

DOUG COCKER

SCOTTISH CONTEMPORARY SCULPTOR

Further information on Scottish Contemporary Sculpture can be obtained at www.ssw.org.uk

DOUG COCKER is a Scottish contemporary sculptor who is based and works in Scotland. Born in Perthshire in 1945 Cocker has built up an international reputation with his work exhibited in both public and private collections in Britain and North America.

After studying at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee, he received many awards and scholarships and completed postgraduate studies in New York and Greece. He has worked as a lecturer in sculpture at art schools in Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Northampton, Newcastle, Ontario and Philadelphia.

In 1990 Doug Cocker took the decision to become a full-time sculptor. At this point he had been living in the North East of Scotland and working as a lecturer in sculpture at Grays School of Art, Aberdeen. He had built up a strong proven track record of acclaimed exhibitions, major commissions and, most importantly, an impressive body of work.



Cocker's work is about craftsmanship - dealing with and exploring materials; it is also about dealing with ideas, symbolism and feelings. It reflects his humanity, and our own, and it questions and explores the roles of sculpture in our modern society. His sculpture is not confined to the exploration of one material or a single style of working but it does, however, have a distinctive

personal voice and always demonstrates integrity of craftsmanship.

Over the last two decades Cocker's work has changed from being 'objective in feel and abstract in form' to work that has become 'not only more personal but volumetric. Concepts have been replaced by people.'



Work in Progress



Coda 1989

Inspirations, Influences & Developments

In the late seventies and early eighties Cocker's work was very strongly inspired by the natural and built landscape. Landscape has always played an important role in his work and is a response to shape and form, colour and texture, seen every day in his own environment. His source ideas and sometimes his raw materials, come from the landscape gathered and caught in photographs.

Examples of work from this period are firstly the series of process based, 'box sets'. In these he used photographs as initial stimuli and as a part of the creative and contemplative process. The resulting collections are powerful and personal evocations of memories associated to landscape. Natural objects such as wood, stones and bark are placed within a pictorial framework. They are striking in their private, intimate and unassuming presence, while at the same time showing Doug Cocker's awareness of and responses to many of the issues in British Sculpture in the 1970's.

In the 1980's his work swung away from enclosed box sets to an open constructivist, abstract style

of sculpture. These are free flowing, finely sculpted pieces of engineering. Manual skill and ingenuity of craftsmanship are important to him and it is an aspect of his work that people encountering his work respond to.

He writes, " My work changed radically in 1985; until then landscape had figured in the work primarily as a source of imagery. I drew upon the topography of landscape itself: weather and seasonal change, farming processes, tools and implements, habits and activities of birds and animals, and the natural and man made forces which collectively shape the natural environment.

Over the past four years, with an increasing desire to address the idea of monumentality in sculpture and to make outdoor sited work, landscape has become the berth for the image as opposed to the source of it."

"From 1985 my sculpture became more concerned with 'singleness' of image, shedding the linear complexities and implied volume of earlier work. My new preoccupations germinated and developed slowly from a fairly commonplace activity - that of using a fresh and hungry eye to observe, consider and acquaint myself with the landscape and architectural features of my (then) new locality, Aboyne and Deeside."

Here he was struck by the road markers, commemorative plaques and fountains of the



Meridian 1990
Meridian is a stainless steel, construction, fifteen feet high that has become a part of the Aberdeen skyline placed as it is at the top of a tall rectangular tower at Grampian House, the headquarters of the Oil company Mobil.



Font 1994

anonymous Victorian craftsmen with their craftsmanship and workmanship and how comfortably they sit within the landscape. These considerations which were sometimes confusing and conflicting, seldom fashionable and always complex offered a platform from which he could look again at the idea of making sculpture.

"I have found these considerations - many of which are predominantly seen as redundant contexts for making contemporary sculpture in the 1980's - a rich source for what is as close as I can get to humour, irony or even a modest stab at sacrilege in my sculpture."

