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Joseph Hillier Sculptor

Catalogue Essay By Ann Elliot

When turning off the A1 towards Newton Aycliffe in County Durham, we shall, in some months' time, be greeted at the entry to the town by the image of a human head rendered in steel. gazing over the tree line. This latest sculpture by Joseph Hillier, *In Our Image*, at 16 metres in height, is the largest work of art in his career to date, and has been commissioned by One North East Development Agency in partnership with Commissions North. This is a daring project within the scope of ever-increasing monumentality in art commissions since Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North*, 20 metres tall and 54 metres across its wingspan, was installed in Gateshead in 1998. Other pieces followed, including Sean Henry's *Couple* 2007, which stands 12.5 metres high in Newbiggin Marina, and now in the planning is a massive sculpture for Ebbsfleet in Kent where five artists have put forward proposals. Much publicity has surrounded Mark Wallinger's concept for a white horse, to be made 33 times life-size.¹

Whilst truly epic sculpture is challenging, impressive, and attracts overt media attention, these commissions provide valuable, though relatively rare opportunities for artists, as the majority of art in public spaces is of a smaller scale, and it is in a smaller scale still that the thinking and planning behind these monumental projects is done. For some artists it is enough that their models or maquettes should be consigned to the fabricator for exact enlargement – small to monumental. For others, including Joseph Hillier, it is important to be involved in every stage of an enlargement, changing and fine-tuning the sculpture to meet the requirements of increased scale. Famously, Henry Moore would make a maquette and a working model before embarking on a monumental sculpture, the form being altered within each version to some degree, accommodating subtleties of change to accommodate the larger image.

At the time of writing, *In Our Image* is in the process of being constructed. The full-scale model, over which a three-dimensional 'drawing' in steel will be welded, stands in the workshop of Aycliffe Fabrications. Although Hillier planned the work as a maquette, he is still changing the way in which the linear network of welded steel rods describes the form – creating a web of lines across the head and shoulders, cutting some away, and moving others in order that the piece will work well in its larger manifestation. The modelling is strong, robust and formed with absolute clarity of vision, and bears the regular features of the artist himself, as do all his works. Smaller figures attached to the structure appear as workers still constructing the head – giving the impression that the sculpture is forever in progress, and that here we are entering a working town, in an area of Britain historically associated with the steel and welding industries. The sculptural tradition of using a manikin as the alter ego of the larger figure is reflected here.

Joseph Hillier depicts his own body in his figurative work, but has a different approach from other artists who use their own bodies – or those of others – from which to cast human form. Instead he films himself

moving around in a way that he wishes the figure to communicate in a sculpture. For the group of sculptures under the collective title *Being Human* 2003, he filmed himself from four viewpoints: from the front, both sides and from the back, then selected single frames from the footage; one from each position filmed, and made drawings and then his model 80% of his own height and volume. This may seem laborious work. Why not just take a cast and then reduce the form by 20 %? His reasons are twofold. He finds that the resulting figure has more life in it, as it is freely and expressively formed, and that the small percentage reduction from life-size to slightly less, gives the figures a strangely animal quality, as though they were part of the life chain that links us to the apes. This shows in the stance of the figures in compositions such as *Ill Commencement 2 a+b* 2003, *Man, Beast, Melancholia* 2003, and *An All Consuming Vision* 2003; all of which were first shown at the Carroll Gallery in New Orleans, when Hillier was there studying for his MFA in sculpture at Tulane University.

Hillier's intent that the figures should make us think and wonder about them, is only part his plan for sculpture and what it might be in the world, for in each work there is a counterpoint, an abstract object of hard line, sometimes open, occasionally solid. The figure in *Ill Commencement 2 a+b* is curious – as in most of his sculptures where figures are formed and positioned to interact with an abstract phenomenon – showing interest, caution and deliberation, like children and young animals exploring the world, the unfamiliar, for the first time. Here is a message for the viewer, an unwritten request, that we should approach a work of art with open mind, shedding all preconceptions. The figure is searching yet determined. He shows no fear as he approaches the entrance to an oval form, large enough to have been the egg from which he emerged. The oval is rendered in geometric form, using the techniques employed by the modernist architect R. Buckminster-Fuller (1895-1983), who with his students at Black Mountain College in 1948-50, created various models of his geodesic dome. Fuller's idea was that a person within a transparent geodesic dome could locate his or her correct position in the universe.² Hillier uses his oval interpretation of Buckminster-Fuller's dome structure to create this possibility for his figures.

