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13th February - 15th March 2013

Catalogue essay by Claudia Tobin

ISBN 978-0-9573072-5-4

Edition of 300

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Photography: Peter White

THE PIPER GALLERY

18 Newman Street, London, W1T 1PE

Fixing Memory: Paul de Monchaux

‘Leaving a trace’ or creating a ‘landmark’. This is how Paul de Monchaux describes his aspiration for sculptural mnemonics. The sculptor asks urgent questions of art: ‘How does the form take you out of the ordinary? How does it create new and separate worlds?’¹ To wander among his graceful, enigmatic sculptures is indeed to be taken ‘out of the ordinary’ and through a mysterious and mesmerising landscape.

This exhibition is in itself a landmark. De Monchaux has been celebrated for his major public commissions but during a lifetime’s commitment to sculpture, this is his first showing in a private gallery. The works are the fruit of de Monchaux’s creative endeavours over the last 27 years, an era in which the sculptor was able to return with renewed focus to his own artistic project, following his retirement from teaching as Head of Sculpture at Camberwell. The transition is visually manifest. Smooth, distilled forms have replaced the rough-hewn, largely figurative sculptures which typified his work in the 1960s-80s.

The sculptures in this exhibition are the product of three different working environments within de Monchaux’s home. These contrasting spaces provide an analogue to a trajectory of refinement and reduction: the ‘drawing’ room is abundant in visual stimulus; the whitewashed work room gleams with intermediary projects and maquettes; the orientalist calm of the garden studio provides a contemplative atmosphere in which sculptures coexist in compelling and harmonious accord. This recalls the spatial purity and sense of inner dialogue created between the works of the sculptor Constantin Brâncuși in his Parisian studio.

De Monchaux’s work is rooted in what he defines as a conventional system of sustained, careful observation instilled

during his formal training at the Slade. He continues to regard himself as a ‘figurative’ sculptor since his work responds to ‘things’ rather than concepts and contains visual references, even if they are submerged or purified out of recognition. De Monchaux’s exploration of the liminal, shadowy territory of memory is anchored by his rigorous attention to underlying structures, developed from preliminary drawings. He invokes musical metaphors to illuminate an approach which negotiates the constructive and the improvised: the sculptor ‘plays’ around a ‘score’ for which geometric elements provide the raw material ‘like the notes on a piano’, allowing for endless variation.

The physical and metaphysical topographies of de Monchaux’s life continue to inform his practice. His formative landscapes were strikingly diverse. Born in Montreal to second-generation Australian parents, he spent an itinerant childhood living in Canada and North and South America. ‘Sculpture cities’, to employ de Monchaux’s redolent term — the self-contained symbolic worlds in which hundreds of sculptures exist in Ancient Greece and Mexico — continue to provide a touchstone for his creative project. This exhibition invites us to travel through de Monchaux’s own ‘sculpture city’. *Uxmal* testifies to the cross-fertilisation of the sculptor’s work with wide-ranging geographies and cultural references. The work alludes in name to an ancient Mayan city and creates a visual reference to The Pyramid of the Magician, a step pyramid in the sacred part of Uxmal which, according to legend, was built by magic in one night. De Monchaux’s sculpture is presented as an emphatically sealed vessel; its stepped motif creates a rhythmic motion, playing upon the external surface and invoking the mysterious internal volumes of the pyramid which invite and yet refuse entrance. *Uxmal* resonates with the gravitas of a miniature temple and is representative of the

sense of the monumental within the miniature which characterises de Monchaux's small-scale sculptures.

The phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty was preoccupied by the fascinating and ambiguous association between the invisible and visible which he described as 'The Intertwining — The Chiasm'. This elusive relationship is at the heart of de Monchaux's sculptural endeavour. He notes that 'in a strange way sculpture is invisible' and that the closed forms with which he works correspond to the human body, of which only a third is visible. It is this hidden quality that de Monchaux defines as 'the ancient ingredient in sculpture,' and which requires not simply the work of vision but also the straining of memory to make manifest.

There is a curious sense of a mute yet nascent reality hidden in the recesses of de Monchaux's sculptures. The contemplative stillness which enfolds these works bears comparison with the still lifes of the twentieth-century Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, the meditative silence of whose paintings has been described as a sign of 'an inaccessible reality that rests within itself'.² However, the taut purity of space created in and around de Monchaux's sculptures does not demand a modernist evacuation of the human, nor is it entirely inaccessible. Indeed the sphinx-like quality of the works, — accentuated by resistant surfaces and impenetrable volumes — is belied by intimations of openings and disclosure in the cleft forms and bifurcated structures which create ambiguous points of connection or fissure.

Far from being experienced as frustrating denials, these works remain intriguingly elusive. Suggestions of the human form are latent in the soft contours and undulations of *Volute II*, and

perhaps the most subtly erotic evocation is found in the tactile plenitude and swelling curves of *Ellipse*. Meanwhile, *Stony Ground* affords an unusual perspective on the complex interactions of light and shadow in interior space. Nevertheless, if art functions as a poetic disclosure of being (as Merleau-Ponty would have it), there is a sense in de Monchaux's work that the object is never exhaustively given, never completely disclosed.

