



Towards a Modern Art History of the Figure: Observations on Elisabeth Frink

Arie Hartog

The figurative sculpture of the twentieth century is a neglected field of art-historical research. Despite the fact that abstract and figurative approaches were shown side by side at exhibitions until well into the 1970s, the false impression has taken root in the discipline of art history that only the beginnings of modern sculpture were figurative, and that thereafter the medium consistently developed in the direction of abstraction – only to be dissipated at the end of the 1960s in a boundless expansion of conceptual art. Taking this a step further, a notion evolved that figurative art belonged outside of art history, it being a conservative art form that had supposedly failed to keep up with, or deliberately distanced itself from, its ‘times’. On the other hand, regular occurrences of figurative approaches in contemporary art since the 1950s are repeatedly held up as a counter-movement to dominant art discourses, but barely feature in the art history of the modern period. These twin approaches are deemed to be anomalies in an otherwise linear process of figurative art. Thus, the impression arises of two separate worlds, which only meet in the art world when an otherwise anonymous market develops a sudden interest in figurative treatments.

These two worlds have far more in common than is generally assumed, but the concept of the figure should be allowed to shed some ballast. There are figures and there are figures: it is constantly forgotten that in principle there are two different approaches, each with its own strand of figuration. The first can be called the ‘conservative’ strand, in which time-honoured concepts are handed down and perpetuated. The second can be called the ‘contemporary’ strand, which develops a notion of the figure in direct engagement with the art and society of its own time. Once the broad field of figurative sculpture is split into these two areas, it becomes clear that the second group – as soon as it finds relevant answers to contemporary questions – can be embraced by the modern art world as a matter of course, whereas the first really does form a detached world of its own.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the rationale for the figure in terms of content was to embody some truth about man, which was presented as an alternative to abstraction and to the relentless advancement of modern art. So a conservative figure of thought became pivotal to all reflection about figurative sculpture, whilst the figure itself also offered possibilities of coming up with new and contemporary truths about man – and all this during a period in which reflection on man had been radically altered by the terrible experiences of the first half of the century. By that analysis, art – be it abstract or figurative – is conservative if the artist uncritically dwells on the obvious. The task for art history is to discover and describe a non-conservative strand of figurative sculpture which critically questions its own conditions, or which uses apparently old means to come up with new answers.

Elisabeth Frink fits this description of a non-conservative figurative sculptor. Her early work, especially her birds with their threatening beaks, falls into line with the Surrealist-influenced English sculpture that succeeded the so-called ‘Geometry of Fear’, but she subsequently turned her back on formal ideas drawn from the circle of her teacher Bernard Meadows (1915–2005). Her late work is assertively figurative. As in the similar case of Reg Butler

CR322
In Memoriam III, 1983



(1913–1981), when Frink turns towards depicting the figure, she moves against to the general artistic trend.¹ The artist and her work defy not only the idea that modern art is moving in the direction of abstraction, but also the notion of an avant-garde based outside of society, the second dominant pattern of modern art history. Her obvious popularity and her presence in public spaces in England contradict this ideal of the avant-garde artist.

Equally, Frink's work can be classified in art-historical terms. All that is missing is a framework to which it can be related. However, there is no inverse implication that art-historical statements about her *oeuvre* are impossible. A more likely conclusion is that her work may be viewed as a window through which to appraise figurative sculpture in the future. Such a history of art should not be conceived nationally, but internationally. Frink as an English sculptor was not the only artist who opposed fashions by opting for the human figure in sculpture, but one of many European sculptors who dealt with this theme. The context of the second, 'contemporary' figurative tradition is the source of another consideration: what is distinctive about Frink is not *that* she made figures, but *how* she did so.

Frink's early work is expressionistic, not in the sense of belonging to a

particular stylistic movement but in its fundamental outlook. This work sets out to address direct emotions. Every piece bears traces of its maker, but in an expressive tradition characteristic of the twentieth century, the personal 'hand' is emphasised and becomes a signifier of emotion. In this aspect Frink differentiates herself from her English colleagues; while they model and develop an individual style, they never so directly combine the artist's personality with the form. In Frink's self-presentation and in the public perception of her work, the (female) emotion expressed in the artwork plays a central role.

Around 1950 Bernard Meadows had left behind the stringent, simplified language of forms used by Henry Moore and started to model in plaster. The emphasis on modelling is also found in other sculptors who studied at the Chelsea School of Art around 1950, such as Robert Clatworthy (*b.*1928), and indicates that the expressive possibilities of modelling had been absorbed into English academic practice. At the same time, Frink developed her method of modelling (as did Meadows) while exploring somewhat traditional motifs, particularly animals, and went on to evolve an iconography of her own in the second half of the 1950s.

Whereas Moore's smoothly sanded forms carried inherent associations of the timeless and seemed to have their precursors in the British Museum, Frink's newly embraced practice of working directly with plaster took its reference from recent sculpture emanating from Paris; from Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) or Germaine Richier (1904–1959). Methods adopted by these sculptors, who worked directly in plaster, modelling and at the same time sawing, hammering or cutting the dried forms, set them apart from the traditional academic practice of modelling in clay and transferring the result into plaster. The approach was a counterweight to the 'direct carving' ideology that dominated in England under the influence of Moore. And whereas stone sculpture was based on an idea of form that found its realisation in confrontation with the material, this new use of plaster as a material enabled a more direct response with it. Even if gravity still had to be taken into account, this technique made it possible to work without a precise plan. Frink was the sculptor who not only used this method but crucially made it visible in the working traces on her sculptures.

