

## Robert Marsden

Barrett Marsden Gallery, February 16 – March 24, 2001

Robert Marsden's new works are low, severe, dense and compact: gone, at least for the time being, are the 'playful jauntiness' and 'soft and sensuous line' associated with much of his recent work. Gone too, because for these works he has chosen rusted mild steel, is the gleaming uplift of burnished brass or silver. The work is light-swallowing and sensually abstinent. Yet neither is this work from the mute school of 'true minimalism' - the forms in these pieces do attempt to relate to each other; in their attempt to relate, however, the forms seem subject to a kind of ultra-heaviness that shuns easy music. (If there is music here, it is the elegiac tolling of bells in the churchyard rather than anything obviously melodic.) The silent stasis of classic Minimalism has been submitted to a modest talking-to, but the result - in these compositions - is only half-animated: forces of reluctance and constraint are operating.

There seem to be obscure and inscrutable laws governing these works, a kind of abstract grammar that prevents this family of pieces from appearing arbitrary and gives their organisation its particular conviction. Like the slow pealing of bells, there is a strict tempo here, where everything is on the half-beat or the quarter-beat and where no element is allowed to dominate in scale or length. While nothing is declaimed with a flourish, it is declaimed with great precision and determination. Nevertheless - and perhaps this is the central law - no composition is allowed to be quite complete; every apparent attempt at the foursquare has, at some point or another, a calculated omission - a corner is found to be missing and an element is left perched and cantilevered. In a word, the work undermines itself. This lack of 'closure' has been made utterly integral to each piece, giving the work its defining quality, and, if one can talk about such things any more, a kind of truth. If, as Robert Marsden is prepared to admit, these works are 'theoretical propositions', then what is being proposed is an aesthetic, within extremely economic means, of deliberate uncertainty. This is brave: to produce objects that, without resorting to tricked-up and trendy expressions of neurotic difficulty, admit anxiety and uncertainty.

This year scientists finally believe they have found the first observed proof of that most scary symbol of the laws that order space - the Black Hole. The Black Hole is but one of the many exotic phenomena that have been deduced to square observed facts with complex laws of physics; for most artists working in the world of materials these laws obviously remain at a remove, but in Robert Marsden's new work it seems to me that we see someone prepared to reflect on the implications behind such suggestive propositions as Dark Matter, Super-Heavy Objects, Chaos Theory and the Uncertainty Principle. It is here, in the discussion of the fundamental instability of space and matter and by implication the instability of life and memory, that I find the true analogies in his work and it is from sources of instability such as this that he draws his painfully ambivalent titles. Einstein famously remarked that God does not play dice with the Universe; yet with the growing ascendance of uncertainty over landscapes previously held to be certain, do we now not feel that God has indeed been playing around with the dice, and are the ten pieces here not appropriately tentative similes for a world of such uncertainty?

Nicholas Rena, January 2001.