De Monchaux has described his practice as 'working in the dark' with the contained energies of closed forms and the dynamics of negative space. Geometrical configurations allow him in to tap into these potent internal spaces. Reflecting upon this, the sculptor has observed:

'The essence of them is that they're hidden [...] it is very mysterious how even though you don't know it's there, it's there'.³

In an essay discussing the paintings of Paul Cézanne, the novelist D.H. Lawrence offers a conception of 'intuitive apperception' based on the artist's awareness of his subject '*all round*, not only just of the front'.⁴ He lyrically describes this as the 'feeling of knowing the other side as well, the side you don't see, the hidden side of the moon'. This sense of imaginative flexing and pursuit of an 'all-roundedness' that is both material and metaphysical provides a suggestive correlation for sculptural practice. It is particularly resonant with de Monchaux's commitment to probing the capacious possibilities of 'working in the dark'. One feels that his endeavour may be characterised, to invoke Lawrence again, as the work of the 'true imagination' which is 'for ever curving round to the other side, to the back of presented appearance'.

De Monchaux's fascination with memory has intensified in recent years but has always been a preoccupation. He describes being 'woken up' in his thirties by Marcel Proust, the French author who made 'the immense edifice of memory' the subject of his novel *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. De Monchaux's immersion in Proust's seven-volume exploration of memory has informed his own researches in sculpture. His work probes the mysteries of collective and individual memory. It is deeply concerned with affect, with stimulating the 'involuntary memory,' a term coined by Proust for memories which contain the 'essence of the past' and are triggered by sensations.

The predominance of limestone as the medium for these sculptures encourages the viewer to experience the concept of 'deep time' aesthetically. The layers of sediment and embedded fossils provide a material analogue to the archaeology of memory undertaken in de Monchaux's creative process. But if we cannot unlock the door to lost memories or the ancient city of Uxmal, there are other ways in which we can make contact with these works. De Monchaux's scrupulously wrought titles function as possible entry points and encourage free association. 'Words are there to set up a new circuit,' de Monchaux explains, 'but nevertheless the sculpture still has to do that on its own'.

Literature and poetry are a rich source of stimulation for de Monchaux, but he is sceptical about dissolving distinctions between the arts or relying on language to 'explain' sculpture. Sculpture is specifically a way of saying something *without* words, as he encapsulates: 'I believe that formal invention alone can generate emotional responses that have no names, perhaps the most enduring and powerful kind'. Yet his version of formalism moves beyond the aesthetic purism prescribed by high modernism to affirm the possibility for meaningful,

non-prescriptive relationships between sculpture and language. To this end de Monchaux prefers to invoke the term 'correspondances', developed by the French poet Charles Baudelaire in his famous poem of that name. De Monchaux's conception of correspondence is exemplified in *Freight to Groove*. This sculpture takes inspiration from the closing couplet of a poem by Emily Dickinson:

'It is enough, the freight should be
Proportioned to the groove'.⁵

The meticulously balanced figurative and syntactic weight of these lines creates a striking parallel with the formal structure of de Monchaux's sculpture. Compressing the couplet into the potent simplicity of *Freight to Groove*, de Monchaux rebalances and appropriates the proportions of the poem, with suggestive connotations for sculptural practice. It is this precarious search for equilibrium that is compellingly realised in works such as *Bridge, Arc* and *Intrados*.

De Monchaux has created a dynamic interplay between sculpture and textual material in several commemorative public works. He drew creative sustenance for *Song* — the BBC memorial to Winston Churchill — from Churchill's drafts for his wartime speeches, which were incorporated into the fabric of the sculpture. Likewise *Symmetry* (1993), the Wilfred Owen Memorial at Shrewsbury Abbey, responds to the visual shape and formal structure as well as the emotional register of Wilfred Owen's poem 'Strange Meeting'.

'Fixing memory' gestures towards the desire, shared by many artists, to create something permanent which will withstand the flux of time. If there is something inherently elegiac about

de Monchaux's desire to 'leave a trace,' it is complemented by a profoundly optimistic belief in art's ability to do so. He perceives that 'those things that had power are those that we remember,' which has a direct correlation with his practice of sculpture as mnemonic. His work attempts to 'lodge itself in the mind of the viewer,' to create a 'marker' for an intellectual and emotional event which also implies an internalisation of the work as a sensory echo. Or, more simply sensuous: a way of 'getting under someone's skin'. As with de Monchaux's public sculptures, the viewer is invited to draw power from the quiet gravity of these sculptural presences. We are inevitably compelled to return and remain circling within their orbit of generated associations and silent communions.

Claudia Tobin

¹ Conversation with Paul de Monchaux, November 2012. All further quotations from the sculptor refer to this conversation unless otherwise stated.