By means of the (by English standards) very evident surface workings, Frink freed her figures from the idealistic connotations with which they were traditionally associated. The traces she left destroyed the idea of the figure as an immutable entity and added to her sculptures wider-ranging ideas of vulnerability and transience. Another element that plays a role in her *oeuvre* from the very start is the idea of presence: it is striking that while the artist executed the majority of animal and human figures at near to life-size, the working is not so much an effort to compete with the natural model as to confront the viewer directly. 'She thought three-dimensionally, her scale of vision was big, essentially wide-angled', said her biographer, Stephen Gardiner, of her attitude to sculpture, as he explains her move away from painting.² The penchant for three-dimensionality may be common to all painters, but Gardiner's second point draws subtle attention to a notion

of presence that Frink typically brought to fruition in her works. Whereas a picture, like a window with a frame, can enclose the gaze and guide it towards a particular focus, a sculpture is confronted by a freely moving eye. From this fact, which is often perceived as a drawback of sculpture, modern artists developed the idea of the utmost coherence and clarity of spatial composition. Frink ranks among the sculptors who work figuratively yet depart from this idea of formal coherence by offering their figures to the viewer as a multifocal visual experience. Giacometti's famous dilemma, that a figure always seems to recede when encountered, could be resolved by making the figure address viewers via multiple registers at once, literally forcing its way into their field of vision.

Each period has its own image of man, claimed the preface to the *New Images of Man* exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1959. In the exhibition its curator Peter Selz developed the idea of an anti-academic image of man, which has cast off the shackles of both idealism and realism. His selection leaned towards artists who represented man's vulnerability, including sculptors like Kenneth Armitage (1916–2002), Leonard Baskin (1922–2000), Butler, César Baldaccini (1921–1998), Cosmo Campoli (1923–1997), Giacometti, Eduardo Paolozzi (1924–2005), Richier and Theodore Roszak (1907–1981).³ The majority of these sculptors were English, and although the exhibition never had the same impact in England as the presentation of sculptors at the Venice Biennale of 1952, where Herbert Read invented the concept of the 'Geometry of Fear', the international impact must have been greater.⁴ The Venice Biennale had been a chance to see English approaches in the wake of Moore; the New York show focused on international, post-idealistic figurative sculpture, which seemed to be preponderantly English. Frink was not included, but this exhibition's alternative to the traditional idealistic image of man provides the context for her works of the period.⁵

The year 1959 also saw the *Fifth Biennial of International Exhibition at Middelheim Park* in Antwerp. Alongside around 30 sculptures by Belgian and Dutch artists, it included representatives of the four most important European traditions: Germany, England, France and Italy. Reviewers seized upon the modernity of the English sculptors, particularly Armitage, Butler and Lynn Chadwick (1914–2003). Middelheim showed the great diversity of English sculpture in both form and content. The *Fifth Biennale* was one of the few international exhibitions at which Frink's works were presented. The exhibited *Warrior* (*c.*1954, FCR28) was often mentioned approvingly but not discussed in detail. Apart from the well-known English sculptors, two Italians commanded great attention: Emilio Greco (1913–1995) and Marcello Mascherini (1906–1983). These artists had further developed the spatial aspect of the idea of composition and arrived at a figure defined by spatial contrasts. The great volumes of their figures' torsos were supported by exaggeratedly thin legs, a formal principle adopted by European sculpture around 1960, thanks to the Italians' influence. At first glance Frink seems to do something similar, but a direct comparison with the Italians shows that her orientation is fundamentally different. Figures by Greco and Mascherini

are conceived as volumes proceeding from a core: the sculptors intentionally manipulate the cross sections of the volumes to expand them visually. Such an analytical approach is alien to Frink's sculpture. While the Italians and their followers interleave volumes and axes in space, and thereby manipulate the frontal views of their figures, there was no adoption of that particular concept in English sculpture at the time. In radical contrast, possibly as a reaction to the block-based 'direct-carving' ideology, an emphatically all-round, three-dimensional approach to sculpture had developed which, in Frink's case, meant that the artist worked literally from all sides. The idea of a frontal view plays no part in her sculpture. The sculpture had to assert itself as a body – and not as a picture.

In 1959 Frink is always on the sidelines. She had been too young for the Venice Biennale of 1952, and while her figures were anti-idealistic and anti-realistic, they were so much less explicit than those of older colleagues that they were not exhibited as part of *New Images of Man* in New York in 1959. And in the context of European figurative sculpture, her art seemed to emphasise the expressive touch and the motif. In direct comparisons with other sculptors, her particular strategy of sculpture as a bodily presence sunk without trace.

The extent to which Frink was preoccupied with the tradition of the figure in order to arrive at new representations of man can be seen in works around 1960 that are conscious departures: first and foremost, the falling, flying, twisted and distorted men's bodies. This preoccupation culminated in a figure of a standing male nude, *First Man* (1964, FCR137), which took the principal motif of the tradition as its departure point and was a very direct reference to Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), whom Frink greatly admired as a sculptor.

First Man was Frink's first traditional standing nude figure. Her earlier standing nudes wore helmets or wings and fitted into the broad context of Surrealist imagery. In those works Frink had developed a highly ambivalent masculine type. The group known as *Birdmen* combine the motif of leaving the ground with an ambiguous standing motif suggesting a mixture of doubt and hesitation. Particularly against the backdrop of the negative image of man that was presented in the 1959 New York show, it is clear that, first and foremost, Frink's figures are deeply ambivalent. They are neither just vulnerable nor just aggressive, but always both; and therein they express a more complex image of man than the majority of her English colleagues' war fantasies.⁶ Interpretations of Frink's work that attempt to resolve the fundamental ambivalence in these sculptures only succeed in destroying their intrinsic structural motif and multiplicity of meanings.⁷

In the title of *First Man* and in its arm motif, Frink's standing figure refers directly to Rodin's *L'Age d'Araïn* of 1875–6 (fig.3). Rodin had created the first modern ambivalent sculpture in which different content-based motifs were layered. The represented man was a warrior (in the drawn design, the left hand was holding a spear) and at the same time wounded (in some versions the right hand clutches a head wound). Via the slight stepping motif, the extended posture and the mythological allusion in the title, the



FCR137
First Man, 1964

figure also represented the awakening of humankind.⁸ Frink's *First Man* seems to represent the condition immediately after awakening. The man stands and surveys his surroundings: hesitant, curious, self-conscious, not knowing what awaits him.

