

## OWEN BULLETT

### *Surface Tension*

20 July to 3 September 2016

*Surface Tension* is a significant body of new work by Owen Bullett. The exhibition comprises nine small-scale works which resonate both in isolation, and as a thematic whole. The title initially occurred to Bullett in relation to the physical materials he was working in, but it may equally refer to the tension that exists between those materials, the differing properties of wood and metal, and the physical act of creation.

On a metaphysical level *Surface Tension* can be seen as an exploration of the possibilities of relationship; Artist with object, viewer with object, object with space and object with object. The abstract forms that make up *Surface Tension* resist interpretation, or the formation of narrative, and succeed elegantly on their own terms. They can be viewed both as rigorous, formal investigations of matter and space, and also as metaphorical explorations of wider human dynamics.

For Bullett, the act of creation, and the explicitness of his process is vital. The means of construction are clearly visible, this gives the work great dynamism and vitality. Many of the works possess a quality of motion, and look like they have just come to rest, or are themselves in the process of change and metamorphoses. In this way *Surface Tension* and the whole gallery, becomes a liminal space, a threshold of change and potential transformation.

The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) was deeply engaged in the study of the origins of creativity, and its role in articulating human experience. He believed that the will to create comes from the liminal space between the conscious and the unconscious mind, and that the act of creation is a way to access and express the 'shadow' or repressed elements of an artist's personality. Jung called the Shadow (the unconscious mind) 'the seat of creativity'. (1) With *Surface Tension*, Bullett is in dialogue with his own creative impulse, and the act of bringing form to that which was previously unknown or unexpressed, the natural materials which inspire his work, and his transforming, or harnessing act.

*'One should think of works of art as involving two fundamentally different ideas. The first is the idea that inventivizes the artist to act, that is, to make a particular work...The second idea in art is that elicited by the finished work. It speaks for itself. Even the artist/maker has to respond to the reality of the finished work.'* (2)

In all his practice Bullett engages with both his incentives, or unconscious motivations and the different potentials of his works beyond his studio, whether in the context of a formal gallery space, a private collection, or a domestic setting. The material tension expressed in these new works could equally refer not only to the tension which is present between the initial idea and the finished work, but also to the relationship between the sculpture and the viewer/spectator. Bullett refers to his sculptures as 'animators of space' and 'performers creating events in particular spaces' (3) This is particularly true in the case of *Surface Tension*: The pieces often seem to embody a sense of playfulness and vivid life, with shocks of colour contrasting with the natural wood, yet they are not without ambiguity, and do not shy away from darker interpretations.

With *Jarred* the carved cedar and oak disk is both pierced and supported by the fine aluminium rod that anchors it. The work exists literally in the tension between wood and metal, the natural and the manmade, the mediated space, the forces of constraint, and those of freedom. The rod that anchors the work, also pierces it. Likewise *Veil* (tightly

constructed of 14 undulating sycamore forms, making a sinuous whole) It is pierced and suspended by three steel rods, at once suggesting mechanisms both of support and constraint, cohesion and pressure, *Peaks* explores the possibilities of constraint still further; formed of four pointed oak staves, circled at the base (bound?) by a cast aluminium ring. The sculpture gives form to notions of inter-dependence, and co-dependence, but also of the bind (both actual and metaphorical) of relationship, and the possibilities (need?) of solitude. The sculpture illustrates the twin poles of connection and separation, what connects and nurtures, also imposes limits. *Trap* a delicate, calyx-like oak form, is bound at one end by a steel ring. It is thematically similar to *Jarred*, but seems to articulate, rather than the bind of connection, instead a longing for relationship, and its existential impossibility. It speaks of the essential solitude of the human experience, bound, as we are, in our own bodies, and the fleeting, elusive nature of connection.

Themes of enmeshment, and the possibilities of connection are a constant in Bullett's work; and *Surface Tension* further explores these ideas. Bullett describes the work as concerned with 'gains and losses'. This refers both to the physical, spatial gains and losses involved in making the work, in imposing an artists will on a natural material, but may equally refer to the gains and losses inherent in human experience; the gaining of wisdom, set against the loss of innocence or naivety. The choice of a certain set of possibilities, set against the loss of others. The works in *Surface Tension* beautifully articulate this balance, and offer a unique perspective on both the creative process, and also the wider, more universal process of existence. *Waves* a series of curving, undulating forms, (elm, walnut and steel) hiding coloured surfaces is joyous, suggesting the energy and potential of relationship.

The paradox of attempting to write about art of course, is that ultimately our experience of it doesn't need words, is visceral rather than intellectual. In imposing language on it, in seeking to decode it, we are in danger of losing something vital in the process of looking; namely our own experience of the work, our interaction with it, and its ability to move us:

*Yet this seeing comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them, is not a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli ...We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice...(4)*

Bullett's practice, in common with artists Phyllida Barlow, Martin Puryear and Isamu Noguchi (whom he acknowledges as influences) is concerned with the highly personal process of interrogating both the material world and his own psychological landscape. The works that comprise *Surface Tension* are eloquent expressions of that endeavour, yet art has its own autonomy beyond its creator, and these sculptures will create meanings and resonances for the spectator beyond the gallery space.

*The poem has to stand for itself, it is what it is... (5)*

Emmett de Monterey: Psychotherapist  
2016

---

#### References:

1. Jung, C.G.: *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* P: 418. London: Fontana Press 1995
2. Craig-Martin, M: *On Being An Artist* P: 259. London: Art Books Publishing 2015
3. Artists website: [www.owenbullet.com](http://www.owenbullet.com)
4. Berger, John: *Ways of Seeing* P: 8. London: Penguin Books 1975
5. Craig-Martin, M: *On Being An Artist* P: 135. London: Art Books Publishing 2015