OWEN BULLETT
Force Field

1 November to 22 December 2012

Force Field presents a significant body of new work by Owen Bullett. The exhibition is composed of a series of related individual sculptures, each connecting both to one another and to us the visitor in a dynamic set of relationships. Force Field here is understood in relation to the gravitational pull of the mass of planets in space; indeed ‘Passing Place’ three dimensionally redraws diagrams of the gravitational potential around spherical bodies. Forms of works, forms within works, constructions and placements are welded, threaded and delicately bolted together in marriages of lightness and heaviness, mass and void, tension and equilibrium. This is achieved through Bullett’s attention to the making of sculpture. Like spinning plates in the dark, he balances formal concerns around the production of each element, alongside the premise that the crafting of each sculpture connects one to the other via the maker and his hand.

The Force Field that is the gallery itself is the starting point for this new body of work; its architecture, the interior of the gallery, visible through the window from the street, and the expectation of the viewer entering the space, pulled from the outside into orbit. The visitor’s journey through the gallery space is interrupted both visually and physically by the central armature within Force Field - ‘Impostor’ a spine of radial beams that dissect the space. From this central axis other works orbit. We, as the exhibition visitor, are also forced to orbit the works. In a form of metaphysical cosmology the tension, balance and suspension between works and within works is critical to our experience, equal to the physical presence and phenomenon of form and volume itself.

In A Quest for the Moment Sally O’Reilly writes of Phyllida Barlow’s aspiration in Peninsula, a commissioned exhibition of new work for BALTIC in 2004/5, to ensure that there is no fixed point from which a summative or totalising experience of the work can be reached, keeping us on the move and thereby in the present tense with the work;

“Imagery is generally formed once a conclusion is reached or a hiatus established, so one way to avoid any ossification of image, meaning or purpose is to stay permanently on the move, to be perpetually in the present tense, postponing indefinitely the process of post-rationalisation.”

The lifecycle of the formation of the works is also at play. Each work starts life as a preparatory maquette and through the transformative process of being worked into full scale pieces, a sense of their ‘maquettishness’ survives. Each work, a set of possibilities that stands for itself in the end.

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Just enough is an important measure. Bullett attends to every detail, with careful attention. Attention to joints, nuances of production and construction, processes of colouration, such as burning, and the application of colour accents, sheaths or skins on forms, set up another set of interplay. Rather than a purist’s ‘truth to materials’ mantra, Bullett takes his chosen materials as a starting point, allowing them to suggest their own set of possibilities. Each to their own. Compositions of possibilities are punctuated by contrasts and highlights.

Bullett is purposeful in his selection of raw materials, his working of materials and the trace and impression he leaves on the worked or treated surfaces of forms. Creating combinations such as smoked oak and hammered
and welded steel on ‘Impostor’. Surface texture and colour are given equal consideration to form, scale and spatial dynamics. Carving surfaces reveals material rhythm on the surface in relation to the physical forms themselves. The charred oak of ‘Emptiness Over Emptiness’ is chainsaw carved; the cedar of ‘Divided Self II’ is carved using an angle-grinder attachment. Carving into the cedar has revealed its history rings; the outer sapwood is cut away to reveal the circular pattern hidden within the wood. The darker colouration of the heartwood is exposed to create pattern through variation in colour, as well as pattern in the shaping of the form itself.

In the catalogue essay accompanying David Nash’s current exhibition at Kew Gardens, Michelle Payne outlines Nash’s position on nature:

“Instead of ‘nature’, he favours discussion of the environment, or elemental forces: terms that allude to the fundamental role natural forces play in humanity’s continued existence. He talks of the environment as our ‘outer skins’, a term that evokes our connection with and dependence on it. We are in and of the environment, not apart from it or its master.”

The unknowable element of our dynamic in this formulation, connects with Bullett’s interest in the Higgs Boson or the so-called ‘God particle’ and ongoing experiments with the Large Hadron Collider. Bullett draws on the full range of scales found in nature, from the atomic to the astrological; Force Field presents a series of forms that connect us to both micro and macro.

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Important to Bullett’s making of contemporary sculpture is the practice of other makers of objects, both in the contemporary context and through history. Triangles and tripods are a recurring construction throughout Force Field. There are many works and makers on which Bullett draws through the work presented in Force Field. A triangulation of useful references drawn on by Bullett connects together the seminal development of Anthony Caro’s ‘Early One Morning’ from 1962, with David Nash’s lifelong commitment to and experimentation with the organic possibilities of the shaping and sculpting of trees and wood. Phyllida Barlow’s playful and resilient insistence on the objecthood of sculpture above all other reference is also key to Bullett’s approach. As Keith Wilson states “It has always been the insistent object that has driven sculpture on,...” Bullett’s latest body of work uniquely fuses these references and approaches to sculpture into something wholly new.

The formation of sculpture and Bullett’s practice is also formed through his dialogue with other sculpture and other sculptors. This includes his close and ongoing dialogue with Rupert Ackroyd, exhibiting simultaneously in the gallery downstairs. Peers since studying sculpture together at the Royal College of Art, from where they both graduated in 2005. Ackroyd and Bullett have also worked collaboratively, notably on the creation of Romeo a 4.5 metre high carved sculpture commissioned by the Art House Foundation, which is to be sited at Grizedale Forest, ‘The UK’s First Forest for Sculpture’ in 2013. These two exhibitions, and their makers, are also in dialogue; another Force Field pushing, pulling and shaping the formation of the new works presented here and our experience of them.

Words © Hayley Skipper - Curator, Forestry Commission England - FOREST ART WORKS & Grizedale Sculpture

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1 O’Reilly, Sally, pg. 12, Ed.s Coles, Pippa & Fabrizi, Elisabetta Phyllida Barlow ‘Peninsula’ BALTIC, Gateshead 2004
3 Wilson, Keith, pg. 270, Ed.s Curtis, Penelope & Wilson, Keith Modern British Sculpture Royal Academy of Arts, London 2011