For all the proximity to Rodin in terms of content, what is striking is that *First Man* is the first figure in which Frink abandoned the expressive modelling that had been her trademark until then. The surface was worked through to an enclosed, large form, and instead of tracing movements three-dimensionally on the surface the tension was hidden beneath the skin. Nevertheless, the surface was full of working traces and anything but smooth, indicating that Frink was becoming more and more sculptural in her process, and making increasing use of chisels, rasps and saws on the form built up in plaster in order to achieve her finished forms. Although a certain similarity to the aforementioned Italian sculptors is apparent – and Frink certainly would have known these works – her distinctive quality is the absence of a formal, ultra-clear organising principle, and the sheer, endless three-dimensionality of her works. There is, therefore, a further reason to connect *First Man* with Rodin, since the figure is defined by Rodin's principle of the *modélé*, from the idea of the unity of the plastic artwork. Rodin had pointed out that the toe of a Greek or Gothic sculpture showed the plastic tension of the entire figure, whereas his contemporaries satisfied themselves with the representation of a toe.⁹ In Frink's *oeuvre*, *First Man* marks the transition from (sometimes narcissistic) expressive modelling to the *modélé*.

The preserved solid original plaster for *First Man* demonstrates that the artist was deliberately anti-academic in her practice, even when working on her large figures. In the academic tradition, a figure of this size would have been prepared either by making a model or by constructing a frame from a design. A method based on a prepared frame permits more economical use of materials and of course human effort, since the figure can then be built up around prepared hollow forms. By contrast, Frink's working method is peculiarly archaic since she built up the plaster solidly around an improvised frame of sticks. This brings a remarkable physical aspect into this sculpture, since it is about what Frink could manage to handle alone.¹⁰

The emphasis on large volumes in *First Man* augurs Frink's later, larger than life-size heads, in which she would go on to heighten the motif of ambivalence further still. In the mid-1960s she made a first series of head sculptures, the *Soldier's Heads* (FCR 136, FCR141–144), in which she purposefully studied the motif of volume and, in the process, refined the ambivalent expressive possibilitie. One of her methods was to play on social types and stereotypes, with an undercurrent of subverting idealism and its quest for eternal beauty. Artists' traditional rejection of idealism was based on social reality and came in two familiar manifestations: the first showed reality with its misery, while the second idealised those at the bottom of the social ladder. Frink took neither of these routes, but by depicting features of the men's heads (narrow foreheads, flat noses, large cleft chins and bull necks) she played very directly on existing social stereotypes. These soldiers



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were not heroes but thugs. Hence the viewer is confronted – and an English viewer in the 1960s all the more so – with the obviousness of the stereotypes even as they are shattered. The surface irregularities, the scratches and holes, also have the appearance of wounds, yet at the same time the juxtaposition very effectively shatters the stereotype. Minimal shifts in facial expression from *Soldier's Head I* (1965, FCR141) to *Soldier's Head IV* (1965, FCR144) take on psychological meaning, and precisely because the heads are so stereotypical, the sculptor can very subtly evoke content and moods via the gaze or the minimal opening of the mouth. These subtle meanings would not exist were it not for the existence of the other heads. Traditionally, figurative sculpture always has been an art of codified gestures and facial expressions. The series created the possibility of ambivalent nuances.

A constant theme in interviews with the artist was a certain anti-intellectual attitude, and neither the concepts of ambivalence nor the aforementioned refinement of subtle differences by means of juxtaposition crop up at any point. In the artworks, however, they are noticeably present, as are aspects of content that – possibly even for the artist herself – only become visible in the artwork. Frink's great consistency in developing her series demonstrates above all else that, for her, each sculpture was unequivocally different and possessed individual qualities.

In the case of the larger than life-size *Goggle Heads* (1969, FCR207–210) Frink herself mentioned that they were modelled on the Moroccan General and Minister of the Interior, Mohammed Oufkir. She said that Oufkir's face in sunglasses had created for her an exceedingly sinister impression, which she had taken as the starting point for her series.¹¹ Oufkir featured regularly

FCR143
Soldier's Head III, 1965



in the media during the period when Frink lived in the south of France, since he was accused of ordering the assassination of the exiled politician Ben Barka. In her own retrospective interpretation, the artist seemed to reduce the heads to pure stereotypes, although the word 'sinister' in particular provokes somewhat ambivalent imaginings. Frink's heads since 1967 demonstrate how the sculptor attempts to reduce the visual prominence of the eyes, and how the resultant pictorial idea of spectacles emerges. Eyes are vehicles of empathy, even in the case of *Soldier's Heads*; now Frink's imagery suggests that heads have no eyes, yet nor are they blind. Here again, for all their similarities, the various forms differ in psychological expression.

