



Maria Martins (1910-1973) *The Impossible III*. © 2007 The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

Against Nature

— The hybrid forms of modern sculpture —

"Sculpture is about much more than marble busts and bronze figures. It's an exciting time for sculpture because it is being broken down and allied to all different kinds of media, such as film, drawing, architecture, performance and photography."

Against Nature: The hybrid forms of modern sculpture is the exciting new exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds this winter. This exhibition continues the Institute's ethos to promote the appreciation of sculpture as a pertinent contemporary art form with a rich and varied history.

Curators, Dr. Jon Wood and Stephen Feeke, are keen to highlight the Henry Moore Institute's strong commitment to sculpture, through research, exhibitions, and archives, which also includes a collection of audio visual materials such as slides and DVDs. Their commitment to multi-media highlights that audiences' perceptions of sculpture are shifting. According to Stephen, it is apparent that artists and the public have realised that "sculpture is about much more than marble busts and bronze figures" and Jon adds, "It's an exciting time for sculpture because it is being broken down and allied to all different kinds of media, such as film, drawing, architecture, performance and photography. The definitions are much more malleable. It is an extremely liberating practice to be involved in." Jon further argues that sculpture is the only medium that provides such freedom from restraint, unlike other forms such as painting; sculptors are not restricted in their choice of canvas or materials.

Sculpture is often seen as one discipline, but the curators are interested in expanding the remit, Stephen says, "For some people, sculpture is a narrow field. We're here to broaden the scope." Another aim of the exhibition is to contemplate how sculpture is featured in other media. "Sculpture can be anything", says Stephen, and this concept is precisely what *Against Nature* intends to promote.

Jon and Stephen initially became interested in the theme of hybrids because of their respective interest in the avant-garde movements of surrealism, futurism, constructivism, vorticism and symbolism. There was an awareness that these *isms* have never been fully appreciated in sculpture, and were typically synonymous with other artistic movements. The curators came to a swift realisation that the hybrid process of taking one thing and changing it into another was a very sculptural idea. It soon became their joint concern to present construction as a central impulse to sculptural enterprise.

The exhibition also embraces the international life of the hybrid sculpture, and its ability to adapt beyond otherwise grounded definitions. The sculptors included in the exhibition have varying levels of notoriety. Artists such as: Jean Arp, Max Ernst, Isamu Noguchi and Raymond Mason will feature and this should instil the viewer with a varied and global conception of hybridism. The use of hybridism as a form of expression "resonates and ripples across the 20th century and across artistic movements", yet the composition of these hybrid forms are in constant flux. In *Against Nature* the fluidity of transition from one form to another represents hybridism very subtly at times, although many of the sculptures are obviously hybrid in nature, embodying deliberately multi-partite beings.

By Leafy Ways, a retrospective of the early work of Ivor Abrahams,

is an exhibition that runs alongside the main show and focuses on the unusual use and representation of nature. The clear connections with hybrid form become apparent in what Jon describes as Abrahams' preoccupation with "de-familiarising the familiar."

In *Against Nature*, the curators purposely made the bold decision to exclude contemporary forms of hybrid sculpture, with the latest piece dating from the late 1980s. Jon says, "This decision was made to ensure that all the present work that is being made can be seen in light of this exhibition, as a sort of pre-history. We wanted to leave the potential open in a full as possible way for the contemporary arts scene. If we had shown work by the Chapman brothers, it would be a shame to say you have to understand the Chapman brothers to understand Jacob Epstein. That's not true. Not going up to the present seems a way of keeping the possibility open."

The historical significance of some of the works in *Against Nature* represent an acceptance of the theory of evolution. To say that sculpture was "against nature" during this time period suggests two lines of enquiry: firstly that sculpture could create impossible beings that went beyond the natural order, which evolution could potentially deliver; secondly, that sculpture presents an absurd fantasy, created by means of realistic modelling, so as to suggest their "real life" existence. The impact of Darwinism and the role of genetics appear to be momentous; Stephen says, "Without Darwin, some of the earlier works would never have happened."

The exhibit begins with *Metamorphic Creatures*, which takes much of its inspiration from classical mythology; figures of centaurs, chimeras and sphinxes that were an important preoccupation for artists during the late 19th century are among the featured exhibits. A further theme, explored in the section entitled *Modern Monsters* develops the view of sculpture as a reaction to the pressures of industrialisation. The notion of sculpture as a form of evolution is brought into the foreground with *Hortisculpture*, which shows a sometimes-sinister manipulation of plants, but also presents how sculpture exists in a state of perpetual growth. Jon says, "Making sculpture can sometimes be a lot like grafting, cross-fertilizing and cross-pollinating to make unusual and new kinds of plants. They are part human and part plant."

Against Nature traces the history of modern sculpture from the very origin of its basic principles. The exhibit questions the purpose and presentation of sculpture and suggests that the evolutionary impulse of this art form not only encouraged its development, but is also an indication of the flexibility of our perceptions. *Against Nature: The hybrid forms of modern sculpture* and *By Leafy Ways* run from 7 February until 4 May 2008 at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds.

For more information please visit www.henry-moore-fdn.co.uk.

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