have long to look. The auctioneer invites the bids and they begin to shoot across the room, gaining momentum as people start to drop out. Currencies are displayed on screens – yen, euros, dollars, pounds – until, eventually, the hammer comes down with a quick beat, and the lot is removed. A painting composed by a young Japanese woman, made just as she had moved to New York and which she called *Untitled (Nets)*, has just sold for ten and a half million dollars.[1]

★ ★ ★

I'm back on the Isle of Lewis, the largest of the archipelago of islands known as the Outer Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland. The isle is marked by spectacular cliffs and rocky shorelines. It is actually part of a single island with two very distinct areas: Lewis is low-lying moorland, while in Harris the terrain is mountainous. Today the wind is fierce, a reminder that there is nothing to buttress the land against the wild Atlantic gales.

Within Lewis's dramatic landscape and desolate beauty lies an ancient stone circle, one older than Henry Moore's Stonehenge, older even than the Giza pyramids. Walking through the gift shop in Stonehenge, amidst the keyrings and mugs, the Stonehenge mead and biscuit box selections busking for attention, I had wondered about that young Yorkshireman who walked through the stones alone at night, their shadow and light informing his sculpture for decades to come. How could we even come close to such an experience? And then I read about the stones at Calanais, in Lewis. For here was a stone circle that experts believe was erected around 2900 to 2600 BCE, approximately five hundred years before the circle at Stonehenge. Still standing today, it is constructed from Lewisian gneiss, that metamorphic rock we found in the gully of Meall nan Surrag. One of the oldest rocks in the world, it was created when the earth churned, crushed and covered the rocks at such a high heat that their very composition changed. Due to its remote location in the Outer Hebrides, Calanais has far fewer visitors than Stonehenge. When I visit, it is unticketed, and you are free to roam within its stones, to touch them, an opportunity denied by the fences at Stonehenge. And so I wanted to come here, to see if I could get a sense of what Moore experienced during his moonlit tryst with ancient stone.

Calanais is a short car journey from Stornoway, and soon I am walking through the stones, the glistening lines of mineral lustre visible within their surface. There are just a handful of other people, and they are quiet. Once man even crouches in the short midday shadow of one stone, eyes closed. Maybe he is just bored senseless and enjoying a catnap, but I imagine him imbibing the spirit of this place. The only conversation is that of a guide and her two guests. I listen in, hoping for some secrets, but she is telling them how to identify the face of a woman in one of the stones. How interesting that we are forever trying to make sense of material, trying to see something in the stones. Always looking for ourselves.



Calanais standing stones

The skies in Lewis are cinematic, huge expanses of grey-blue pierced with shafts of lucid light. Because of the wind, the clouds move quickly here, their shadows running along the ground. As the gusts nearly blow me over, I look over the undulating curves of land and loch. Even today it feels isolated, so how, nearly five thousand years ago, were these stones moved and erected here? The tallest stands almost five metres, and weighs around five tonnes. As I walk within the stones, I find one to sit beneath for temporary respite from the wind, and study the sky. This place is like a prehistoric planetarium, positioned here in direct relation to the movements of the celestial bodies. What is even more extraordinary is that the stones align with what are known as lunar standstills, 18.6-year cycles where the moon reaches the furthest points north or south in its orbit, making it visible in the highest or lowest points in the sky. Clive Ruggles, an expert in prehistoric archaeoastronomy, tells us that at Calanais, when the moon reaches a lunar standstill, it is 'seen to skim along the horizon, disappear behind Cnoc an Tursa [a nearby hill], and then reappear briefly at ground level within the silhouette of the stone circle'.[2]

It is through these stones at Calanais that we saw the movements of our universe; the dawns and the dusks, the rising and setting of the sun during the summer and winter solstices, the grand descent of the moon to the ground during a lunar standstill. It was all here, waiting for us to watch. The unfathomable mystery of the cosmos was, for a moment, on display within and around the standing stones of this moorland on the outer edges of Europe. We have always used the skies to try to understand who we are and our place in this world. Although we call these standing stones and others like them 'ancient', we are just a few thousand years away from the bodies that hauled them into place and gave them meaning, only a heartbeat in the billions of years the universe has been in existence.

As I walk back through the corridor of stone, which stands like a guard of honour leading to the central circle, I watch my fellow visitors take selfies next to the stones, and soon I am doing the same, hair flying in the wind. It reminds me of another place where we photograph ourselves, the infinity of the skies all around. But this time, instead of a stone circle, it is in a small room, and, across the world, we queue in our millions for our moment within the stars.

In 1957, Yayoi Kusama moved to the United States from Japan. She soon made for New York City, drawn by the bold creativity which seemed to burst off the famous pavements like the steam blowing up from beneath the streets. Paint-splattered canvases by names such as Jackson Pollock announced the city as a vibrant home for the inventive and original, and artist-run galleries breathed life into an art scene which was making waves across the world. But we should be wary of falling for the hindsight glamour of this moment. It was still just over a decade since the end of the Second World War, where conflict and loss blistered in the muggy heat of the Pacific. For a young Japanese woman who spoke little English, Kusama found that 'New York was in every way a fierce and violent place'.[3]

It was in New York that Kusama began making paintings known as her *Infinity Nets*. These are now in such famed public collections as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, but Kusama tells us that when she painted them she was frozen to the bone in her studio, with only one blanket to stave off the biting New York chill. She used an old door for a bed, and ate 'discarded fish heads from the fishmonger's rubbish along with the rotting outer leaves of cabbages tossed out by the greengrocer'.[4] These were hard years for Kusama, and a friend from this time recalls that 'she struggled in New York. She had no money. I

used to see her cry'.[5] For me it is one of the most uncomfortable aspects of the art world that a canvas she painted in 1959 would sell for over ten million dollars at auction the following century.

As I look again at her *Infinity Net* paintings, now so sought after, I see dots flicker across canvas in a swirl of movement. Perhaps dots is the wrong word. It might be better to imagine accumulations of paint in peaks which give the visual illusion of dots. These are flicked and twisted into life like the cresting waves of an ocean seen from afar. The *Infinity Net* paintings of this date are usually described as white but that belies the depth of colour contained within each brushstroke. Imagine looking at a sheet of raindrops through a window, each drop a prism of different light, and believing that one word could encompass all that you see.