In the group *Tribute I* (1975, FCR247) to *Tribute IV* (1975, FCR250) made in 1975, and the huge *In Memoriam* (FCR301, FRC302, FCR322) heads from the early 1980s, Frink's larger than life-size head forms are extended with a deliberate goal of empathy. The slightly inclined heads with closed eyes are no longer potential perpetrators but rather victims, the facial expression conveying the idea of stoic suffering. While the *Soldiers* and *Goggle Heads* were instances of highly personal imagery by the sculptor, these last monumental heads call to mind the tradition of portrayals of the Christian martyrs. At first glance it may seem that Frink stipulated

FCR207
Goggled Head I, 1969



the content of these figures by linking them in interviews with the aims of an organisation like Amnesty International, but in fact she stressed that it was suffering that really interested her, regardless of its time in history. Often, empathy in perception is based on familiarity with the context, a phenomenon that is known in the media world to lead to a strangely (politically) selective empathy; Frink's head figures, however, call upon an empathy that is unspecific.¹²

Observation of nature plays a remarkably minor role in the sculptural work of Elisabeth Frink. Of course, her forms themselves are reminders of their connection with nature, but her starting point seems less of a perceived form than a perceived presence of something alive. The analytical approach of many European figurative sculptors, whereby the structure and elements of the natural model are analysed so as to develop a sculptural idea, obviously was not to her taste. This is clearest in the horse representations, where Frink never gives prominence to the geometrical correlations in the animals' proportions, although these have been familiar elements of the European sculptural vocabulary since the Renaissance. Nor is there much sign of the closely related theme of animal elegance and beauty.¹³

Therefore it would also be wrong to label the reduced and calmer

FCR247
Tribute I, 1975



modelling in the sculptures after *First Man* as a form of classicism, because throughout her work Frink maintained a clear distance from any such measurement of the world. Her approach remained expressive, not in the sense that the artist's emotional stirrings culminated in an artwork, but conversely that the artwork plays on the viewer's sensitivity. Her highly versatile modelling, which is still thoroughly in keeping with Rodin's *modelé*, gives rise to a dual perception. On one level is the perception of the entire sculpture as a (not necessarily realistic) three-dimensional body without a predetermined frontal view, a factor that impels any viewer who pays attention to it to move around it. From a distance Frink's sculptures never give the effect of a 'picture', which, incidentally, explains the problems of photographing her work. The second level is a physical perception, conveyed through the sense of touch, of individual curves and traces on the surface of the sculpture at close range. The nearer the viewer gets to the figure, the more alive it appears – not in the sense implied by realism, but as a living presence. These two levels of perception cannot be neatly separated, but the borderline can be located roughly where it would theoretically be possible to touch a sculpture. Distinctions between effects observed at a distance and those at close range belong to the standard repertoire of the

FCR249
Tribute III, 1975



European tradition; Elisabeth Frink was notable for incorporating her own accents. So the actual theme of her sculpture could be a certain presence: the fact that a viewer perceives not just a formed material reminding him or her of nature, but something more – a form shaped in such a way as to suggest life. What can be concluded from this difference, above all, is that a viewer must 'experience' these works in reality and not just 'see' them, mediated by photographs. A statement like that pushes at the limits of traditional art history, but for Frink's work it seems necessary to build such a phenomenological level into any description of it.

Indeed, the proximity to archaic Greek sculpture in her late work is not a formal proximity.¹⁴ Unlike sculptors in the early twentieth century, Frink was not in search of the simplified form but, more than anything, a living form that made reference to nature. In her figures *Riace I to IV* (1986, FCR347, FCR359, FCR370, FCR377) this aspect is defined by the fundamental ambivalence in the figures, for although the men are clearly in motion it is not so clear which direction they have chosen, so that – like *First Man* – they immanently convey an image of curiosity and alertness. This group in particular shows the importance of a radical three-dimensionality for aspects of the sculpture's content.



In the 1980s Frink began to paint her sculptures. From the traditional art-historical perspective this recalls the German neo-Expressionist painter-sculptors, and their influence should not be ruled out. But Frink also knew that Greek sculptures had been coloured, and as a sculptor she understood that the Greeks painted their sculptures for other reasons than the Europeans in her own times. Colour provides accents and disrupts the uniform attention that characterises the perception of a three-dimensional body. Colour can wipe away sculptural accents or, conversely, highlight them. Frink employed both strategies in her use of colour, and always based on sculptural considerations.

In one version of *Riace I to IV* the faces were painted white. From close up, this makes them look like masks; from further away, however, it clearly accentuates the heads. Figures in a landscape always seem small, and the white colour here was a means – borrowed from the Greeks – of making them stand out at long distance in an overbearing environment. The attention commanded at distance compensates for the plasticity lost at close range. In contrast, the other reason for employing colour to accentuate individual elements is to enhance perception in the immediate vicinity of the sculpture. In Frink's work such painting is never a neo-Expressionist end in itself but a means of underscoring the plastic details. One of the most striking features of her sculpture, the painted or colour-patinated eyes in her late work, connects the views from close up and at a distance, because even from a great distance people have a very keen perception of which way other creatures are looking.

The sculptural *oeuvre* of Elisabeth Frink offers plenty of encouragement for people to perceive bronzes as something more than just the formed material. This pre-eminence of the living, combined with a certain distance from Naturalism, defines her special place in the history of sculpture. Yet precisely this concept of the living explains her omission from art history, because it is deemed to be a purely subjective category. Frink's *oeuvre* and her popularity give reason enough for a thorough reappraisal of her achievements.

