

Robert Marsden

Stark Reality

Barrett Marsden Gallery, June 26 – July 31, 2009.

The gallery has become an environment, a place where sculptures comment on the links between sculpture and furniture and architecture. Six large forms are the core of Robert Marsden's installation entitled *Stark Reality*. They have been constructed for this space. But the group is also a proposal for a sculpture series to be realised in another material. For someone as sensitive as Marsden to the qualities of different metals this is a brave decision. Marsden wants the group to be constructed in stainless steel and Cor-Ten weathering steel. What we see here has been made, practically enough, out of laser-cut mild steel sheets bolted onto MDF panels. These are, therefore, interim objects. But what they emphatically are not are up-scaled versions of Marsden's smaller work.

Robert Marsden's table-sized sculptures are very different. They are all of a piece, if sequential, and they are conceptually, technically and materially perfect. Perfection suggests ease and suavity. But Marsden's work is invariably unsettling. High finish and sureness of construction are combined with a structural logic that the eye cannot quite take in. Marsden offers spatial information that goes back on itself. Practically every one of his small to medium sculptures suggests some heavy mathematics in the form of complex algorithms being set out in three dimensions. It would be natural to assume that a computer-modelling program played a part in the facture of these pieces – until we reflect that Marsden's *Curve* series got underway in 1984 when only a handful of artists were engaging with the digital realm. And in any case when we look more closely it becomes clear that there is no ghostly soft-ware at work behind the scenes. Rather, a Marsden sculpture is completely self-determining and sovereign while at the same time presenting us with immensely skilled artisanal work of the kind that has increasingly been stripped out of industrial labour. Tellingly he once described himself as an 'abstract light engineer'.

Marsden has made some of the most remarkable small sculptures of our time. They run in series that employ different materials (brass sheet, sawn aluminium, rusted mild steel block, bolted mild steel sheet) and different constructional techniques and they set out to solve very different visual problems. Small sculptures demand to be held or at least touched and each series offers entirely different sensuous experiences. Much of Marsden's work, therefore, comments on the denial of artisanal skill – in industry and also by artists themselves as they turn from artistic technique to a much more generalised activity – to what the art historian John Roberts has called 'social technique'. A rejection of artistic handwork was a revolutionary strategy in the early twentieth century. Now it has now become an orthodoxy and, as a result, Marsden's way of working appears unusual, challenging and, increasingly, a radical model of authorship.

But Marsden has an understandable and intermittent desire to scale up. I have only seen these new works in his studio, crammed in and awkward – very unlike the small sculptures carefully positioned throughout his austere beautiful house on the two floors above the studio. These big pieces work in pairs or as conjoined mirror forms. Pairs are usually meant to reassure, suggesting balance and symmetry. They are central to decorative art and furniture production. And pairs, sequences and suites are equally to be found in modern sculpture, and invariably produce a similar classical atmosphere of calm. But pairs also

generate tension and excitement - in that they often are not exactly alike. They echo rather than mirror each other. The effect of the Stark Reality installation is, as I write, unknowable. But as Marsden's title suggests, unease may prevail. Each construction looks like an industrial object, though we have no idea of its purpose. On closer acquaintance the group appears carefully, even painstakingly made. Like Marsden's small sculptures, therefore, they comment on productive labour. But their real purpose is to create an environment - of pairs that are not quite pairs. Marsden does not give much away but he has spoken of 'trying to convey a sense of not knowing, like looking into deeper sea'. Marsden's work operates at the extreme end of a modernist tradition and his marine image tells us how it is to be there.

Tanya Harrod, June 2009.