

Love Theory in Suspension

The work of Charles Mason

Equilibrium is less a question of gravity and weight, than a question of balance. Instead of weight relative to mass, balance is the resultant of a smooth collusion of strengths and expectations experienced through friction or of shock felt during any encounter. Charles Mason's *Between you and me* (2008) is not just the reflection of a spectator incapable of reaching the other side of the mirror, but at once the representation *and* the object of that representation prevented by a reflection of oneself - of one's ego perhaps - in the endless black mirror of a transparent screen of Perspex. It is above all a power struggle, a game of exchange and balance that structures all organisations and all relationships.

So let us formulate the hypothesis that Mason's sculptures are for the most part compositions emancipated from formalism and charged with poetics of affect. If we attribute feelings and psychologies to these objects, they become an image of a group or a position, united, inseparable - inseparable because united, a societal organisation and a relational space. Balance in this sense is the sine qua none of equilibrium, based on notions of weight and counterweight, of rivalry and negotiation, of vision, tensions and flexibilities, of equivalent and mutual exchanges.

The latest groups of Charles Mason's sculptures are fixed structures all about balance. Skeletal and muscular systems based on a strict organisation, they are architecture-worlds and balancing acts, where a black, shiny translucent screen supports itself on metal struts countering 'The Thing', a concrete and serpentine shape, sometimes covered totally or partially with porcelain scales. They physically answer the problematic of equilibrium, weightlessness with mutual support - theirs is a *chic* aesthetic posture. They are the encounter of textural antinomies, through contact and collage: the metal plays against the mirror effect of the Perspex, which plays against the concrete, which in turn plays against the mosaic. The meeting points are solid and secure, for should one component slip the whole edifice collapses. Doubtless from this springs 'the anxiety' that Mason uses in the title for two of his exhibitions in 2009 and 2010.



Between you and me 2008
Perspex, concrete, galvanised steel, rubber and ceramic tiles
120 x 240 x 146 cm

In this way *Crutch* (2010) a chair back, slightly magnified, moulded in polished bronze, resting in a corner gives the impression of a strange awkward object, disproportionate and amputated, unusable. Materially supercharged in bronze but immediately put aside, the object is the proscription of a sick shape, a worried, isolated form - unlike the other works which are frozen in their own combination systems - for *Crutch* - there is nothing for it to really worry unduly over.

In his essay *Peri Bathous, the Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1727) Alexander Pope coined the word *Bathos* to describe a fall from the sublime to the ridiculous that produces moments of (unintentional) comedy in would-be solemn poems. The bathetic style, Pope suggested, is distinguished from the true sublime by an absurd combination of antinomies making verse a form of stupidity. The meaning of the term bathos has noticeably shifted; it is now sometimes used to describe something that is so pathetic and poignant that it becomes comic - to the point where the solemnity within a bathetic production becomes 'a seriousness that



Dummy II 2010
Perspex, concrete, galvanised steel and ceramic tiles
203 x 102 x 207 cm

fails'. Such is the condition that afflicts *Crutch*. Here the chair back that usually supports its user is confined to a corner of the exhibition space and is able to stand thanks only to the kindness of a stranger, the wall: an embarrassing situation for an object that resembles a crutch. In *Dummy II* (2010) the shapeless 'Thing' poses in front of its own reflection, maintaining its upright posture due only to a perfectly equal 'rapport de force'; it remains a narcissistic structure, performing open-mouthed, stupefied by its own image. In holding such a balanced posture of elegance it could be an allegorical architectural representation of a love relationship, or of the Dandy in the story who placed a mirror in front of his bed to have the pleasure of watching himself sleep. The optical effect of the three panels deployed in *Backsliding* (2010) is of a folding screen hiding nothing, showing everything (and more) through a kaleidoscopic effect of multiple reflections. When the spectator's body does not interfere, two twin 'Things' are mirrored, rather like Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles in the mirrored corridor of *The Lady from Shanghai*. The 'Thing' and we, its spectators, are creatures caught in a trap, living in a world of images, of forms and reflections on the border of day - dreams.