Endnotes

- 1 On Butler see Arie Hartog, 'Decent Sculpture: Der Bildhauer Reg Butler', in exh. cat., *Reg Butler – Decent Sculpture*, Gerhard-Marcks-Haus, Bremen, 2006, pp 40–8.
- 2 Stephen Gardiner, *Frink*, HarperCollins, London, 1998, p.26.
- 3 Peter Selz, 'New Images of Man', New York, 1959.
- 4 Dennis Raverly, 'Critical Perspectives on "New Images of Man"', in *Art Journal*, vol.53 (1994), 4, pp 62–4.
- 5 See Margaret Garlake, *New Art New World: British Art in Postwar Society*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1998, pp 194–201.
- 6 Edwin Mullins, *The Art of Elisabeth Frink*, Lund Humphries, London, 1972, p.9,

- referred to 'the threatening man-bird-beast [as] one of the clichés of British sculpture during the 1950's and early-1960's'.
- 7 The ambivalence of Frink's figures brings to mind a figure of thought in the work of Hans Jonas, who saw ambivalence as the sole force capable of preserving modern civilisation from its consequences. See Zygmunt Bauman and Martin Suhr, *Moderne und Ambivalenz: Das Ende der Eindeutigkeit*, Fischer Taschenbuch, Frankfurt am Main, 1995, p.71.
- 8 For a summary of the complex history of Rodin's L'Age d'Airain see Martin E. Elsen, *Rodin's Art*. The Rodin Collection, Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, New York and Oxford, 2003, pp 37–49.

- 9 This idea caused the disappearance of narrative detail from modern sculpture, for only where it was employed in keeping with the *modelé* did it make any sense, though not as a detail but as part of a plastic whole.
- 10 See in this regard the methodology of the Belgian sculptor Johan Tahon (b. 1965), whose plaster sculptures probe the limits of what for him is physically possible.
- 11 Elisabeth Frink, *Sculpture, Catalogue Raisonné*, with essays by Sarah Kent and Bryan Robertson, Harpvale Press, Wiltshire, 1984, p.38.
- 12 This aspect might well be the starting point for developing some fundamental reflections on 'humanism' in the artist's work. However, such interpretations soon

- transport her sculpture in the conservative direction mentioned at the beginning of this essay.
- 13 Modern German and Italian sculptors of animals emphasised the contrast between an animal's rounded body and thin paws or legs, and developed their figures on that basis. For Frink it is inconsequential to stress such obvious contrasts.
- 14 There is one formal element that Frink borrows from archaic Greek art and that is the marking of the belly with a round line. It is noteworthy that when the German sculptor Gerhard Marcks (1889–1981) identified Greek archaic forms of art in the 1920s and developed a modern form from them, he adopted exactly the same element.

Muck and Magic

Michael Morpurgo
Illustrated by Elisabeth Frink



Introductions

While curating the 1997 Elisabeth Frink retrospective exhibition in Salisbury¹ it quickly became apparent that both friends and many of the people who had come to know Lis had developed a deep affection for her. She was warm-hearted, generous in spirit and great fun to be with. Underpinning all this were her strongly held beliefs in fairness and freedom for all living things.

Inside her studio she focused on her artwork and was rigorous in spending several hours there most days. Frink was confident in the materials and processes that she used, and relied upon them to develop her sculptures within which are embedded aspects of the feelings and moral issues that mattered to her. Outside that space she had to attend to the professional business of an ever-changing art world: galleries, commissioners, clients and foundries. But she also freely gave her time to family, friends and charities, and was always supportive of young artists.

We wanted to share Lis, the artist and woman, with you the reader, and so we asked Michael Morpurgo if he would write something. Michael and Lis were great friends, who shared a belief in the basic rights of all humanity and the animal world.

Annette Ratuszniak, editor

‘Lis Frink was dear to us, and a generous supporter of Farms for City Children, the charity that Clare, my wife, began some 35 years ago. Our times spent in Dorset with her and Alex, amongst her wonderful sculptures, are treasured memories for us. Lis was a great teacher, as well as the best of friends. She loved to work alongside students – my own son was one of them – and was always hugely encouraging. So when she died, I wrote this story, and dedicated it to her. Her character is only thinly disguised, the spirit of her not at all. The wonderful drawing we used to illustrate it is hers, and seems to have been done especially for it. Of course it was the other way round. It was this drawing and the artist herself that inspired me to write my story. That it now, all these years later, serves as an introduction to her catalogue raisonné, her life’s work, is a great honour for me. Lis particularly loved “War Horse”, but it’s a bit long for an introductory story. So this one will have to do, Lis.’

Michael Morpurgo, writer

¹ Annette Downing [Ratuszniak], *Elisabeth Frink: Sculptures, Graphic Works, Textiles, exh. cat.*, essays by Annette Downing, John Hubbard, Edward Lucie-Smith, Salisbury Festival and Wiltshire County Council publication, 1997.



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FCR393
War Horse, 1991

Muck and Magic

I am sometimes asked these days how I got started. I should love to be able to say that it was all because I had some dream, some vision, or maybe that I just studied very hard. None of this would really be true. I owe what I am, what I have become, what I do each day of my life, to a bicycle ride I took a long time ago now, when I was twelve years old, and also to a pile of muck, horse muck.

The bike was new that Christmas. It was maroon, and I remember it was called a Raleigh Wayfarer. It had all you could ever dream of in a bike – in those days. It had a bell, a dynamo lamp front and rear, five gears and a silver pump. I loved it instantly and spent every hour I could out riding it. And when I wasn't riding it, I was polishing it.

We lived on the edge of town, so it was easy to ride off down Mill Lane past the estate, along the back of the soap factory where my father worked, when he did work, and then out into the countryside beyond. It was too far to walk, and in a car you zoomed past so fast that the cows and trees were only ever brief, blurred memories. On my bike I was close to everything for the first time. I felt the cold and the rain on my face. I moored at the cows, and they looked up and blinked at me lazily. I shouted at the crows and watched them lift off cawing and croaking into the wind. But best of all, no one knew where I was – and that included me sometimes. I was always getting myself lost and coming back at dusk, late. I would brace myself for all the sighing and tutting and ticking off that inevitably followed. I bore it all stoically because they didn't really mean it, and anyway it had all been worth it. I'd had a taste of real freedom and I wanted more of it. After a while I discovered the circuit that seemed to be just about ideal. It was a two-hour run, not too many hills going up, plenty going down, a winding country lane that criss-crossed a river past narrow cottages where hardly anyone seemed to live, under the shadow of a church where sometimes I stopped and put flowers on the graves that everyone else seemed to have forgotten, and then along the three-barred iron fence where the horses always galloped over to see me, their tails and heads high, their ears pricked.