What fascinates me is that these paintings emerged from a series of watercolours Kusama began in 1958 called *Pacific Ocean*. These are material meditations on what she saw from her plane window as she flew from Japan to the United States. As with the white of her paintings, and the transparency of raindrops, describing the ocean as blue demonstrates only the inadequacy of language. As we look over the surface of an ocean we might see a path of radiant turquoise chilled into darkness by a sudden wall of inky blackness. Those lightless patches in the ocean always make me shiver, imagining the stinging cold of the depths beneath. And even the word ocean might conjure something different for you; instead of colour you are perhaps thinking of waves which surge and swell into mountain ranges of surf, only to disappear once more into the breathless world below. We all know the feeling of being small in the face of nature, how we lose ourselves for just a moment as wind gusts over water, bringing with it the sounds of our past or our hopes for what is to come. Kusama used her view of the ocean from the plane to burrow into something that is universal, to ask the question that comes to us all; where do we fit within the vastness of this world?

But rather like Vincent Van Gogh, Kusama has been squirreled away into the box marked 'tortured artist', where mental illness is the prism through which we understand their work. While there is no doubt that the hallucinations Kusama has suffered from since she was a child find expression in the dizzying web of dots and spots which populate her work, I think that Kusama's interest in the natural world sometimes gets lost in the story that is told and retold in museum exhibitions across the world. It is into the incomprehensible magic of nature that Kusama also falls, entering a trance which is so readily available to us if we just stop to look at the radial symmetry of a starfish or the fractals glowing across the surface of a leaf. In

this place the boundaries of human and nature dissolve into colour and shape. We saw this with Kusama's Pumpkins, where ideas of selfhood expand and merge across the dot-filled forms. It is nature which prompts her questions. She talks of how she communed with the 'souls of violets', and 'in doing so, tumbled from the realm of reality into scintillating illusion'.[6] It is this melting of borders, of the fixed idea of the self, that we see in her infinite dots. These may appear on oversized pumpkins or rise as peaks of paint, but what they share is the impossibility of pinpointing where they begin, and where they might end.

In 1965 Kusama had a breakthrough. It was the year she exhibited her first infinity mirror room, *Phalli's Field*. Now, instead of dots elucidated in swirls of paint on a flat surface, Kusama transferred them onto hand-stitched soft sculptures, splashes of red spotting the white material. As I look over the old photographs of it, the room expands into the mirrors all around and the sculptures rise up from the ground like malevolent vegetables from a child's nightmare. But what is clear, and what we are signposted towards from the title, is that the sculptures are phallic, and Kusama has handmade a field of penises which bounce back and forth across the room. At first it is funny. Who does that? Who hand-stitches soft sculptures of penises in white material with red polka dots, like the clothing of a clown? But, just as some of us find clowns terrifying, by making and remaking these phallic sculptures, Kusama was performing an exorcism, trying to rid herself of her obsessive fear of sex.

In fact, she had been making these so-called soft sculptures, phallic and tuber-like, since the early 1960s, displaying them as densely populated groups. For Kusama, sculpture was not just one object to be placed upon a plinth. Instead it was repetition and obsession, an extension of her *Infinity Net* paintings which had, she tells us, 'continued to proliferate until they had spread beyond the canvas to cover the tables, the floor, the chairs and the walls'.[7] In the dots of her *Infinity Net* paintings, we see a nascent physicality, where the dots are flicked into life by accumulations of paint, and start to climb from the surface of the canvas. I can understand how from here, a flat canvas with dots pouring out from its edges, it was a logical move to objects covered in these dots. And by placing her sculpture in a mirrored room, Kusama is endlessly reproducing it. I can only think how prescient she was, that something birthed in the psychedelic sixties could feel so relevant today, with our ceaseless and almost dizzying appetite for more.

After a failed suicide attempt, believing that many better-known – and male – artists had copied her, Kusama returned to Japan in 1973.[8] It was not until 1991 that she would make another of her large-scale participatory mirror rooms, which she presented at the Venice Biennale. This was *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* in which the floor, ceiling and walls were painted yellow with black dots, and a mirrored cube in the centre of the room reflected and repeated the bright colours in hallucinogenic vision. Kusama was part of the work, matching it by dressing herself in a yellow dress with black dots. She had done this before, posing amidst the penises of *Phalli's Field* wearing a bright red bodysuit. What I find interesting is that Kusama does not restrict participation to herself. We are not held at arm's length, turned into passive watchers, or voyeurs. Instead we are drawn in, invited to see ourselves reflected in the work as our own bodies move in the mirrors. After Venice, she began to use light as a material in her infinity rooms, making them darker, the phosphorescent glow of bulbs more like a distant galaxy than an endless field of phallic dreams.

You may well have been in one of her infinity rooms. They are all over the world, and newspapers often report the queues of people trailing around city blocks, waiting to participate. I visit the one in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. It is called *Infinity Mirrored Room – A Wish for Human Happiness Calling from Beyond the Universe*. The museum's website told me that I would be reminded of 'the impossible, the magical, and the galactic'.[9] Not a humble claim, but as I follow the line to get in, all I can see is a very humble white box. Could it really be a portal to another world? It looks like a fortune teller's booth at a local fair, with us all queuing up to get our palms read.

I reach the entrance. There aren't many of us waiting to get in, and so I hope to be able to go in by myself.

'Sola?' the guard asks me.

'Yes.'

But then she shouts down the line, asking for other lone travellers. One by one they walk up to me, until finally we are given the nod, and we all go in together. We only get ninety seconds, just enough time to find your footing in the darkness. My rational brain dominates, trying to work out where the lights are coming from, how to get the best photograph, and then, without warning, it is over. I leave and join the back of the queue, like a child racing around to have another go on a playground slide. That happens twice more until, finally, there is no one else around. I put my phone away and go in alone. Maybe it is because I have stopped thinking about it as a

trick of light and mirror play, but the experience is different. Without a phone in my hand to take a selfie there is nothing to anchor my perception on to, and as my reflection shatters across the walls, I feel hot and dizzy. Just as those dots slipped from Kusama's canvases into the three-dimensional world, here they appear as incandescent lights emanating from a mysterious source, like the way a dark ocean seems to flicker and teem with unseen life at night. If you were here you might see them as stars in a clear sky, or the dance of insects at dusk. You may retain my initial scepticism, and resist the headlong fall into another way of seeing. But what is very clear to me is that these rooms, with their boundless views, where lights soar, glow and move around us, come from sculpture, and all its infinite possibilities.

I have long believed that sculpture is a two-way relationship between us and it. You cannot view a sculpture passively like a painting. Instead you have to walk around it, under it, over it, climb on it. We have an unconscious, bodily response to it. Does it tower over us? Can we pick it up in our hands? We feel sculpture physically, not just intellectually, and that is its joy. The heft of a stone carving, the teetering balance of a bronze ballerina, the dance of wire in space, all point to the unseen force that binds us to the earth. Sometimes sculpture plays with our perception, seeming to defy gravity, but ultimately, it is always governed by the invisible forces that shape our world.

