

Abstraction & Aeriality

David Annesley, Richard Smith and William Turnbull

Abstract art in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s was charged by ideas of freedom and liberation. Sculpture could be free-standing, released from the plinth, and painting free-floating, given a life beyond the frame. Art could escape the coordinates of narrative and the memorial. Flight and the experience of air travel played an important and fascinating role in these new ways of seeing and making. Artists, especially those who had backgrounds as pilots, had their vision of the world altered and radically reorientated. Flying and aerial experiences changed the ways in which they created images and envisaged viewpoints, transforming the ways they understood space, place and the moving body.

This in-focus exhibition, *Abstraction & Aeriality*, gives insight into this subject, through the work of David Annesley (b. 1936), Richard Smith (1931-2016) and William Turnbull (1922-2012). The works on display all show the intriguing ways in which these artists let the aerial inform their work, taking it to new and imaginative levels.

Turnbull's experience as a pilot in the Royal Air Force, internationally during the Second World War, expanded his understanding of point of view. His sculptural and painterly imagination was activated by the new and intense aerial views afforded from the cockpit of an aeroplane. As he recalled in 2011: 'I was up there and there was nothing else...it made you think about space as a thing, almost an object.' Turnbull found the aerial experience inspirational and it played a crucial role in his conceptualisation of the landscape in sculpture and painting in the decades to come. We find large abstract paintings that suggest landscapes and rivers as seen from above, such as *30-1964* (1964) on display here. The world looks very different at 30,000 feet and for an artist like Turnbull different ways of thinking about people and places, about lines of descent and ascent, about verticality and horizontality, came into focus, as this painting demonstrates.

Richard Smith shared Turnbull's passion for vibrant colour and, like him, he was conversant with artistic tendencies not just in Britain but also in the United States. He also shared his interest in the interconnections between sculpture and painting, creating, from 1963, shaped canvases that hung from the wall like reliefs, projecting out into the space of the viewer. These works stepped away from the traditional conventions of painting and offered up bold sculptural, object canvases. *My Garden* (1972), on display here, is an interesting example of Smith's work from this period. It relates to the garden

and bordered lawn of his Wiltshire home, as seen from above, at the same time as it is a shaped and textured canvas that bespeaks the new language of abstract painting.

David Annesley translated the experience of aerobatics as a trainee pilot in the 1950s into the curvilinear forms of his abstract sculpture the following decade. *Loquat* (1965) and *Up and Over* (2019) on display here, are good examples of how his sculpture was informed by his experience of flying. Annesley recalls: ‘Although I didn’t think about it consciously at the time, my training to be a RAF pilot, of learning how to fly and doing aerobatics led me to make the kind of sculpture I did.’ Continuing, ‘my sculpture drew upon my physical experience of aerobatics...Doing barrel rolls at RAF Hullavington was an exciting, if terrifying experience. The trainers tested you to see how much you could handle. On one occasion, I recall the trainer doing barrel rolls at such a low level that the tips of the wings were almost touching the tree tops below.’

Making a connection between sculpture *as drawing in space* and sculpture *as flying in space*, Annesley describes making sculpture through this aerial experience as follows: ‘it was like drawing out chunks of space in metal. The thinness of the metal goes back to the flying experience. It is just a pathway. It is called an airplane, but it is basically a plane, as a sculptural plane.’ Adding: ‘All my sculptures could be carried out by little planes flying around.’

Aeriality and aviation inform the idea of movement in Annesley’s sculpture, as well as the streamlined, machine aesthetic of their forms. He responded intuitively not only to the gravity-defying power of aircraft and the aerodynamic shapes, but also to the emotional, experiential and phenomenological life of flying and those peculiar and kinetic coalitions of pilot and object, of structure and surface that they can generate.

Jon Wood