There were three of them: a massive bay hunter that looked down on me from a great height, a chubby little pony with a face like a chipmunk, and a fine-boned grey that flowed and floated over the ground with such grace and ease that I felt like clapping every time I saw her move. She made me laugh too because she often made rude, farty noises as she came trotting over to see me. I called her Peg after a flying horse called Pegasus that I'd read about in a book. The small one I called Chip, and the great bay, Big Boy. I'd cuddle them all, give each of them a sugar lump – two for Peg because she wasn't as pushy as the other two – told them my troubles, cuddled them a little more and went on my way, always reluctantly.

I hated to leave them because I was on the way back home after that, back to homework, and the sameness of the house, and my mother's harassed scurrying and my little brother's endless tantrums. I lay in my room and dreamed of those horses, of Peg in particular. I pictured myself riding her

bareback through flowery meadows, up rutty mountain passes, fording rushing streams where she would stop to drink. I go to sleep at nights lying down on the straw with her, my head resting on her warm belly. But when I woke her belly was always my pillow, and my father was in the bathroom next door, gargling and spitting into the sink, and there was school to face, again. But after school I'd be away on my bike and that was all that mattered to me. I gave up ballet lessons on Tuesdays. I gave up cello lessons Fridays. I never missed a single day, no matter what the weather – rain, sleet, hail – I simply rode through it all, living for the moment when Peg would rest her heavy head on my shoulder and I'd hear that sugar lump crunching inside her grinding jaw.

It was spring. I know that because there were daffodils all along the grass verge by the fence, and there was nowhere to lie my bike down on the ground without squashing them. So I leaned it up against the fence and fished in my pocket for the sugar lumps. Chip came scampering over as he always did, and Big Boy wandered lazily up behind him, his tail flicking nonchalantly. But I saw no sign of Peg. When Big Boy had finished his sugar lump, he started chewing at the saddle of my bike and knocked it over. I was just picking it up when I saw her coming across the field towards me. She wore long green boots and a jersey covered in planets and stars, gold against the dark, deep blue of space. But what struck me most was her hair, the wild white curly mop of it around her face that was somehow both old and young at the same time.

'Who are you?' she asked. It was just a straight question, not a challenge. 'Bonnie,' I replied. 'She's not here,' said the woman. 'Where is she?' 'It's the spring grass. I have to keep her inside from now on.' 'Why?'

'Laminitis. She's fine all through the winter, she eats all the grass she likes, no trouble. But she's only got to sniff the spring grass and it comes back. It heats the hoof, makes her lame.'

She waved away the two horses and came closer, scrutinising me. 'I've seen you before, haven't I? You like horses, don't you?'

I smiled. 'Me too,' she went on. 'But they're a lot of work.' 'Work?' I didn't understand.

'Bring them in, put them out, groom them, pick out their feet, feed them, muck them out. I'm not as young as I was, Bonnie. You don't want a job do you, in the stables? Be a big help. The grey needs a good long walk every day, and good mucking out. Three pounds an hour, what do you say?'

Just like that I said yes, of course. I could come evenings and weekends. 'I'll see you tomorrow then,' she said. 'You'll need wellies. I've got some that should fit. You be careful on the roads now.' And she turned and walked away.

I cycled home that day singing my heart out and high as a kite. It was my first paying job, and I'd be looking after Peg. It really was a dream come true.

I didn't tell anyone at home, nor at school. Where I went on my bike, what I did, was my own business, no one else's. Besides there was always the chance that father would stop me – you never knew with him. And I certainly didn't want any of my school friends oaring in on this. At least two of them knew all about horses, or they said they did, and I knew they would never stop telling me the right way to do this or that. Best just to keep everything to myself.

To get to the house the next day – you couldn't see it from the road – I cycled up a long drive through high trees that whispered at me. I had to weave around the pot-holes, bump over sleeping policemen, but then came out onto a smooth tarmac lane where I could freewheel downhill and hear the comforting tic-a-tic of my wheels beneath me.

I nearly came off when I first saw them. Everywhere in amongst the trees there were animals, but none of them moved. They just looked at me. There were wild boar, dogs, horses, and gigantic men running through trees like hunters. But all were still as statues, then I saw the stables on my right, Peg looking out at me, ears pricked and shaking her mane; and beyond the stables was a long house of flint and brick with a tiled roof, and a clock tower with doves fluttering around it.

The stable block was deserted. I didn't like to call out, so I opened the gate and went over to Peg and stroked her nose. That was when I noticed a pair of wellies waiting by the door, and slipped into one of them was a piece of paper. I took it out and read:

Hope these fit. Take her for a walk down the tracks, not in the fields. She can nibble the grass, but not too much. Then muck out the stables. Save what dry straw you can – it's expensive. When you've done, shake out half a bale in her stable – you'll find straw and hay in the barn. She has two slices of hay in her rack. Don't forget to fill up the water buckets.

It was not signed.

Until then I had not given it a single thought, but I had never led a horse or ridden a horse in all my life. Come to that, I hadn't mucked out a stable either. Peg had a halter on her already, and a rope hung from a hook beside the stable. I put the wellies on – they were only a little too big – clipped on the rope, opened the stable door and led her out, hoping, praying she would behave. I need not have worried. It was Peg that took me for a walk. I simply stopped whenever she did, let her nibble for a while, and then asked her gently if it wasn't time to move on. She knew the way, up the track through the woods, past the running men and the wild boar, then forking off down past the ponds where a bronze water buffalo drank without ever moving his lips. White fish glided ghostly under the shadow of his nose. The path led upwards from there and past a hen house where a solitary goose stretched his neck, flapped his wings and honked at us. Peg stopped for a moment, lifted her nose and wrinkled it at the goose who began preening himself busily. After a while I found myself coming back to the stable-yard gate. And Peg led me in. I tied her up in the yard and set about mucking out the stables.