Kusama's infinity rooms loosen such a grip on reality. We are disorientated; there is nothing upon which to hang our balance, just an endless revolving darkness punctuated by lights. Normally we use lights to guide us, the glare of a lighthouse warning sailors off treacherous rocks, or stars that we use as navigational points. But these are lights that cannot be read. At least by us. And even the doors out of these rooms are hard to find. We are enclosed, but the mirrors ape a sense of ever-increasing space around us. Here Kusama takes sculpture further than ever. Rather than simply walking around it, moving our bodies in relation to it, we are now part of it, our reflection dizzying back at us everywhere we look. We are consumed by it.

Or, perhaps, we consume it.

These infinity rooms are now a global phenomenon. Millions of us around the world have experienced them, queuing for our ninety seconds of the sublime. Kusama had serious intentions for her work, hoping it would encourage us to 'become one with eternity. Obliterate your personality. Become part of your environment. Forget yourself.'[10] But I wonder how many of us actually forget ourselves when we step into her version of infinity.

For even her well-respected London gallery suggests on its website that we use #instakusama, and as I search through social media I find countless videos giving tips on how to take the best selfie in an infinity room. I am not writing this from the smug perch of an art historian. I too take selfies in them, and when I visited the infinity room which enlivened the crowds at Tate Modern in London for a while, I chose a particular dress for the most flattering #instakusama image. What I find interesting is that we centre ourselves within these infinity rooms, latching on to the fixed idea of self which Kusama wanted us to lose. Taking photographs as our bodies multiply in the mirrors around us provides us with the confirmation that yes, even in this disorienting dizzying world, I am here. I exist.



Calanais standing stones

Perhaps it is naïve to think that the infinity rooms can remind us of the radiance of our short lives. But I believe that, beyond the hype, Kusama taps into something deep within us all: our pull to the skies above. As my mind goes back to those ancient stones at Calanais, I think of how she links her

infinity rooms to the cosmos, their boundless bright darkness to outer space, and their lit dots to accumulations of stardust.[11]

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Epilogue: The Family of Man

In his epic poem *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, the nineteenth-century British visionary William Blake introduces us to the character of Los. In the world conjured for us by Blake, there are four aspects of universal humanity – reason and law; passion and energy; the sensations of the body; and the creative, imaginative mind. In Blake's tale, we learn that if these four elements are in harmony, we are as fluid and fresh as a river running down a mountain. It is the divine order. But when they are fragmented, fighting one another, our universal humanity is lost; and we are fallen.

In *Jerusalem*, we learn what happens after that fall, when selfishness, pride and competition have caused these four parts of us to fracture and separate. For Blake, Los represents the element of human creativity, and takes the form of a blacksmith. As he labours in his smouldering forge we hear the hiss of steam rising as water meets burning metal, the acrid smoke in our lungs. It is here that the human imagination finds form once more, shaped by the heartbeat of his hammer and the breaths of his bellows. The symbolism beats across time. For Blake, sculpture is a realm of power, and redemption. It also signals our imaginative potential. Los builds a spiritual city, Golgonooza, which is woven from our dreams. Here art is what saves us, for it is our ability to create which is our connective cord to the divine. And Blake tells us that this city is ours whenever we want it, for it lives within all of us.

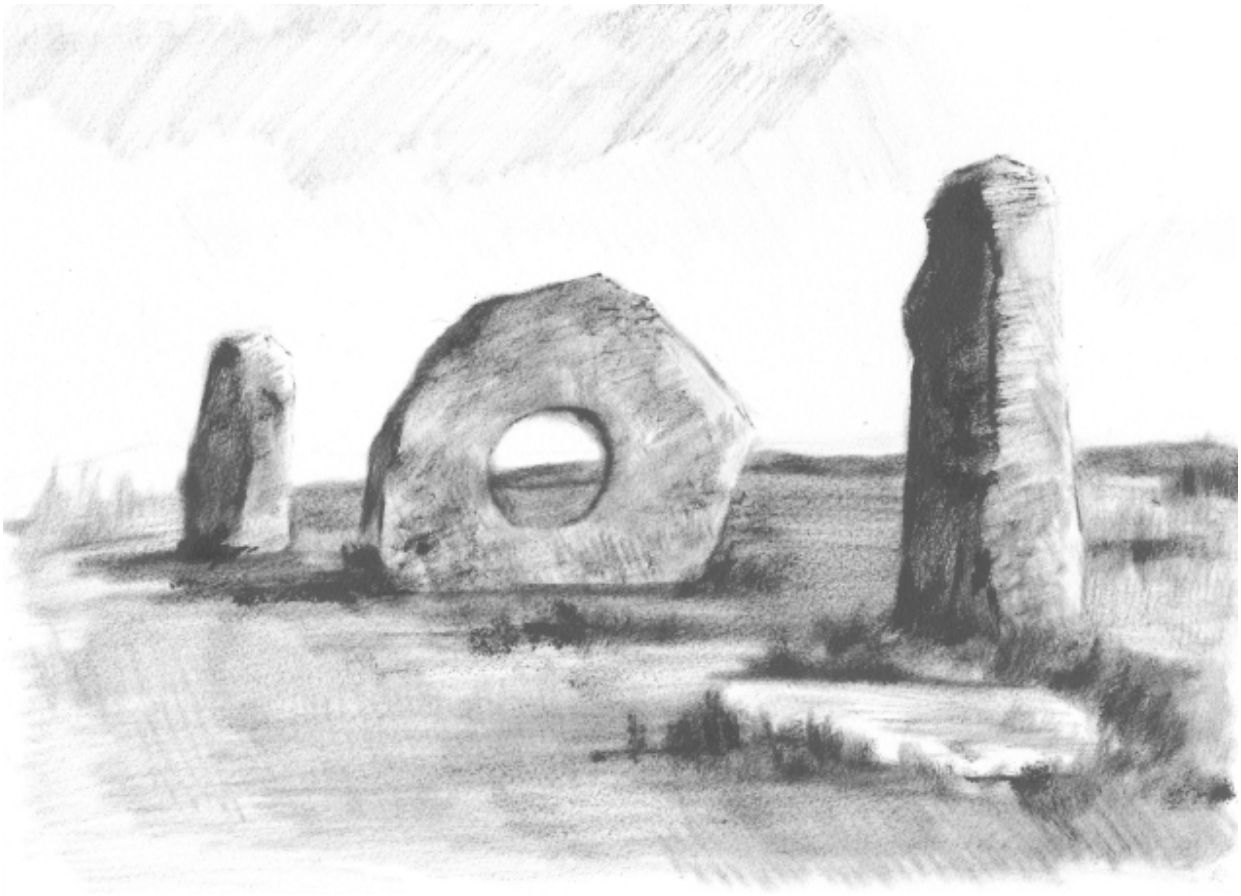
★ ★ ★

It's an unseasonably hot day in March, one of those extraordinary moments that arrives almost violently within spring's fragile beginnings. While the air is still crisp on my face, it carries with it the faint scent of the earth reawakening, the heat of the sun a reminder of summer's blowsy exuberance. Bathed in the unexpected warmth, I feel connected, part of a larger rhythm, hearing the click of a beetle and the murmuring of loose winds through leaves. I am back in St Ives, Cornwall, and walking through the gardens of