In *Melancholia* Hillier has introduced a solid form that seems to have aroused the interest to two figures as they approach it crawling and crouching, uncertain of what they see. Apparently a faceted metallic object, it at first appears as a rocky outcrop, but it is clearly man-made. Their caution and curiosity are palpable, and might well produce similar feelings in the viewer, drawn in, but who would forever await a revelation.

The third work in this series, *An All Consuming Vision* shows the figure almost obscured by a polyhedron. Clearly the victim – possibly benefactor – of his thoughts and ideas, he is unaware of all else, encapsulated in his own universe, but with his feet on our ground. Perhaps a metaphor for the universal artist, or could this also be us, distanced from our fellow passengers by i-Pod and mobile phone.

The three sculptures that make up *Being Human* normally stand in the courtyard of One North East Development Agency's headquarters in Newcastle as part of their collection. For the summer of 2008 the company has lent the sculptures to the Durham Light Infantry Museum, Durham City Council for their Sculpture in the Park summer exhibition 26 July to 31 October.³ Their placement in front of the museum shows these elemental creatures in a new context, not quite raw in nature, although they are at one with the elements.

A further piece *Lure* 2006, larger than the pieces that make up *Being Human*, stands apart from the others, outside Durham County Hall. A figure stands in the shadows of trees, beginning to approach an egg several times his size. Again, the figure is the artist's alter ego, the geometrically formed egg being something he is trying to comprehend. The egg or oval is a universal image, symbolising birth and regeneration; and as the Hindu myth suggests, the world developed from the *Cosmic Egg*. The egg, which lay dormant before splitting in two halves, the veins of the egg becoming rivers, and fluid inside, the sea. The entrance to Hillier's egg lies almost hidden in its geometry. The sculpture gives rise to wonder and to speculation, for many a scenario could be true. While the artist lays out the possibilities for our interpretation, we have the power of decision.

The distortions of pure abstract form, which Hillier has employed in *Lure* have been carried over into the head of his commissioned work *In Our Image* for Newton Aycliffe, in a scenario where the human form is drawn through geometry, and the figures, although rendered as flat silhouettes, are in accordance with his other sculpture, 80% of his body height and in this case, convey outline rather than mass. Like all new works, this sculpture has provided Hillier with opportunities over and above the challenges he sets himself in the studio. His integrity of working within his oeuvre, while addressing the needs of his clients, is well balanced, and as in the best of partnerships – and there are many individuals coming together in a project of this kind, the technicians, commissioners and engineers to mention just a few – each listens to the others. Where there is no compromise, the work of art sings. 'I intend that my sculptures should evoke metaphor, yet invoke a gut response that comes before and after words,' says Joseph Hillier. That being the case, I hope that readers of this account will have viewed this artist's work before looking at his sculptures, and after reading, will look again.

Ann Elliott
2000

Joseph Hillier was born in Cornwall in 1974. He studied at Falmouth School of Art (1992-93); Newcastle University (1993-97); Cyprus Summer School (2000); and Tulane University, New Orleans (2000-03). On moving back to Britain, Hillier set up his studio in South London, then moved to Newcastle in 2005, where he now lives and works. He has been the recipient of many residencies and commissions, which include *Moving Matter* Hull University Logistics Institute 2007; *Beyond Number* John Hunt of Everest School, Basingstoke 2007; *Now, Then and Always* Tullamore District Hospital 2006-ongoing; *Carbon Bond* Wansbeck Council 2005-6; *Generation One* North East, Development Agency, Newcastle 2004-05; and *Clutch*, Chopwell Forest, Gateshead. 2000, made as a result of winning the Year of the Artist Award from the Arts Council.

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(Footnotes)

¹ Artists under consideration for the Ebbsfleet Commission are Daniel Buren, Richard Deacon, Christopher Le Brun, Mark Wallinger and Rachel Whiteread.

² *Your Private Sky* R. Buckminster Fuller *The Art of Design Science*, Ed Joachim Krausse and Claude Lichtenstein, Lars Müller 1999, p.216

³ The Sculpture in the Park series has been held annually at Aykley Heads, Durham, since 2002.