I was emptying the wheelbarrow onto the muck heap when I felt

someone behind me. I turned round. She was older than I remembered her, greyer in the face, and more frail. She was dressed in jeans and a rough sweater this time, and seemed to be covered in white powder, as if someone had thrown flour at her, even her cheeks were smudged with it. She glowed when she smiled.

'Where there's muck there's money, that's what they say,' she laughed; and then she shook her head. 'Not true, I'm afraid, Bonnie. Where there's muck, there's magic. Now that's true.'

I wasn't sure what she meant by that.

'Horse muck,' she went on by way of explanation. 'Best magic in the world for vegetables. I've got leeks in my garden longer than, longer than . . .' She looked around her twice. 'Twice as long as your bicycle pump. All the soil asks is that we feed it with that stuff, and it'll do anything we want it to. It's like anything, Bonnie, you have to put in more than you take out. You want some tea when you're finished?'

'Yes please.'

'Come up to the house then. You can have your money.' She laughed at that. 'Maybe there is money in muck after all.'

As I watched her walk away a small yappy dog came bustling across the lawn, ran at her and sprang into her arms. She cradled him, put him over her shoulder and disappeared into the house.

I finished mucking out the stable as quickly as I could, shook out some fresh straw, filled up the water buckets and led Peg back in. I gave her a goodbye kiss on the nose and rode my bike up to the house. I found her in the kitchen cutting bread.

'I've got peanut butter or honey,' she said.

I didn't like either, but I didn't say so.

'Honey,' I said.

She carried the mugs of tea and I carried the plate of sandwiches. I followed her out across a cobbled courtyard accompanied by the yappy dog, down some steps and into a great glass building where there stood a gigantic white horse, the floor was covered in newspaper, and everywhere was crunchy underfoot with plaster. The shelves all round were full of heads and arms and legs and hands. A white sculpture of a dog stood guard over the plate of sandwiches and never even sniffed them. She sipped her tea between her hands and looked up at the giant horse, the horse looked just like Peg only a lot bigger.

'It's no good.' She sighed. 'She needs a rider.' She turned to me suddenly. 'You wouldn't be the rider, would you?' she asked.

'I can't ride.'

'You wouldn't have to, not really. You'd just sit there, that's all, and I'd sketch you.'

'What, now?'

'Why not? After tea be alright?'

And so I found myself sitting astride Peg that same afternoon in the stable yard. She was tied up by her rope, pulling contentedly at her hay net and paying no attention to us whatsoever. It felt strange up there with Peg

shifting warm underneath me. There was no saddle and she asked me to hold the reins one-handed, loosely, to feel ‘I was part of the horse.’ The worst of was that I was hot, stifling hot, because she had dressed me up as an Arab. I had great swathes of cloth over and around my head and I was draped to my feet with a long heavy robe so that nothing could be seen of my jeans or sweater or wellies.

‘I never told you my name, did I?’ said the lady, sketching furiously on a huge pad. ‘That was rude of me. I’m Liza, when you come tomorrow you can give me a hand making you if you like. I’m not as strong as I was, and I’m in a hurry to get on with this. You can mix the plaster for me. Would you like that?’

Peg snorted and pawed the ground.

‘I’ll take that as a yes, shall I?’ she laughed, and walked around the horse, turning the page of her sketch pad. ‘I want to do one more from this side and one from the front, then you can go home.’

Half an hour later when she let me down and unwrapped me, my bottom was stiff and sore.

‘Can I see?’ I asked her.

‘I’ll show you tomorrow,’ she said. ‘You will come won’t you?’

She knew I would, and I did.

I came every day after that to muck out the stables and to walk Peg, but what I looked forward to most – even more than being with Peg – was mixing Liza’s plaster for her in the bucket, climbing the stepladder with it, watching her lay the strips of cloth dunked in the wet plaster over the frame of the rider, building me up from the iron skeleton of wire to what looked like an Egyptian mummy then a riding Arab at one with his horse, his robes shrouding him with mystery. I knew all the while that it was me in that skeleton, me inside that mummy. I was the Arab sitting astride his horse looking out over the desert. She worked ceaselessly, and with such a fierce determination that I didn’t like to interrupt, we were joined together by a common, comfortable silence.

At the end of a month or so we stood back the two of us, and looked up at the horse and rider, finished.

‘Well,’ said Liza, her hands on her hips. ‘What do you think, Bonnie?’

‘I wish,’ I whispered, touching the tail of the horse, ‘I just wish I could do it.’

‘But you did do it Bonnie,’ she said and I felt her hand on my shoulder. ‘We did it together. I couldn’t have done it without you.’ She was a little breathless as she spoke. ‘Without you, that horse would never have had a rider. I’d never have thought of it. Without you mixing my plaster, holding the bucket, I couldn’t have done it.’

Her hand gripped me tighter. ‘Do you want to do one of your own?’

‘I can’t.’

‘Of course you can. But you have to look around you first, not just glance, but really look. You have to breath it in, become a part of it, feel that you’re a part of it. You draw what you see, what you feel. Then you make what you’ve drawn. Use clay if you like, or do what I do and build up plaster over a wire

frame. Then set to work with your chisel, just like I do, until it’s how you want it. If I can do it, you can do it. I tell you what. You can have a corner of my studio if you like, just so long as you don’t talk when I’m working. How’s that?’

