

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

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BARRY FLANAGAN: EARLY WORKS 1965-82; DAVID TREMLETT, TATE BRITAIN - REVIEW

Barry Flanagan is known for one thing and one thing only – the sequence of bronze sculptures in the form of hares he began in 1980. Flanagan’s hares come in many shapes and sizes, but whatever the scale they’re as light and quick as a bouncing ball. Hares leap like Nijinsky, box like Mohammad Ali, and play cricket like Ian Botham. Some strike gladiatorial poses while others perch on helmets or soar above pyramids, anvils, or bells. Their antics express joy, renewal, resurrection and endurance and they were so popular with collectors that he made scores of them. By the time he died in 2009, the hares were what he was chiefly remembered for. By then he’d long been seen as a spent force in British art and the hares dismissed as unspeakably naff. Yet in the late 1960s and ’70s Flanagan was one of the sexiest names in British art. A young conceptual artist trained at St Martins, he set out to question the very notion of what sculpture could be by discarding many of its traditional attributes including mass, volume, permanence, and stability. By the mid 1960s he’d reduced his work to two elements – material and process.

A shapeless cloth sack filled with sand; a pile of folded lengths of hessian fabric; a pyramid of sticks held precariously in place by the force of gravity; a large canvas rectangle buttressed to a wall by two large branches: when you look at works like these, you ask yourself what they are made of and what Flanagan did to make them. They have little expressive content, and no reference to anything outside themselves. In the sack filled with sand, for example, the sagging folds and crumpled shapes are not the artist’s doing, but gravity’s. What you see is all there is: a sack of sand, nothing more. In their time, these works looked transgressive and exciting. Today they look terribly dated, interesting experiments and not much more. Comparing Flanagan’s work to Giuseppe Penone’s poetic meditations on the natural world, Richard Long’s passionate response to landscape or Eva Hesse’s reflections on her own mortality, it strikes me that Flanagan has nothing to say about anything except how sculpture is defined and how it is made.

What his generation of British conceptual artists forgot is that art is, above all, a visual medium. Exhorted to “Live in Your Head”, artists such as Flanagan made work that critics and curators loved but that bored the public to death. Art as experimental as Flanagan’s often doesn’t stand the test of time.

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Just look at a little scrap of paper displayed in a vitrine in the first gallery of this show. It's a 1965 student identity document for the vocational sculpture course at St Martins and of the 15 photos and names on it I recognised only one apart from Flanagan's. The rest either didn't have careers at all or are long forgotten. That's where Flanagan's old-fashioned bronze hares come in. The fashionistas may sneer, but without them I wonder whether Tate Britain would be staging this show today. By ending the exhibition with a gallery in which the very first bronze hares are shown, the curators remind us that the subject evolved naturally from the stone carvings and assemblages of the late 1970s. More important, their position within the exhibition captures something we tend to forget: how strange they looked when they were first exhibited. At a time when figurative sculpture (let alone animal sculpture) was passé and bronze was a material associated with war memorials, they gleefully overturned the orthodoxies of avant-garde art. It took all of us time to get used to the idea that art could appeal to the eye and the heart as well as to the mind.

Which is something that Flanagan's near- contemporary, David Tremlett, has never lost sight of. His work is just as ground-breaking as Flanagan's once was – but with the difference that Tremlett was aware of how much pleasure our eyes give us. His work has always been beautiful in the direct, visceral way that the art of Matisse or Elsworth Kelly is beautiful. Though he's very popular on the Continent, in this country it can be hard to see his art. So take some time on your next visit to Tate Britain to look at the drawing he's made on the walls of the Manton Staircase. No hurry. It will be in place for the next five years. Monumental in scale, Drawing for Free Thinking consists of lines, squares and rectangles of pure colour, created by a team of assistants who rub pastel pigments directly on to the walls with the palms of their hands to build up a rich, textured surface. Inspired by the surrounding architecture, Tremlett creates a rhythmic dance of abstract shapes and colours by "rhyming" geometric blocks of khaki green, burnt umber, black and red. For example, the shape of a rectangular aperture in the middle of the largest wall is replicated more than once in white rectangles of the same shape and size framed with a border of red. Black is the "ground" (background colour) on one wall, overlaid by khaki and burnt umber. But elsewhere, black seems to hover over rectangles of yellow or red. The warm, vibrant colours bring the dead space of the stairway to life. Tremlett demarcates each architectural level with colours that define shapes, from the chartreuse he uses for the triangular area under the skylight to the long multi-coloured verticals that rise up from the ground floor like columns holding up his dizzy edifice of colours and shapes. The staircase has always overwhelmed any work of art hung there. Tremlett not only masters the space, he turns it into a work of art that is at once utterly simple and endlessly interesting to look at.