Trewyn, along the paths trodden by Barbara Hepworth. Her home and studio is now a museum, the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden, which opened in 1976, a year after the sculptor's death.

Within the garden, I see her sculptures rising from the ground like the trunks of grand trees, their curving lines echoing nature, foliage reflected in shimmering bronze. I am not alone here. There are children running around, clambering on and through her sculptures. One in particular appears to be an enticing climbing frame. This is *Four-Square (Walk Through)*, which even in its title seems to be asking us to move our bodies through bronze.

Watching the children wheel through its holes reminds me of a Bronze Age grouping of stones I'd visited earlier in the day. Known as Mên-an-Tol, it is believed to be three and a half thousand years old, and lies a few miles from Trewyn. Mên-an-Tol means 'holed stone' in Cornish, and refers to the most evocative of the stones there, a circle within a circle, which brings to mind the pierced forms of modern sculpture, and acts as a viewing device for a landscape painting full of skidding clouds and bounteous skies. As seabirds called overhead, I watched visitors weave in and around the stones. These Cornish stones are full of legends. They say that if a woman passes through the holed stone seven times – backwards – during a full moon she will get pregnant. Other stories advise that going through the hole will cure a child of rickets. There was a queue of us lining up, waiting for our chance to crawl through the hole. It was smaller than I had imagined, and the sun, which later blazes so strongly in Hepworth's garden, had not yet dried out the mud on the ground. We were strangers united in our inability to crawl through the wet sludge at the bottom of the stone, and the impossibility of elegance created a camaraderie among us all. Amidst photos of wriggling bottoms, smiles and sympathy abounded.



Mên-an-Tol standing stones

It is these bodies I think of as I watch people walk around Hepworth's sculptures, or sit in silence in their shadows. More children arrive to play peekaboo in the pockets of bronze. It is sculpture's relationship to our bodies which makes it so enthralling.

We are the protagonists in any meeting with sculpture, having our own unique experience depending on height, position, scale. Sculpture doesn't provide an easy frame of reference for us. Of course, there is no frame, nothing guiding us towards what we should look at, no neat horizon line or beautifully evoked rays of sun shimmering across painted waves. And sculpture doesn't unveil everything at once. Instead it is rather like a seduction, with surfaces, shadows and shapes hidden or hinted at, revealed or concealed, as we pass around it. Any movement – ours, a flexion of light and shadow, a dart of motion into the shared space we occupy with the sculpture – and our view shifts, altered forever.

As an ephemeral unfolding which cannot be recreated, sculpture makes us aware of a precise moment in time. I will never again experience Hepworth's

garden as it is now; the bright March sun, the cry of seagulls, the gurgling laughter of children. If you were to visit this garden, you would walk these paths and hear the call of different gulls, the light casting fluttering patterns on new leaves. Your experience would be distinct from mine. But the sculptures would be the same, standing as a silent accompaniment to the melody of your day, just as those stones of Mên-an-Tol have held the sea-salted winds for thousands of years. The poets sense this temporal duality of sculpture. In his 1819 poem 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' John Keats laments the fleeting nature of our own lives, comparing our affairs of the heart to a pair of lovers bound forever in time on the classical urn's sculpted frieze; 'When old age shall this generation waste / Thou shalt remain'.

I think back to the photograph of those Riace figures I saw on Kim Lim's studio pinboard. They were full-body bronzes dated to between 460 to 450 BCE, whose home had been the seabed off the coast of Riace in Calabria, Italy, for over two thousand years. As they were brought up to the surface in 1972 we saw our fellow man. There's something astounding about coming face to face with a human head sculpted thousands of years ago, a head that has lain undisturbed in the darkest of the sea's fathoms.

Our shared humanity glistens across time.

When the *Riace bronzes* emerged from the water, their sheer physicality was extraordinary. Tensed power and muscular prowess emanate through the figures, which are naked. Like the greatest of athletes walking to the start line of a race, there is a looseness to their stance, a lightness in the way their feet reach the ground. We sense that their pose is just a pause before the next explosive movement.

Looking at them now, we can admire the craftsmanship which, over two thousand years ago, turned molten liquid into bronze flesh. We notice the delicacy in the folds of their beards, and ribs which pulse with life. No detail was too much. Their nipples were modelled separately in bronze before being applied to the chests. But the veil of history cannot hide our imperfections. For these figures were soldiers. Although academics cannot agree on exactly who they represent, there is a consensus that they are warriors, either fighters from myths and epic stories, or idealised soldier archetypes designed to embody and inspire heroism on the battlefield. Violence and death stalk their forms. When I see our shared humanity in them, I see *all* the parts of us. Our imaginative vision which sculpts intense beauty from bronze, a material we made from the world around us, just as in

those origin stories. And our propensity for violence and aggression, our urge to honour and idealise that side of ourselves in sculpture.

For even when the Riace figures were created, sculpture had already become an active vehicle for displays of power, nationhood and legacy. We don't know how or why the figures found their way to the seabed. Perhaps they were thrown overboard during bad weather, their weight too much for a safe passage through stormy seas. Other theories suggest a shipwreck, but none has been found nearby. This part of the Ionian Sea was a favoured sea route between Greece and Italy, and the *Riace bronzes* may well have been on their way to a new home after the vanquishing of ancient Greece by the Roman Empire, taken as a souvenir of taste, as well as power.