'Camp taste doesn't propose that it is in bad taste to be serious', writes Susan Sontag, 'it doesn't sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures'. Mason's work is a game of improbable balances, maintained with an almost comic dignity, often absurd, and coloured with humour and irony. This shapeless, feminine 'Thing' dressed as if for a night of clubbing on the town, is suspended, transfixed by its own reflection, balancing in unnatural positions like an acrobatic tight-rope walker in a circus, producing a sculptural group at the crossroads of formalism, architecture and pole-dancing.

Marie Canet

Translation from French: Nicky Zurlino

1 Susan Sontag, Notes on 'Camp', in *Against Interpretation*, 1966.



Crutch 2010
Bronze
87 x 53 x 56 cm



Backsliding 2010
Perspex, concrete, galvanised steel and rubber
Dimensions variable

Through A Glass Darkly (II)

The work of Charles Mason resides firmly in the realm of sculpture, for even when presenting wall drawings or photographs, his emphasis is on the delineation of an object in space, or on the depiction of space itself.

In *Structure and other anxieties* Mason has created a constellation of works that lead the visitor through a sequence of spaces, both physical and metaphorical. The first work the attentive visitor may encounter is an enigmatic rhomboid of reflective Perspex, hung on the wall a little above head height. A two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional shape and a sort of visual palindrome, it reflects the space behind the viewer, but also appears as a void in the wall. In the main gallery, this same shape is used as the basis of a pencil wall drawing, a frieze that leads the visitor around into the final room. Titled *Camera della morte*,



the shape is a minimalist *trompe l'oeil*, producing a sense of a seemingly shallow space that simultaneously draws us into and pushes us out from the white gallery wall. The shape here adopts a rather sinister meaning, its title translating as the 'chamber of death'. Expanding upon its already unsettling form, Mason made a connection

between this mysterious shape and the nets traditionally used to catch tuna by Sicilian fishermen. Constructed as a sequence of 'rooms' on the seabed, these nets contain a floor-like structure and are hauled full of fish to the surface in an ancient ritual, captured in a scene of Rossellini's 1950 film *Stromboli*. The shape appears again in the digital photographic print – itself titled *Wall drawing* (2007-8) – that appears in the final room, cut out from a painting canvas that leans against a wall, in a photograph which itself leans against the wall, a subtle *mise-en-abyme* that further confuses our visual sense of space.



Stepping Lightly 2010
Concrete, rubber, ceramic tiles, steel and Perspex
Dimensions variable

This sequence of works recalls Mason's earlier drawings of interior spaces depicted on the exteriors of freight containers, and his virtual murals sketched on the facades of buildings in Berlin (both series *Untitled*, 2005). It also reveals Mason's interest in the interaction between surface and volume. "There is so much material under the surface of a sculpture," says the artist, "that I wanted the surface itself to be the structure". We see the extension of this logic in the two large sculptures presented in the centre of the gallery: *Dummy II* (2010) and *Stepping Lightly* (2009/10), both of which use reflective elements that capture a shallow space in their dark surfaces. The latter – whose title could be taken from a Broadway musical – is comprised of two potentially mobile elements, their material fragility frustrating any dynamic potential. Balancing flamingo-like on one spindly leg, a wheel at its base, the coquettish piece casually drapes an inflexible concrete tube against the floor as it admires its own reflection. Its mirror is a large sheet of translucent dark grey Perspex, landscape in format and with the 16:9 ratio of a cinema screen. It is also on wheels, resting on a trolley as if it were a mirror in a ballet studio, complete with exercise rail. The sheet rests at an incline, creating a flattering elongating effect for its observer and reflecting only the legs of any approaching visitors, thus emphasising the flamingo-like leg of the standing sculpture.

