The Curious Matter of Time and Space: a Conversation Between Michael Warren and Noel J. Brady

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For 35 years Michael Warren has been carving out an existence from raw material, one that 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”. [1] Sculpture, he says, “is an expression of matter, the same kind of matter that is the stuff the universe is made out of.” Warren maintains a quiet and persistent curiosity about making, in my view a kind of hope.” [2]

Michael’s sculpture may be regarded as meditations on space. He seeks 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 Well, 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 his sculpture with a very human enquiry. He admits that although “the work is, on the face of it, entirely non-figurative, figuration is implied from the outset.” He adds that his study of anatomy for four years as a student has, for instance, informed the “the proportions and the interrelationships of mass and void”. Michael describes his work as a precarious balancing act: “The way my work meets the ground is very important, the way it tilts or is undercut. There is always a contrary presence. It is predominantly about weight but there are issues of levity as well. In the end what I am interested in is the paradox, weight and levity together. This I can equate with the human condition as I see it. Weight can be read as an analogy for the limits of living. That sense of uplift is a kind of hope.” [1]

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 – from their earth-bound imprisonment. 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 Personaggi” installation for the retrospective is the sarcophagus-like “Fallen Caryatids” which hides in the middle of the workshop becoming the altarpiece for testing new experiments. [1]

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 life places, in which, if you consider them well, you may find really marvellous ideas.” Leonardo da Vinci [3]

Michael is less circumspect than many artists about the way in which people engage with the work. “During the inaugural show in Visual, Carlow, I gave special dispensation to anyone wishing to touch and smell the large timber baulk of my “Fallen Caryatids”. Interaction with the material is a good thing.” [1]

With Unbroken Line, a choreographer is arranging a contemporary dance piece to engage directly with the installation’s five scattered elements. While these unit-forms in painted steel will not exhibit the same “unliverability” as his beloved timber pieces, their assembly and lay-out in the context of the exhibition illustrate the need to establish a sense of place, being in a place, and engagement with the world, hallmark preoccupations and key to unlocking the coined sense of this and other works.

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Michael is concerned that “one of the most unspoken aspects of contemporary culture is that our attention is being scattered over ever-greater areas largely because of modern technology, keeping us further and further from the here-and-now, diminishing our capacity to feel inevitability in any given place.” [4]

The contextual nature of his work echoes Greek thought about landscape. Like the Tholos at Delphi his work sets a datum against which the natural world is seen, compared, and brought into new relationship. In adding an observation


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“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.” Simone Weil [1]

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about Louis Barragan’s use of delineated space, he confirmed the depth of his knowledge and understanding of architectural space. His philosophical background does however demand high degrees of clarity and precision in such discussion especially where concepts of space and place are the concern.

**gravity**

At the heart of matter is a concern for the centre. It is this centre that generates the Boccioni and Malevich-like constructions of early years. It is the interpenetration of two or more parts explicitly, as in “Lieu de Rencontre”, or implicitly in “Sei Personaggi” and “Caryatids”, that requires 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 Personaggi” and “Caryatids” exhibit these attributes in probably the most direct and uncompromising manner to-date. Within these masses, like the Ronadini Pietà by Michelangelo that he frequently visited when in Milan, is a form trying to escape the confines of the earth. Michael’s dream is to find a monumental, magnificent. I quickly handsawed a rectangular shape of plywood cutting it in proportion to the floor area of the Link Gallery at Visual and using a method not unlike the I Ching, I threw the five tiny pieces up and let them fall wherever they wanted to fall - just so long as they fell somewhere on the rectangle. This action I repeated a couple of hundred times until I got this one. (mw)

The arrangement is chance-driven 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. What was form for one becomes the void for another. As a Symbolon they are evidence of the artist’s particular relationship with space and time. The courage of the artist to open such avenues of investigation should be lauded but as Michael indicated when he paraphrased Picasso, “inspiration exists but it must find you working”.

“…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 revivified that body with their own breath of life.” Mark Rothko. (7)

**Notes**

[6] 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 subatomic density.
[7] A Symbolon is an ancient Greek tradition where an object is broken between friends which, when reunited, demonstrated their link, their friendship.