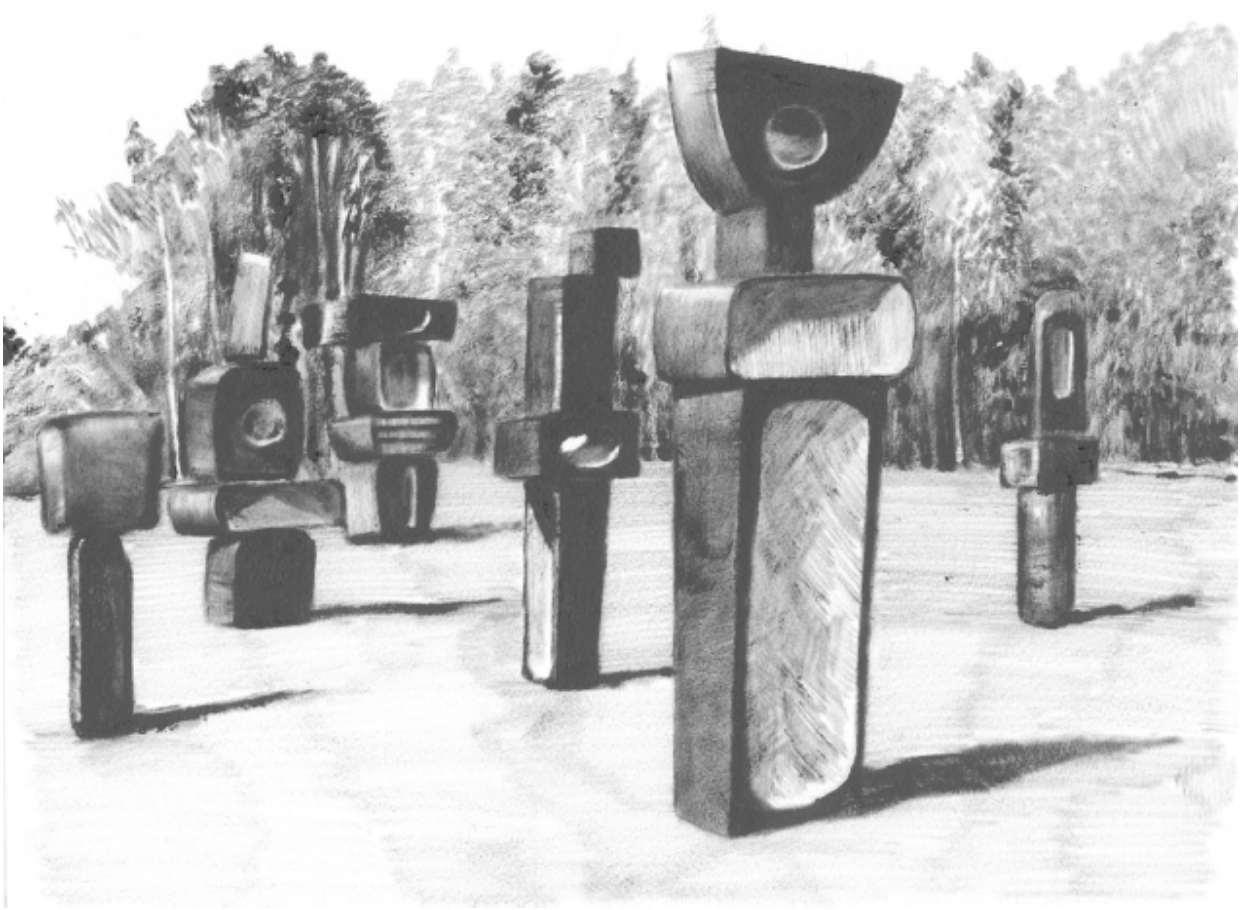
It is these darker impulses which course through the centuries of sculpture, for it is the story of human life. It reflects us back to ourselves. And therefore it cannot just be the best of us. The sacred and the beautiful finds form alongside the devastation and the destruction. I think back to the original language root of totem, meaning to 'dwell together', and I am reminded of those hunter gatherers at Göbekli Tepe we met at the beginning of this journey. Experts don't know what purpose the settlement at Göbekli Tepe served, whether it was funerary, celebratory, or spiritual, but evidence tells us it was a place of community. Surface analysis of limestone troughs shows that 'processing of fine and coarse cereal flour'[1] was performed, and the amount of wild animal bones with the cut marks of butchery found in and around the site,[2] alongside evidence of 'neolithic beer brewing',[3] suggest many people were fed and watered here. The sculptures of Göbekli Tepe have prompted discussions around the timeline of human civilisation. We have long believed that it was only once we learned to farm and live together that we were able to create more complicated social and cultural structures. But that landscape in southeastern Turkey might present a different view. The sheer communal organisation required to shape and heave these stones 'shows sociocultural changes come first, agriculture comes later' according to archaeologist Ian Hodder.[4] And a number of experts, including Klaus Schmidt, who dedicated his life to uncovering the secrets of Göbekli Tepe, have argued that 'The factor that allowed the formation of large, permanent communities was the facility to use symbolic culture, a kind of pre-literate capacity for producing and "reading" symbolic material culture, that enabled communities to formulate their shared identities, and their cosmos.'[5]

Here the importance of sculpture to human beings is being spelled out. Eleven thousand years ago we carved limestone into shapes in a gathering place, hinting at a group identity and a shared way of understanding the

world. Wherever humans have settled, we have told stories. Stories of beast and bird, man and gods, as we seek to understand the universe, and our place within it. These stories are passed down and retold, folded within the clouds as they float across the world. Although we can no longer hear those tales, given life around orange-tongued flames of ancient fires, sculpture provides some visual clues which, like the legend of a map, give us a sense of their imaginative terrain.

Whether a proud sphinx rising from desert sands, a majestic head shaped from the volcanic rock of a Pacific Island or a lichen-strewn prehistoric stone circle on the outskirts of the world, sculpture is the material expression of our collective imagination. It is the stories we tell about ourselves, the personal and the particular, the national and the official. It is a portal through which we gain a better understanding of who we are and who we want to be. It's a timeline of our strengths, our aspirations, our beliefs. It also reveals our very human flaws. Sculpture is veined with influence and prestige, made in praise of hollow heroes and resonant of our feet of clay.

Towards the end of Barbara Hepworth's life, she finally realised an idea she had been playing with for decades, a family of upright standing sculptures. This was her *Family of Man*, consisting of nine figures going from childhood to adulthood, and beyond. She gave each figure a name; *Youth, Young Girl, The Bride, The Bridegroom, Parent I, Parent II, Ancestor I, Ancestor II*. The ninth figure she called *Ultimate Form*. The Hepworth Wakefield gallery describes the figures as 'totemic'.[6] I can understand why. They stand at around nine feet tall, and are stacked with sections of different shapes and sizes, recalling the delineations of the *Star House Totem Pole*. But where that had animals scrambling up it, and a large beak emanating from the majesty of carved red cedar, *The Family of Man* is made up of abstract shapes, packed one on top of another. Here rectangles of bronze lie on their side, or balance atop squares. The youngest of the figures, *Youth* and *Young Girl*, are the simplest and the shortest, their structures without the decoration of age, like sapling trees. Some of the groupings have holed bronzes, recalling the huge eyes gazing at us from the *Star House Totem Pole* through the museum gloaming. But we can also see in them the circles of Hepworth's *Single Form* in the United Nations Plaza, and the movements of the sun and moon in our skies.



