

the curious matter of time and space – Michael Warren at work a conversation between Michael Warren and Noel J Brady

For 35 years Michael Warren has been carving out an existence from raw material, one which has at its heart an existential quest for belonging. He is an advocate of the spiritual seeking for his art an “*existence apart from the world of everyday objects*”ⁱ. Sculpture he says “*is an expression of matter, the same matter that comprises the world and is subject to the strains of existence and the accidental*”ⁱⁱ. At the foundry where the title piece of his forthcoming retrospective, **The Unbroken Line**, is being made and at his studio home, **Letatlin**, a name inspired by the Russian Constructivist Michael, reaffirmed the tenants of his art previously published in art catalogues and publications. Outside of this he is known by his work that occupies the contingent space of buildings by various architects in Ireland, especially the work of Ronnie Tallon, STW. Michael has engaged in a form of enquiry, focused on the condition of man, of existence and the mystery of the human body and spirit. He explained that the title “**The Unbroken Line**” is in part inspired by Stanislavsky’s “**An Actor Prepares**”. “*In order to be a total being he (the actor) has to be given a past and a future. It is an unbroken line of being, about making a piece of work that heightens that sense of being, to bring about an awareness of the here and now*”, **mw**.

curiosity

He maintains a quiet and persistent respect for his teachers, Frank Morris and Oisiin Kelly and others. “*They talked about their art as a way of life. I have not really diverted from that stance. There is a continuous questioning in art. In a very strange way the accumulation of questions constitutes a form of answer*”, **mw**. This method has generated many distinct sculptural forms and expressions in a number of media, but the work is at its most elemental when it is expressed in wood. It is tempting to place the work in with minimalists like Donald Judd but it defies such simplification. Michael acknowledges a depth to Simone Weil, in particular to her work “Gravity and Grace”.

*“Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes. Instants when everything stands still, instants of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such instants that he is capable of the supernatural.”*ⁱⁱⁱ **Simone Weil**

Michael has sought to contemplate the void in his work seeking to engage the viewer in this mediation. Over the years the work stretches to defy gravity, floating on earth or stone bases aspiring, like the constructivists to spring free of the earth and like Weil, to escape “the laws of this world”. Progressively it has taken on a figurative quality reversing the trend of modernists like Rothko or Mondrian to seek the universal by moving away from the figurative to the abstract. The use of dramatic ideas and themes identify the work with a very human enquiry. He confirmed that the figurative “*might apply from the outset, though it is from the face of it entirely non-figurative*” before confirming that his study of anatomy for 4 years has informed the “*the proportions and the interrelationships of masses and voids*”. Michael’s describes his early work as a precarious balancing act. “*The way my work touches the ground is very important, the way it tilts or is cut. There is always a contrary presence. There are issues of levity as well. In the end what I am interested in is the human condition. The weight will be an analogy for the limits of living. That sense of uplift is a kind of hope.*”

mw. In many of his works one can see not merely one figure but two, as if choreographed around a centrifugal centre, attempting an escape united by the same desire to fly though imprisoned, earth bound. Current pieces still exhibit this activity even though they are amongst his most dense, massive creations. It is somewhat ironic that the piece that has given impetus to the “**Sei Persone**” installation for the retrospective is the sarcophagus like “**Fallen Caryatid**” which hides in the middle of the Workshop becoming the altarpiece for testing new experiments.

matter

"I have discovered an extraordinary revelation in doing what I am doing. It is something to do with the attention at the act of creation. As you empathise with a block of timber or a piece of stone, you become that, at that moment of heightened attention, there is a counter sense of great uplift. I think it is very mysterious. For other artists as well." **mw**. It is in the material reality of the pieces that confirms the dramatic and dynamic presence. To my mind the timber altar pieces in "**Tulach a' tSolais**" remind me of turf which has been harvested drying out in the sun distorting and twisting as it releases up its moisture. We spoke about the nature of sculpture having been once part of something else, the forest, the earth, and the quarry. Many of the pieces betray a form of quarrying, a carving of living material as if stone. The timbers are in some instances highly finished (sanded) but others are left raw and expressive of the technique of making, with evidence of marker, pencil, dog irons and chainsaws. Even the curved Steles are carved, though logic might suggest a steaming and bending process. "**Sei Persone**" inspired by Pirandello's play, "Six Characters in Search of an Author" and "**Caryatids**" suggest a greater appreciation for mass and density. Carved from Douglas Fir, Redwood, Monterey Cypress, Spanish Chestnut and Badi (Opepe - *Bilinga Nauclea diderrichii*) they exhibit the surface density, colour and texture of Corten Steel. In others like the "**Fallen Caryatid**" the internal grain and heart of the wood is allowed to weather, creating secondary images quite apart from the "precise cuts and angles". It is this interplay between the controlled and the accidental that enlivens the work.

