



SELECTED CRITIQUES ON THE WORK OF DAVID BEGBIE

SIR LAWRENCE GOWING

"As he is a splendid sculptural draughtsman, the shape is exquisitely outlined. It has the rightness and adjustment of observation which, in their absence, we always miss in visual art

The steelmesh that makes these bodies also constitutes their imaginative clothing. It creates an iridescent fabric, with a fluttering sheen that is wantonly voluptuous, harsh yet silky, all at once. David Begbie weaves for imperial nakedness an optical garment, which is more illusory and stylish than ever."

MARY ROSE BEAUMONT

"If one envisages the human form in sculpture one perhaps first thinks of it being carved in marble, since we all wear what Henry Moore once referred to as 'Greek spectacles.' Alternatively one might reflect on Donatello's DAVID which is arguably the most beautiful sculpture ever made. Or, perhaps nearer to our own time one thinks of Rodin's powerfully modelled figures - and here we are getting closer to what David Begbie is seeking to create: an incomplete portion of the human body, a part which speaks eloquently for the whole. The foregoing examples are of the human body carved or modelled, solid either absorbing or reflecting light. Begbie has explored a further range of possibilities - his figures are transparent, made of wire mesh, modelled, painted and galvanised; the light both ripples on the surface and passes right through. The effect is of a presence which is not quite of this world. It is real but also surreal."

EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH

"His work is quite unlike anything else being done at the present moment. His figures and figure-fragments are moulded from fine wire-mesh. This material turns out to be extraordinarily sensitive: Begbie is able to shape it with his hands to produce the illusion of rippling musculature. He makes it seem as sensitive and pliable as wax. But the mesh provides a whole range of other effects as well - the sculptures become translucent - they are simultaneously there and not there. In this new series of works, Begbie has become much bolder so that the spatial interaction becomes more complex. Every time the viewer shifts position, a new set of relationships appear. The fascinating thing is that these relationships remain coherent."

JOHN RUSSELL TAYLOR

"It must not be assumed, because so much interest attaches to his material and the way he handles it, that he is merely, or primarily, a technical innovator. Since the success of his first one-man show in 1984, a number of imitators, or at least artists who have learned to define their ideas in Begbie terms, have appeared on the scene. But the more widespread the use of "his" material becomes, the clearer it becomes also that whereas for others the tail is wagging the dog, the material creating the effect for them, in Begbie the tail and the dog, the material and the vision embodied in it, are in exactly the right balance of power. Begbie came to his material because it was ideally suited to doing what he wanted his sculpture to do, physically robust enough to survive quite rough handling yet visually insubstantial enough to allow his work in it to continue and refine his, as he describes it, "constant fight against gravity". Whereas most traditional sculpture is very solid, rooted to its base, Begbie's seems to float free. To further this effect he has progressively eliminated armature as far as possible, and claims that he would like to eliminate the sculpture itself as a physical presence, reducing our perception of it to a shadow. In all this he is clearly a child of his time and has learnt from the possibilities inherent in Calder's mobiles or Tinguely's kinetic art. But he still pursues different goals. Certainly there seems to be no limits to his technique as long as there are not limits to his imagination. And of that there is no perceptible danger for a very long time to come."

MARINA VAIZEY

"David Begbie is a sculptor, draughtsman and printmaker whose materials and media are unusual but whose preoccupation - the human condition - is ancient. The first known paintings, the cave paintings of southern France, are of living creatures, animals in the main; even older however, are the first known sculptures: a very plump female in limestone, and a man in ivory, both from Central Europe. The survivors - (and characteristically sculpture has a potential for survival denied to painting) - are associated with the art of the hunters, rather than with the more settled art of the farmers appearing substantially later. The famous dictum of Pope's turns out to have been shared throughout the millennia, even if man and woman were dressed up or rather down, in the sense of being naked and observed - as a deity.

In the face of all creeds and isms, the most persistent motif - man is the measure of all things - characterises the formulation of imagery for all of human history. (Abstraction is bold, because it emphasises human absence the more powerfully in some instances to recall the human presence.) Therefore, in one sense, what is there still to say or show?

David Begbie's human and humane art does demonstrate in contemporary terms and the human figure is inexhaustible as an inspiration in itself, and as itself, and as a way of saying all kinds of things about art - and life - now. First of all there is the refinement of the material. In the case of the three dimensional figures, Begbie confounds sculptural preconceptions - particularly when related to figurative work. We are accustomed to seeing the figure carved in stone or cast in bronze, however we are also used to an enormous variety of material in the revolutionary formulations for sculpture so characteristic of this century. In a curious way, the figure itself is the last bastion. David Begbie does not, it seems to me, use the novelty of steel mesh and now copper, simply for its own sake. Rather, it is an extension and amplification of an earlier avant-garde - Julio Gonzalez, say, and his drawing in space with his welded metal sculpture. Their technical insights and expansions of possibilities were and are quarried by artists who have tended to abandon overt representation for a more oblique view of the world around us, relying more on an inner vision, a sense of constructing from within.

I do not believe that David Begbie's seemingly accurate (although they are not; artistic licence is subtly, imaginatively and interestingly at work) visual mediations on the human figure and face could in fact have been created without the liberty afforded to artists by photography and its apparent faithfulness to the observed world (although we know that fidelity to be false as well). Nor could the evolution and development of his highly individual idiom have taken place without the freedom afforded figuration by abstraction.

For the figures here - hieratic startling and monumental on paper, airy light and even playful in three dimensions - are curiously ambivalent and mysterious, even at times androgynous. There are strongly masculine bodies, and studies which are inescapably feminine, and sometimes tantalisingly close to pin-ups, to the pointed bosoms of war time girls, Vargas, and in the current London art spectrum, there is an oblique relationship to the art of Allen Jones. Indeed, Begbie's flirtation with kitsch adds another element of risk-taking to his art.

On one hand we have the monumental, the dignified, the awesome. We also see in his work the intimate, the affectionate. The use of shadowplay, the shadows cast by his figures, is an element that helps to convey liveliness, a sense of movement. There is also the nearly abstract, the refinement, especially in the works on paper, whether monoprints, Monoprint collages or drawings - into a paradigm of the figure, a pattern of outline shaded in with varying textures, and a rich sense of colour although all is black and white and the greys in between.


The artist captures too that sense of interest in the body that is characteristic of western culture. There is the awareness of health, of good bodies; a feeling that we must rescue our bodies from the ill usage caused by the activities of the modern consumer world. People pay attention to their bodies, some even spend time and effort in building their bodies, a sport some claim as art.

Effective art must be of its time, as well as containing within it some understanding of tradition and the past. David Begbie's art is exhilarating and fascinating precisely because he deals directly with a subject that could not be more ancient and traditional, but does so in ways that are only possible now. He uses traditional and invented techniques. He uses the human form, but his art mediates it into a series of works, highly individual, that communicate a recognisable, emotionally authentic and affecting interpretation that is his own.

www.davidbegbie.com email: different@davidbegbie.com Tel +44 (0) 207 232 1023

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