Barbara Hepworth, *The Family of Man*, 1970, bronze



Barbara Hepworth, *Ultimate Form*, from *The Family of Man*, 1970, bronze

When she was first thinking through her *Family of Man*, Hepworth imagined the figures rising from the ocean, surrounded by waves, water tracing the contours of her sculpture, accentuating every curve and surface with a liquid sheen. Later, she envisaged them on a Cornish hill, where they would be part of the timeless landscape which called so strongly to her. 'I can't go up a hill and see a cromlech [a formation of ancient stone] and not want to pat it, or pick some flowers and put them on it: it's very ancient this feeling, and very pagan'.[7] Now the only full set of nine figures from *The Family of Man* on public display is in her home county of Yorkshire in the north of England, set across the dips and dales of Yorkshire Sculpture Park. That they grow from the valleys of her birth, a landscape she called deep and true, 'the real source of man's energy', seems right.[8]

If we look at *The Family of Man* now, the traditional, and transitional, stages of human life – childhood, marriage, parenthood – are readily understood, but what of the mysterious ninth figure, the *Ultimate Form*? In an interview she gave to the *Daily Telegraph Magazine* in 1972, it is described as a totem, and she explained that it represents 'not a god but something in

ourselves'. And then, unusually for Hepworth, she was lost for words, illustrating what she meant with a 'dance-like gesture, arms extended upwards and outwards'.[9] Here we are in a place without language, sensing a spirit that is expressed in a myriad of ways, finding form in music, dance, poetry, the blossoms of spring and the loose scattering of their petals in a whispering breeze. We hear it in the distant beat of the tides, and the swell of sea over rock. It is as much a part of our lives as the growth from child to adult, and then on to ancestor.

As I think of Hepworth being asked to define her ultimate form, her totem, I consider how rooted we are to linguistic explanation. If ever we get out of our depth, transported to a place without language, we seem to clasp back on to words for safety, like clutching at a life jacket thrown to us in a heaving sea. But there are some experiences for which we have no words. It is here in Trewyn, a place of objects, not words, that I finally understand this story. Sound, sea and light converge in this garden. The chiming bells of St Ia's church tower, built from locally quarried granite, seem to dip over the horizon, towards the water, where sun and moon rise and set in their eternal duet.

In the interview Hepworth gave to *The Times* in 1968, she said that 'I find that the people who come to see me and walk around my garden are quite remarkable: they wander round patting things and looking through holes and stroking them and then they often say to me, "I don't know what this means, but I think it's terribly beautiful and it reminds me of …" and they're always right!'[10] In this generosity of thought, Hepworth is confirming what I have come to believe over the course of this journey. That sculpture is an intensely personal experience. There is no 'wrong' meaning, there is only what you sense, what memories it conjures for you. I cannot know what is held within your bones, whose voices still call to you at night. The pleasure of the sculpted object is a somatic sensing, rather than a rational knowing. Just as in Blake's *Jerusalem*, it is our ability to dream and make, not logic and reason, which draws forth our divinity.

But totem still has one surprise left. Think back to that litany of magical beasts found in Göbekli Tepe, etched by human hands into the grooves and fissures of stone older than the Giza pyramids. Remember the open mouth of the *Shigir Idol*, found in a bog in Western Siberia, its surfaces decorated with incised patterns made eleven and a half thousand years ago. Imagine running your fingers over the mammoth tusk that someone carved into the fantastical

figure of the *Lion Man*, which lived quietly in a cave in Germany for millennia. These objects are all storytellers of lives long past, thoughts, dreams and fears made manifest, which now lie latent, beyond our reach.

That the word totem was used to describe all three of these objects began this story. We know now that totem was John Long's phonetic approximation of an Ojibwe word, a word used to refer to a specific system marking social and clan identity through natural emblems (and to prevent the marriage of blood relatives). But there is one last mystery hanging in the wind. Because, from what I can find, totem is the same in all modern languages. From Albanian to Azerbaijani, Icelandic to Italian, it is totem. There is no translation. In Japanese, トーテム (Tōtemu). Even the inventive German language, home to words for such poetic feelings as Torschlusspanik (the fear of diminishing opportunities as one ages) only gives us totem. This suggests that when it arrived into the world in 1791, in the publication of Long's book, it seared into our collective imagination like the beaver on his chest. It was something for which we had no previous word.

That it was applied to those ancient sculptures, whose meaning we cannot parse, flickered something to me, like the beam of an old lighthouse at dusk. It drew us into the world of sculpture, where meaning lies beyond language, and material lives on the cusp of human consciousness. But the violent hinterland of totem, the cultures denuded and destroyed, the beliefs traduced, must not be not forgotten. We cannot lose ourselves in an imagined magic. Because just as we saw in the *Riace bronzes*, sculpture is about *all* the parts of ourselves; our desire to access a world beyond our physical realm, to realise the potential of the human spirit, co-exists alongside our darkest impulses, our ability to wreak, time and again, the most heinous of atrocities upon one another. Sculpture is silenced voices and the basest brought high. But it is also the finest of us, our attempt to visualise the intangible truth of being.

For forty thousand years, we have been carving and moulding, shaping and chiselling, feeling our way and sensing our place in the world through sculpture. Discovering, without words, what it means to breathe, to exist, to create. To dwell in this world together.

I get up to leave the walled garden of Trewyn, and the wind brings the brine of the Atlantic. A seagull cries overhead, the church bells chime once more. My time here is over. Perhaps now it is your turn. For the story of sculpture is your story, where infinity dances just ahead of you, and dreams take shape in starlit shadows.

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List of Works

I've given details below of works referenced in the text and in which public collections you may see them. Some of the bronzes have multiple casts in different places. Visit www.jobaring.com/totem for further information and links to images.