² Lorenz Dittmann quoted by Joseph D. Parry in *Art and Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 47.

³ Paul de Monchaux in conversation with Richard Harris, 18th May 2005.

⁴ D.H. Lawrence, 'Introduction to his Paintings,' *Selected Essays* (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 340. All references to Lawrence's essay are taken from this page in the edition.

⁵ Emily Dickinson, 'That Love is All There Is', *The Single Hound* (Boston: Little Brown, 1914), p. 118.

































PAUL DE MONCHAUX

Born in 1934 in Montreal. Lives and works in London.

EDUCATION

1955-1958 Slade School of Fine Art, London
1952-1954 Art Students League, New York

TEACHING

1965- 86 Head of Sculpture and Head of Fine Art at Camberwell School of Art, London
1960-65 Lecturer in Sculpture at Goldsmith's College, London
1958-60 Lecturer in Sculpture at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, Nigeria

AWARDS

2000 Civic Trust Award with Townshend Associates for Oozells Square, Birmingham
1990 The Northern Electric Environment Award
1980 Arts Council Major Award

PUBLIC COMMISSIONS

2012 *Girton Column*, Girton College, Cambridge
2011 *Breath*, Memorial Gardens, Norwich
2007 *Silence*, Memorial to WW2 Slave Workers, Jersey
2005 *Song*, BBC Churchill Memorial, The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds
2001 Brunswick Square, Birmingham
2000 *Enclosure*, West Park, Southampton
1998 Oozells Square, Birmingham
1993 *Symmetry*, Wilfred Owen Memorial, Shrewsbury
1991 *Basilica*, Coventry Crown Court, Coventry
1990 *Time Benches*, Gateshead Garden Festival, Tyne and Wear, and Euston Station, London
1984 *Mnemonic*, Colchester Hospital, Colchester

PRIVATE COMMISSIONS

2010 *Cairn*, Memorial to Jeff Stinson, Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire
2000 Installation of "Table" & "Column" in Scotland in new configuration
1988 "Column" for Lord & Lady Irvine, London
1986 "Table" for Lord & Lady Irvine, London

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *United Enemies*, The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds
2002,03,05,07,08,09,11,12 *Summer Exhibition*, *The Royal Academy*, London
1992 *The Furnished Landscape*, *Crafts Council Gallery*, London
1990 *Gateshead Garden Festival*, Tyne and Wear
1986,87,88,89 *Whitechapel Open*, *Whitechapel Gallery*, London
1986 *Stoke-on-Trent National Garden Festival*, Staffordshire
1983 *The Sculpture Show*, *Haywood Gallery and Serpentine Gallery*, London
1979 *Notices*, *Camden Arts Centre*, London
1961,62,65,68,74,84,88 The London Group exhibitions (elected as a member in 1961), London
1960 *John Moores*, *Walker Art Gallery*, Liverpool
1960 *18 Young Sculptors*, *Institute of Contemporary Art*, London

CURRENT PROJECTS

- 2008 to date Eight bench sculptures for Granary Square, Kings Cross Central, London (to be completed in 2014)

COLLECTIONS

- The Contemporary Art Society, London
The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds

CATALOGUE

Dimensions show height x length x depth

All works are courtesy of the artist

- p. 6 Sea Lily (1985)
Swaledale fossil limestone - unique
48 x 35.7 x 20.7 cm
- p. 7 Freight to Groove (1994)
Swaledale fossil limestone - unique
48 x 28 x 25 cm
- p. 8 Arc (1993)
Swaledale fossil limestone - unique
83 x 35 x 12 cm
- p. 9 Bridge (1990)
Purbeck spangle limestone - unique
104 x 32 x 32 cm
- p. 10 Intrados (1996)
Purbeck spangle limestone - unique
48 x 28 x 25 cm
- p. 11 Volute III (2013)
Bronze - edition of 7
62 x 35.7 x 20.7 cm
- p. 12 Ellipse (2005)
Purbeck spangle limestone - unique
52 x 32 x 22 cm
- p. 13 Equilateral (1989)
Bath limestone - unique
60 x 39 x 13 cm
- p. 14 Uxmal (2008)
Bronze - edition of 7
34.5 x 34.5 x 32.5 cm
- p. 15 Stony Ground (2008)
Corten Steel - edition of 7
36.5 x 34.5 x 34.5 cm
- p. 16 Volute II (2007)
Bronze - edition of 7
54 x 54 x 15 cm
- p. 17 Song School (2009)
Bronze - edition of 7
45.5 x 30 x 22 cm
- p. 18 Squared Column (2011)
Lime - unique
46 x 12 x 9.6 cm
- p. 19 Crossed Column (2010)
Maple - unique
46 x 14 x 9.6 cm
- p. 20 Cranked Column (2011)
Lime - unique
46 x 46 x 9.6 cm
- p. 21 Volute I (1991)
Bronze - edition of 7
42 x 20 x 9 cm

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