In this seemingly gravity-defying piece, Mason establishes a confusion between soft and hard in both the materials that he uses and the surface finishes he employs. The draped tube is in fact made from reinforced concrete, its horizontal section padded with black polyurethane foam, and its draped section tiled with white mosaic fragments. The tiles complicate the smooth surface, turning it into a jagged patchwork of shapes that reflect light in all directions, dislocating the gaze from any one point of focus. *Stepping Lightly* could be seen as the combination of several earlier works: for example, *Hung-up* (2007) consisted of a concrete loop wrapped into PVC tape suspended from two wall-mounted coat-hooks; and in *Untitled* (2008), a serpentine concrete form covered in black ceramic tiles rested on a metal table-frame, drooping off one corner.

The mosaic ceramic tiles bring with them a whiff of kitsch that Mason employs with a knowing wink to civic sculpture, the designs of Gaudi, or even crazy-paving and naïve architecture. In fact, Mason started using this tiled finish after a visit in 2005 to the *Maison Picassiette* in Chartres. In contrast, the Perspex brings with it a high-tech feel, the cool minimalism of sleek surfaces, designer

furniture, trendy bars or offices. This is not the first time Mason has used Perspex on this scale. His 2008 piece *Between you and me* employs just such a sheet to support and reflect a serpentine form of hollow concrete, and sheets of a similar size stand vertically in both *Stay* and *Dummy* (both 2009). Mason has spoken of his own disquiet when faced with the dark Perspex of his recent constructions, whose wasteful production consumes gallons of oil, and which refers – if only obliquely – to our lives lived increasingly through a screen.



In *Dummy II*, there is again the formal juxtaposition of hard and soft, of curved and linear, of two- and three-dimensional space. As in its predecessor *Dummy* and its counterpart *Stay*, the support framework becomes a pronounced part of the work itself. The curved mouth of concrete is larger than in earlier works, now dwarfing the visitor, but the push-and-pull remains in its interaction with the screen. In addition to the Perspex, these works employ scaffolding (which has appeared frequently in Mason's work since 2001), foam, concrete, and tiles.

This *arte povera* for the 21st century, emerging – as did the original movement – in a moment of financial crisis and political uncertainty, uses materials that reference our built environment and are at once familiar and removed.

The large work presented at Union gallery is in some ways the subsequent step in the evolution from *In the loop* to *Stay* and *Dummy*, through *Dummy II* to this large, articulated (and articulate) form. Ironically, its title *Backsliding* – which also gives the exhibition its name – suggests the opposite of progression, and is a term used in Christianity to describe the condition of reverting to a time prior to conversion, a return to false idolatry and an indulgence in sin. The sculpture consists of three sheets of Perspex, each two metres high by one metre wide (roughly the proportions of a large doorway), interlinked using a structure of scaffolding with joints that allow the screens to be angled to one another. Just as the wheels in *Stepping Lightly* give the impression of potential movement, so here the articulated joints suggest that the screens could contract towards or expand away from one another, breathing in and out like the bellows of an accordion. On the front of the sculpture is a concave mouth-shaped form of rough, black, pebbled concrete, varnished to resemble wet tarmac. The shape is inverted in convex form on the back of the sculpture. These curved forms evoke the safety harnesses used in rollercoasters to strap the riders into their seats. The black polyurethane foam – which has also been a recurring material in Mason's sculptures since 2001 – also suggests a sort of safety padding, protecting us from the hardness of the sculptures. At one spot, it is possible for the visitor to pass through the sculpture, reflected simultaneously in two of its screens.

At once playful and unnerving, the articulated and curving forms of *Backsliding* can be contemplated through the Perspex sheets, this highly industrialized material that rebuffs us like a riot shield, shows us our reflection framed within the work, distorts our perception of reality and engenders a very particular way of looking. To continue the biblical reference of the work's title, one might say that we see the sculpture through a glass darkly, with our human and thus forever imperfect perception of reality.

Zoë Gray



Sans titre 2009
Mirrored Perspex
24 x 30 cm