ELISABETH FRINK (B. 1930, SUFFOLK, ENGLAND; D. 1993, DORSET, ENGLAND)
Alcock and Brown Memorial (here)
1962
Bronze
Manchester Airport, England

ANONYMOUS
Löwenmensch (Lion Man) (here)
Circa 35–40,000 BCE
Mammoth ivory
Museum Ulm, Germany

Shigir Idol (here)
Circa 9500 BCE
Wood
Sverdlovsk Regional Museum, Yekaterinburg, Russia

Göbekli Tepe 'totem pole' (here)
Early PPNB (Pre-Pottery Neolithic B) culture, between circa 8800–6500 BCE
Limestone
Şanlıurfa Archaeology and Mosaic Museum, Şanlıurfa, Turkey

ALICJA KWADE (B. 1979, KATOWICE, POLAND)
l'ordre des mondes (Totem) K11 (here)
2024
Patinated bronze, lacquered bronze, Macauba, Bianco Carrara, Alaska Red, Silesian marble, Wondergrey, Vasa, Rainforest Gold, Amadeus Granite, Masi, Alaska White, Calacatta Viola, Rosa Portogallo, Branco, Verde Guatemala, German Red
Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong

ANONYMOUS
Star House Totem Pole (here)

Circa 1878
Canadian Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*)
Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, England (1901.39.1)

ANTONY GORMLEY (B.1950, LONDON, ENGLAND)
Angel of the North (here)
1998
Corten steel
Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, England

PAUL LANDOWSKI (B.1875, PARIS, FRANCE; D.1961 BOULOGNE-BILLANCOURT, FRANCE)
Christ the Redeemer (here)
1931
Reinforced concrete and soapstone
Corcovado Mountain, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

CONSTANTIN BRÂNCUŞI (B. 1876 HOBIŢA, ROMANIA; D. 1957 PARIS, FRANCE)
Endless Column Ensemble (here)
Unveiled in 1938
Cast iron
Târgu Jiu, Romania

Table of Silence (here)
Romanian limestone

Gate of the Kiss (here)
Travertine marble

Bird in Space (here)
Various versions in marble and bronze of which the earliest is the 1923 marble sculpture in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, USA (1996.403.7ab)

The Kiss (here)
1907–08
Marne stone
Craiova Art Museum, Romania

Endless Column (here)
Version 1, 1918
Oak
The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, USA (645.1983)

DAVID NASH (B. 1945, ESHER, SURREY, ENGLAND)
Through the Trunk, Up the Branch (here)
1985
Elm
Tipperary, Ireland (lost)

BARBARA HEPWORTH (B. 1903 YORKSHIRE, ENGLAND; D. 1975 ST IVES, ENGLAND)

Single Form (here)
1961–64
Bronze
United Nations Headquarters, New York City, USA

Totem (here)
1953
Wood
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, the Netherlands (KM 128.697)

Single Form (Chûn Quoit) (here)
1961
Bronze
Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, on display at Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy (2012.62)

Curved Form (Bryher) (here)
1961
Bronze

Hollow Form (Churinga III) (here)
1961
Wood

Single Form (September) (here)
1961
Walnut
Tate, Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden, St Ives, England (T03143)

Single Form (Memorial) (here)
1961–62
Bronze
Wandsworth Borough Council, on display at Battersea Park, London, England

Single Form (Sun and Moon) (here)
1966
Polished bronze

EDUARDO CHILLIDA (B. 1924 DONOSTIA-SAN SEBASTIÁN, SPAIN; D. 2002 DONOSTIA-SAN SEBASTIÁN)
The Comb of the Wind (El Peine del Viento XV) (here)
1976
Steel
La Concha Bay, Donostia-San Sebastián, Spain

Ilarik (here)
1951
Iron

The Comb of the Wind I (El Peine del Viento I) (here)
1952
Iron sheet

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain AS04703

The Comb of the Wind XVII (El Peine del Viento XVII) (here)
1990
Corten steel
Chillida Leku, Hernani, Spain

Eulogy to the Horizon IV (Elogio del Horizonte IV) (here)
1989
Concrete
Santa Catalina Hill, Gijón, Spain

ROBERT SMITHSON (B. 1938 NEW JERSEY, USA; D. TEXAS, USA, 1973)
Spiral Jetty (here)
1970
Mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water
Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah, USA

ANONYMOUS
Southern Pacific Monument (here)
1916
Concrete, masonry coating, paint
Golden Spike National Historical Park, Promontory, Box Elder County, Utah, USA

ANTONY GORMLEY
Another Place (here)
1997
Cast iron
Crosby Beach, Merseyside, England, 2005–present

JULIE BROOK (B. 1961, RAF RINTELN, GERMANY)
Firestack (here)
Jura, west coast
1991–1993
Jura Limestone, driftwood, fire
5 cycles of building/firings

Firestack (here)
Aird Bheag, Hebrides
2015–2022
Lewisian gneiss, driftwood, fire
Winter, Spring, Summer, Autumn
9 cycles of firings

The Surrag Path (here)
Meall nan Surrag, Aird Mhòr, Hebrides
2021–2023
Lewisian gneiss
83 steps, 3 path bridges

Ascending (here)
Kanagaso Quarry, Japan
2019
Rhyolitic Tuff
58 steps

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI (B. 1901, BORGONOVO, SWITZERLAND; D. 1996, CHUR, SWITZERLAND)
The Couple (here)
1926
Plaster coated with a parting compound and traces of pencil
Giacometti Institute, Paris, France

The Couple (here)
1926
Bronze
Giacometti Institute, Paris, France

Spoon Woman (Femme cuillère) (here)
1926–27
Bronze
Foundation Maeght, Saint-Paul de Vence, France

ANONYMOUS
Choiseul-Gouffier Apollo (God, or Athlete) (here)
CE 1–100, based on a Greek original circa 460 BCE
Marble
British Museum, London, England (1818,0801.1)

Farnese Hercules (here)
CE 216, Roman copy after fourth-century BCE Greek original
Marble
Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy

VERONICA RYAN, (B. 1956, MONTSERRAT)
Hackney Windrush Commission, Custard Apple (Annonaceae), Breadfruit (Moraceae) and Soursop (Annonaceae) (here)
2021
Marble and bronze
Narrow Way, Hackney, London, England

Shelves with Fragments (here)
1985–86
Plaster, pigment

GEORGE FRAMPTON (B.1860 LONDON, ENGLAND; D. 1928, LONDON, ENGLAND)
Peter Pan (here)
1912
Bronze
Kensington Gardens, London, England

YAYOI KUSAMA (B. 1929, MATSUMOTO, NAGANO, JAPAN; D. 2026)
Pumpkin (here)
2024
Bronze

LOUISE BOURGEOIS (B.1911, PARIS, FRANCE; D. 2010, NEW YORK, UNITED STATES)
Maman (here)
1999
Bronze, stainless steel, and marble
Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain

Portrait of C.Y. (here)
1947–49
Painted wood, nails and stainless steel
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

YVES KLEIN (B.1928, NICE, FRANCE; D.1962, PARIS, FRANCE)
Fire Fountain (here)
1961
Fire
Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain

FUJIKO NAKAYA (B. 1933, SAPPORO, JAPAN)
Fog Sculpture #08025 (F.O.G.) (here)
1998
Water fog generated by 1,000 fog nozzles and high-pressure pump/motor system
Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain

MICHELANGELO BUONAROTTI (B.1475 FLORENCE, ITALY; D.1564 ROME, ITALY)
Pietà (Madonna della Pietà) (here)
1498–99
Carrara Marble
Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

GIAN LORENZO BERNINI (B.1598, NAPLES, ITALY; D.1680, ROME, ITALY)
Apollo and Daphne (here)
1622–25
Carrara marble
Galleria Borghese, Italy

ANONYMOUS
Venus of Hohle Fels (here)
Circa 35–40,000 BCE
Mammoth Ivory
Urgeschichtliches Museum Blaubeuren, Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany

ANONYMOUS
Pan with a Goat and a Bird (here)

Second-century copy after Hellenistic original
White marble
Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy

WANGECHI MUTU (B. 1972, NAIROBI, KENYA)
Water Woman (here)
2017
Bronze

This second Dreamer (here)
2017
Bronze

CONSTANTIN BRÂNCUŞI
Sleeping Muse (here)
1909 (marble), 1910 (bronze)
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., USA (marble)

BAULE ARTIST, BAOULÉ
Portrait face mask from Gbagba (here)
Circa 1900
Wood
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, USA (1997.277)

WANGECHI MUTU
The NewOnes, will free Us (here)
2019

The Seated I (here)
Bronze
The Met, New York City, USA (2020.119)

The Seated II (here)
Bronze
Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, USA (2021.14)

The Seated III (here)
Bronze
The Met (2020.128)

The Seated IV (here)
Bronze
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia (2022.86)

ANONYMOUS
Caryatids of the Acropolis (here)
420–415 BCE
Marble from Penteli
Acropolis Museum, Athens; British Museum, London, England

Danh Võ (B. 1975, BA RIA, VIETNAM)
08:43, 26.05 (here)
2009
Late-nineteenth-century chandelier
MoMA, New York City, USA (394.2010)

Oma Totem (here)
2009
Philips television, Gorenje washing machine, Bomann refrigerator, casino entry pass and wooden crucifix

ANONYMOUS
Riace Bronzes (here)
Circa 460–450 BCE
Bronze
Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria, Italy

KIM LIM (B.1936 SINGAPORE, D.1997, LONDON, ENGLAND)
Wind-Stone (here)
1993
Hoptonwood Stone

KISHIO SUGA (B. 1944, MORIOKA, IWATE, JAPAN)
Infinite Situation I (window) (here)
1970
Wood, window frame, landscape

Law of Situation
1971
Stones, fibreglass, water

LOUISE NEVELSON (B. 1899, PEREIASLAV, UKRAINE; D. 1988, NEW YORK CITY, USA)
Sky Totem (here)
1956
Painted wood
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, USA (1986.6.67)

Dawn's Wedding Feast (here)
1959
Found objects and wood, painted white
Now separated, individual pieces installed in multiple locations

BHARTI KHER (B. 1969, LONDON, ENGLAND)
Ancestor (here)
2022
Bronze
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India

Artemis (here)

2019
Clay, cement, wax and brass

HENRY MOORE (B.1898 CASTLEFORD, ENGLAND; D.1986, PERRY GREEN, ENGLAND)
Elephant Skull (POR 14) (here)
1970
Standard edition of 2500 contains reproductions in black and white of etchings, CGM 114-141, deluxe edition of 150 also contains the etching CGM 147

Large Totem Head (LH577) (here)
1968
Bronze
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Canada

Head: Boat Form (LH 509) (here)
1963
Bronze
Dallas Museum of Art, USA

Reclining Figure (LH59) (here)
1929
Brown Hornton stone
Leeds Museums and Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery, England). Bought with the aid of a grant from the Board of Education and the Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund, 1941

Knife Edge Two Piece (LH 516) (here)
1962–1965
Bronze
City of Westminster, London, England

Stonehenge (POR 30) (here)
1974
Standard edition of 60 contains lithographs CGM 208 to 222 and the etching CGM 207
Deluxe edition of 40 also contains lithograph CGM 223 and two etchings CGM 202 and 203
CGM 202, 203 were printed by Atelier Lacourière et Frélaut, Paris; CGM 207 was printed by M. Basis, London; CGM 208 to 222 by J.E. Wolfensberger, Zurich; and CGM 223 by Curwen Prints Ltd, London

Stones in a Landscape (HMF 12590) (here)
1936
Charcoal, chalk, wash, pen and ink on cream medium-weight wove
The Henry Moore Foundation, acquired 2007 in memory of Professor Bernard Meadows

ANONYMOUS
Toltec-Mayan chacmool sculpture from Chichén Itzá (here)
Circa 900–1000 CE
Limestone
Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City

YAYOI KUSAMA

Untitled (Nets) (here)
1959
Oil on canvas

Infinity Mirrored Room – Phalli's Field (Floor Show) (here)
1965
Sewn stuffed fabric and mirrors

Mirror Room (Pumpkin) (here)
1991
Mirror, iron, wood, plaster, styrofoam, acrylic
Hara Museum ARC, Japan

Infinity Mirrored Room – A Wish for Human Happiness Calling from Beyond the Universe (here)
2020
Mirrors, wood, LED lighting system, metal and acrylic panel
Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain

BARBARA HEPWORTH
Four-Square (Walk Through) (here)
1966
Bronze
Tate, Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden, St Ives, England (L00937)

The Family of Man (here)
1970
Bronze
Full set on display at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, England

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Endnotes

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

1 Moseley, Elsie quoted in: Stephen Gardiner, *Frink: The Official Biography of Elisabeth Frink*. London: Harper Collins, 1998, p. 133.
Go to note reference 1

PROLOGUE:

1 Long, John quoted in Mitchell, W.J.T. 'Romanticism and the Life of Things: Fossils, Totems, and Images'. *Critical Inquiry* 28, No. 1 (2001): 167–84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344265>, accessed 20 February 2024.
Go to note reference 1

2 Stringer, Chris. Quoted in Robin McKie, 'When Homo sapiens hit upon the power of art', *Guardian*, 9 December 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/dec/09/ice-age-art-exhibition-british-museum>, accessed 20 February 2024.
Go to note reference 2

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