"... It should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places, in which, if you consider them well, you may find really marvellous ideas."^{iv} **Leonardo da Vinci**

Michael is less circumspect than many artists about the way in which people engage in the work. "*During the inaugural show in Visual, I had a great big timber piece where I gave special dispensation allowing people to touch and smell the timber, I like that.*" **mw**. With the "**The Unbroken Line**" a choreographer is arranging a dance piece to engage directly with the elements. While these elements in painted steel will not exhibit the same "vulnerability" as his beloved timber pieces, it illustrates the sense of place and engagement with the world that is the key to unlocking the cloaked sense of the work.

space (place) and time

Michael's concern is that *"our attention is being scattered because of modern technology, keeping us from the here and now, in this place. I would be proud to make people attentive to matter, place and ultimately the fragility of their own being, even to a tiny minority of people."* **mw**. In preparing a piece and its place a great deal of effort is put into the platform, from which the piece gains strength. In the installation, "**Piazza**" at the RHA in 2007 the sculpture became the platform, probably the clearest invitation to the audience to contemplate place rather than thing.

"During the course of making these large sculptures such as that out in Andorra I found that there was something magnificent about the platforms themselves" **mw**. His thinking is more closely aligned to eastern sensibilities. We are too used to Western Aesthetic principles based on contrast and opposition whereas the aesthetics of grey and graduation offer hope in resolving the inherent mysteries in life. He found the following Tadao Ando quote I have used before as particularly resonant of his position about which he said *"rather than separating it is actually creating two new lives."*

"This tense relationship between inside and outside is based on the act of cutting (as with a sword), which to the Japanese is not cruel and destructive but is instead sacred; it is a ceremonial act symbolising a new disclosure. To the Japanese this act has become an end in itself. It provides a spiritual focus both in space and time." **Tadao Ando**

The contextual nature of his work echoes Greek sensibilities about landscape. Like the Tholos at Delphi his work sets a datum against which the natural world is seen, compared and brought into a new relationship. In adding an observation about Louis Barragan's used of delineated space confirmed the depth of his knowledge and understanding of Architectural Space. His philosophical roots however demand clarity in such matters especially when concepts of space and place are used too loosely.

gravity

At the heart of the matter is a concern for the centre. It is this centre that generates the Bocconi and Malevich like constructions of early years. It is the interpenetration of two or more things explicitly as in "**Lieu de Rencontre**" or implicitly in "**Sei Persone**" and "**Caryatids**" that require a centre to hold the composition. Gravity is the central theme of this desired expression. Gravity is made known to us through weight, pressure and mass. "**Sei Persone**" and "**Caryatids**" exhibit this as probably his heaviest, his most pregnant of works. Within these masses, like the Ronandini Pieta by Michelangelo, a piece he used to visit daily when in Milan, is a form trying to escape the confines of the mass, trying to escape the bounds of the earth. Michael's dream is to find a sculptural algorithm that would establish the specific gravity of a place, pulling on the history, the culture, the sense of place, the genius loci. I likened this idea to that of a singularity^{vi} where gravity unites time and space. Even if he is successful in achieving this nucleus its very placement would shift the conditions creating a new relationship. This is he sees as a worthwhile challenge another avenue for investigation. Ultimately this is a return to and "*acceptance of the moral void*", an acceptance of the responsibility of all artists, of all beings to act. He has been inspired also by the Korean Artist, Lee Ufan, who has identified existence is a dot but being is a line. Coupled with Stanislavski's preparation and Ufan's spirit the title "The Unbroken Line" christens the main piece for the retrospective. This new work is a departure of sorts, one that finds "*really marvellous ideas*" in the discarded, the forgotten or removed. This openness to the instant is what sets Michael's work apart.

“After a day of abortive attempts in the studio while locking up I noticed that there were some little off cuts on the band saw, from something that was no longer there. I had a little epiphany on the spot. I took these little 5 elements that were left over and made a composition in proportion for the area of the large room (in Visual). Using a method not unlike the I Ching, I threw the pieces up and let them fall wherever they wanted to fall. There might have been a couple of hundred throws before I got this one.” mw.

The arrangement is casual but there is a precision about the dimension, the angle, the placement and the absolute logic governing the masses. In another space, a garden or courtyard the arrangement would be different. The five pieces contain within them the ghost of the thing removed and this now becomes the coda for the piece. That which was form for one becomes the void for another. As a symbolon^{vii} they are evidence of the artist's particular relationship with space and time. The courage of the artist to open new avenues for investigation should be lauded but as Michael indicated when he paraphrased Picasso, **“inspiration exists but it must find you working”**.

“On the whole, however, modern art is not a denial but an affirmation. Like most of our scientists, the process of disintegration or analysis is not a wanton act of destruction but part of a process for the evolving of more comprehensive synthesis. And therefore modern artists have not left us merely with members of the body of art strewn about, but they have reassembled them and revived that body with their own breath of life”^{viii} Mark Rothko

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ⁱ Peter Murray Referencing Rainer Maria Rilke Light Gravity and Distance Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, Cork 2002

ⁱⁱ Michael Warren – RHA Exhibition Catalogue 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Simone Weill Gravity and Grace p.11 Gravity and grace, Volume 1952, Part 1 Routledge, 2002

^{iv} Leonardo da Vinci –from Trattato della Pittura, Vatican Library, published in The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, Oxford University press 1985

^v Tadao Ando – Introduction to Tadao Ando Buildings Projects Writings Rizzoli 1984

^{vi} A singularity is the theoretical point at the centre of a Black Hole where all matter, time and space are compressed into an indescribable mass of infinitesimal density.

^{vii} A symbolon is an ancient Greek tradition where an object is broken between friends which when reunited demonstrated their link, their friendship.

^{viii} Mark Rothko – P61, The Artist's Reality Philosophies of Art Yale University press 2004