So my joyous spring blossomed into a wonderful summer. After a while, I even dared to ride Peg bareback sometimes on the way back to the stable yard. And I never forgot what Liza told me. I looked about me. I listened. And the more I listened and the more I looked, the more I felt at home in this new world. I became a creature of the place. I belonged there as much as the wren that sung at me high on the vegetable garden wall, as much as the green dragonfly hovering over the pool by the water buffalo. I sketched Peg. I sketched Big Boy (I couldn’t sketch Chip – he just came out round). I bent my wire frames into shape and I began to build my first horse sculpture, layer on layer of strips of cloth dunked in plaster just like Liza did. I moulded them into shape around the frame, and when they dried I chipped away and sanded but I was never happy with what I had done.

All this time Liza worked on beside me in the studio, and harder, faster, more intensely than ever. I helped her whenever she asked me to, mixing, holding the bucket for her, just as I had done before.

It was a rising Christ, she said, ‘Christ rising from the dead, his face strong, but gentle too, immortal it seemed.’

She’d come over and look at my stumpy effort that looked as much like a dog as a horse to me, and she would walk around it nodding her approval. ‘Coming on, coming on,’ she’d say. ‘Maybe just a little bit off here perhaps.’ And she’d chisel away for a moment or two and a leg or neck would come to sudden life. I told her once, ‘It’s like *Magic*.’ She thought for a moment, and said ‘That’s exactly what it is, Bonnie. It’s a God-given thing, a God-given magic, and it’s not to be wasted. Don’t waste it, Bonnie, don’t ever waste it.’

The horse and rider came back from the foundry, bronze now and magnificent. I marvelled at it. It stood outside her studio and when it caught the evening sun, I could scarcely take my eyes off it. But these days Liza seemed to tire more easily and she would sit longer over her tea, gazing out at her horse and rider.

‘I am so pleased with that, Bonnie,’ she said, ‘So pleased we did it together.’

The Christ figure was finished and went off to the foundry a few weeks before I had to go on my summer holiday. ‘By the time you come back again,’ said Liza, ‘it should be back.’ ‘It’s going to hang above the door of the village church, isn’t that nice, it will be there forever. Well not forever. Nothing is for ever.’

The holiday was in Cornwall. We stayed where we always did, in Cadgwith, and I drew every day. I drew boats and gulls and lobster pots. I made sculptures with wet sand – sleeping giants, turtles, whales – and everyone thought I was mad not to go swimming and boating. The sun shone for fourteen days. I never had such a perfect holiday, even though I didn’t have my bike, or Peg or Liza with me.

My first day back, the day before school began, I cycled out to Liza’s

FCR337
Horse and Rider
(Robed), 1985



place with my best boat drawing in a stiff envelope under my sweater. The stable yard was deserted. There were no horses in the fields. Peg wasn’t in her stable and I could find no one up at the house, no Liza, no yappy dog. I stopped in the village to ask but there was no one about. It was like a ghost village. Then the church bell began to ring. I leaned my bike up against the churchyard wall and ran up the path. There was Liza’s Rising Christ glowing in the sun above the doorway, and inside they were singing hymns.

I crept in, lifting the latch carefully so that I wouldn’t be noticed. The hymn was just finishing. Everyone was sitting down and coughing. I managed to squeeze myself in at the end of a pew and sat down too. The church was packed. A choir in red robes and white surplices sat on either side of the altar. The vicar was taking off his glasses and putting them away. I looked everywhere for Liza’s wild white curls, but could not find her. It was difficult for me to see much over everyone’s head. Besides, some people were wearing hats, so I presumed she was too and stopped looking for her. She’d

be there somewhere.

The vicar began. ‘Today was to be a great day, a happy day for all of us. Liza was to unveil her Rising Christ above the south door. It was her gift to us, to all of us who live here, and to everyone who will come here to our church in the centuries to come. Well, as we all now know, there was no unveiling, because she wasn’t here to do it. On Monday evening she watched her Rising Christ winched into place. She died the next day.’

Well I didn’t hear anything else he said. It was only then that I saw the coffin resting on trestles between the pulpit and the lectern, with a single wreath of white flowers laid on it, only then that I took in the awful truth.

I didn’t cry as the coffin passed right by me on its way out of the church. I suppose I was still trying to believe it. I stood and listened to the last prayers over the grave, numb inside, grieving as I had never grieved before or since, but still not crying. I waited until almost everyone had gone and went over to the grave. A man was taking off his jacket and hanging it on the branch of the tree. He spat on his hands, rubbed them and picked up his spade. He saw me.

‘You family?’ he said.

‘Sort of,’ I replied. I reached inside my sweater and pulled out the boat drawing from Cadgwith. ‘Can you put it in?’ I asked. ‘It’s a drawing. It’s for Liza.’

‘Course,’ he said, and he took it from me. ‘She’d like that. Fine lady, she was. The things she did with her hands. Magic, pure magic.’

It was just before Christmas the same year that a cardboard tube arrived in the post, addressed to me. I opened it in the secrecy of my room. A rolled letter fell out, typed and very short:

Dear Miss Mallet,

In her will, the late Liza Bonallack instructed us, her solicitors, to send you this drawing. We would ask you to keep us informed of any future changes of address.
With best wishes.

I unrolled it and spread it out. It was of me sitting on Peg, swathed in Arab clothes. Underneath was written:

For dearest Bonnie,

I never paid you for all that mucking out, did I? You shall have this instead, and when you are twenty-one you shall have the artist’s copy of our horse and rider sculpture. But by then you will be doing your own sculptures. I know you will.
God bless,
Liza.

So here I am, nearly thirty now. And as I look out at the settling snow from my studio, I see Liza’s horse and rider standing in my back garden; and all around, my own sculptures gathered in silent homage.