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PROJECTIVE PROPOSITIONS: ROBERT MARSDEN'S NEW SCULPTURES

Marsden: 'They're all propositions, in a way...' The voice trails off. Characteristic, the diffidence. But characteristic, too, the quiet insistence on the essentially philosophical purpose of the work. The sculptures are themselves anything but provisional: they have the constructive finish, the precise niceness of angle and fit, the volumetric exactitude and absolute structural coherence of high-definition engineering; their surfaces polished or richly patinated: undifferentiated reflective brilliance against matt variegation. They set solidity - they have indeed the weight they present to the eye: gravity! - against void or, to be more precise (as the work demands), volume against absence.

This opposition is intrinsic and material, not optical. It is not correlative with the visual contrast of reflective polish and matt patina. If we speak of a familiar volume - an oblong block, as in these sculptures, for example - truncated at an angle, we are describing form in space. The form comes first, it is a physical fact ('a proposition, in a way...'). The inventions of the playful eye, discoveries of illusory angles of surface and form in the fall of shadow over plane, for example, or the impression of plane where there are volumes at angle, come later, with the inescapable susceptibility to deception of optical perception. Change the fall of light, change the form perceived: these sculptures offer the eye the pleasures of both two-dimensional and three-dimensional geometry and of their interplay. And more besides.

Architectural geometry provides a language with which to describe these particular dynamics of solid and vacancy, light and shadow, for it is proper to consider Marsden's sculptures as belonging to the specifically modernist type of the sculptural *architectonic*; they take their place in a line of such objects, essentially propositional by nature, that can be traced through the work of artists as diverse in their purposes as K. Malevich, El Lissitzky and Georges Vantongerloo. The architectural writer Robin Evans has written of the collective failure of historians to recognise that the living geometry of architecture is 'projective' and of the ways in which this has greatly affected the perception of geometry's role in architecture. 'However abstract, however contemplative in spirit, however remote from practical application', Euclidean geometry is concerned with the intrinsic properties of objects; projective geometry concerns itself with visually imagined - and *imaged* - extensions of the object. The former, in Evan's terms, is 'haptic', relating to the sense of touch or imagined touch, whereas projective geometry is 'optic', it is a geometry of vision. The medium of the former is the physical plane, and its extension in the object, the medium of the latter is light, and its extension in space.

'... to find the geometry in architecture', writes Evans, we look first 'in the shape of buildings, then perhaps in the shape of the drawings of buildings.' This is the geometry, as we may say for the present purposes, to be found in these sculptures considered as engineered forms, or in the drawings as projections of those forms: it is static and objective; in Evans's terms, 'stolid and dormant'. But each piece is further informed by an active *projective* geometry, a vitally *imagined* function of the dynamic relations of the forms to the space and light around them. This function is further enlivened by the proximity of one or more other pieces, which multiplies the imaginative projections possible. 'Composition,' (by which term Evans refers to the volumes and their architectonic configuration) 'which is where the geometry of architecture is usually sought, may still for convenience be considered the crux of the matter, but it has no significance in and of itself. It obtains all its value via the several types of projective, quasi-projective, or pseudo-projective space that surrounds it, *for it is only through these that it can be made available to perception.*' (my emphasis)

If there appears to be a paradox here, it is precisely that which is enacted in Marsden's sculptures: the object, a concatenation of volumes and planes in light and space, provides the eye with the opportunity for vision to encounter light and space as such, as projections of the object. (Evans quotes Henri Poincaré: 'One would be tempted to say that metrical geometry is the study of solids, and projective geometry that of light.') As if to emphasise their conceptual generation, they are constructed within the constraints of an elegant and arbitrary economy. They deploy only two basic architectonic forms, with the further variable of surface polish or patina. It might be better, however, to describe them in terms of the simple premeditated abstract strategy that determines their apparently infinite variation: it consists in the permutation of combinations of rectangular volumes, some diagonally truncated, with two distinct types of surface. (There must be a mathematical limit to this variation.) To do this, in a way, would be to acknowledge them properly, as the beautiful propositions they are. These small sculptures may suggest greater scale without requiring it: they are monumental enough for their purpose.

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Robin Evans is quoted from the Introduction, 'Composition and Projection' of *The Projective Cast: Architecture and its Three Geometries* (MIT, Cambridge, Mass, London, England 1995).