

Sculptures and drawings by Michael Ball

Art historians, anthroposophists and theologians use the terms adorants or worshippers for figures from earlier cultures whose special characteristics are outspread arms. In the new era in the first two decades of the 20th century, many artist were admirers of such adorants. What appealed to them was the strict essentiality of these sculptures, intended entirely for sacred tasks. The sculptor Lothar Fischer traces their strictly reduced form back to the nature of the tools available. These tools were used to create form that came directly from the soul, as well as they possibly could, but with complete devotion. At that time, God, man and nature were still one. Things that were merely beautiful, or then emptily aesthetic, were reserved for a later time.

But in these days of individualism and complete freedom on the creative path, both poles can be found in fine art today.

In the terms of depth psychology, a distinction could perhaps be defined like this:

An artist passes along a particular development path, and what he ‘creates’ comes from his innermost being. Another may express himself in a way that equally corresponds with his essential nature, but he tends to pick up more stimuli from the outside world, and will perhaps be more susceptible to fashion or aesthetic elements.

Michael Ball is one of the artists who have proceeded completely in the stillness of their own path. The works he is now prepared to show have the force and purity of the archaic or archetypal figure, according to whether his approach is examined in terms of art history or depth psychology. They embody areas of human nature that we usually never reflect about from day to day. As a rule, viewers merely sense that they are moved. After a while, they may start to realize that strength is being bestowed on them, and even comfort. Just as fairy-tales and myths do us good, without our minds being aware why.

So these figures carry something within them that relates to what philosophy calls the “second reality”, but that can be supported by other terms like “fourth dimension”, for example. Take Eric Vogel, who taught in Munich for eleven years and is now, 15 years after his death, slowly becoming acknowledged, in Germany as well, as one of the great social philosophers of the 20th century. In his extensive work, he denies that human beings can ever recognize reality. His constricted view, inevitably always pre-channelled, would not admit that, he says. Here Vogelin is in tune with the basic tenets of quantum physics, which states that the observer and the observed determine each other, and that ultimately reality cannot be measured and objectivized. Vogelin cites to Plato’s allegory of the cave.

Craft skill is needed to make pictures or sculptures able to convey a message that is inherent in them from the second reality. Tireless practice and an honest awareness of one’s own position in this field is essential, just as musicians become one with their instruments the more they practise and become increasingly convincing in their

interpretations by approaching more new compositions. Michael Ball has pursued this route very purposefully in craft terms as well.

He studied at the Munich Academy for eight years in all and took practical courses, in particular under Professors Robert Jacobsen and Eduardo Paolozzi. Practical work was always important to him. He worked in the workshops, also trained himself in casting techniques, but above all accumulated a great deal of experience in printed graphics, that is to say he is at home in the second and the third dimension, now speaking physically. He was specially enthusiastic about a special photomechanical etching technique, because he can work very spontaneously with it.

Michael Ball came to terracotta through this need for spontaneous implementation. He had originally worked with various materials, above all with expendable moulds, and with casting. But he saw the periods of waiting that were necessary here disturbed the artistic flow. His teacher Paolozzi approached spatial quality in a different way in his works. Michael Ball had to forge his own approach here and he was not very happy with his early work. The first thing he had to do was to move away from construction techniques and turn to a modified plate technique. But then an entirely figurative element established itself increasingly clearly. When asked about the figures, he always says: "They always turn out like that." And this gives the a certain universal validity, an insight I have acquired from long experience of looking at art.

Michael Ball has always sought equilibrium, and maintained close links between his sculptural work and his drawing. This means that we find exactly the same human figure in his drawings. It is a kind of torso, a reduction to the well-grounded substance of the body. Frequently it included the stocky stumps of legs, looking as if they are rooted deep underground. The torso stands there powerfully, giving a sense of fortification. Mentioning "fortification" brings me to the bridge to the second reality of these works. The fact is that this solid grounding, which figures from old cultures – which Michael Ball was always interested in – have always had, is complemented by counter-poles of a spiritual rather than a physical nature. On the one hand we have the helmets and visors on the heads or, in more recent work, skulls shaped like helmets. The helmet protects, but the person behind it can still look out. C.G. Jung called our everyday ego, the mask we hide ourselves behind, the persona, from the Latin "personare", to sound through. We can explain ourselves, in words and with our voices. But the other person does not really see us. In some of the works even the bodies seem to be protected, as if by armour. Strangely not heavy, bulky armour, but playful carapaces. Others again of the figures have started to change in the direction of chimeras. Associations with animal skulls or natural spirits start to occur, hand in hand with a sense of opening up and enlivenment. The mask begins to slip. Man as a creature of many parts on this earth increasingly starts to make his presence felt. On isolated occasions Michael Ball has already created multipartite figures, with a dialogue taking place among them.

One striking characteristic of many figures is the position of their arms. They actually are, and here a spiritual component is finally appearing, adorants. These arm positions can be interpreted in many ways. They express pleas and thanks to the

gods or God. But the raised arm gesture can also mean that that a person is coming in peace, or unarmed, or that he is giving himself up by showing that he is unarmed. It is interesting that Krishna has a thousand arms, so that he can do all that is needed on this earth, while Buddha is shown with his arms hanging down inactively – letting go is the message here.

In the drawings, where it is easier to try things out than with material, a sense of opening up started to appear at an earlier stage. In the sketches, drawn with a very free hand, the central point is always a stable, grounded basic figure – Ball says he can even sense whether they can stand well -, perfected by a movement that is very dynamic and sometimes even fluent, striving outwards and upwards, a gesture of vibrant energy. Here again the reality of the other world is expressed.

Modern man needs protection, does not yet understand (again) very much of other-worldly reality, and can no longer rely on gods unconditionally. Although he, as in the case of some of the figures, is raising his hands. To worship, to give thanks, to defend, who knows.

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