From an interest in these local monuments Doug Cocker's interest led him to study other works of the past such as those in the Renaissance Sculpture Gardens in the South of Italy and the classical sites of Pompeii and Paestrum.

Politics and Society

Doug Cocker's later work is strongly motivated by his thoughts about society and politics.

This could pose a dilemma for an artist who as a professional sculptor relies very much on public and corporate commission patronage, since at the same time as earning a living as a professional sculptor he wants his work to retain its challenging, even disturbing social critical edge. He is conscious of the dangers of biting the hand that feeds, while at the same time being true to his own self imposed criteria of artistic validity.

In the eighties (the years of Conservative government and Margaret Thatcher) Doug Cocker used his work to comment on social and political issues. He made several large pieces that were sited out of doors. They were monumental pieces with a 'singleness of image' that demanded attention. Examples of this period are - "State of a Nation", "Boss", "One of Us" and "Song of Sisyphus".

The titles reinforce the statements he was making and employ clear verbal metaphor.

Later in the 1980's the titles become less obvious, more enigmatic and poetic, and the work more conceptual and yet still reflecting his desire to



Song of Sisyphus 1988



"Two Tribes - Forty Shades": 1994

address social and moral issues. Pieces such as "Persian Whispers" and "Beneath the Screaming Eagle" work as sculptural forms while their titles open up a wide range of meaning.

Doug Cocker's work is political in the broadest sense of the word in that it aims to raise awareness of the underlying contradictions of late 20th century capitalist society.

The theme of social and ideological restriction is a recurring one. It can be seen in many pieces of work including "Two Tribes - Forty Shades".

In this piece of sculpture Doug Cocker is specifically responding to the religious sectarianism in Northern Ireland. He sees this endemic tribalism, whether in Ireland, or elsewhere, as one of the main internal, self-deluding and self-destructive forces that suppress freedom of thought and action.

The Importance of Drawing.

Doug Cocker believes that the act of being visually aware at all times, even when travelling, is an important part of the creative process.

His drawings are an exploration of dozens of variations on one or two themes. Drawing directly onto paper in ink and wash - ideas are often reworked and repeated varying the scale and the relationship of one form to another.

He says, "Drawing has become a natural and automatic part of my way of working" He usually draws first thing in the morning when his mind is freshest. "The drawings that I do are quite vast in quantity but very few of these are carried to any degree of finish."

For Doug Cocker drawing is an enjoyable and practical way of working because it means that he

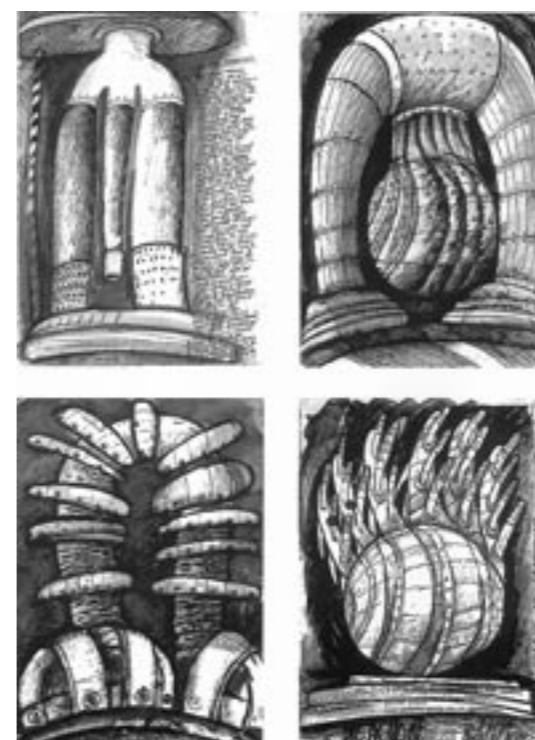
can look even closer at the sculptural process - it also helps him to firm up and explain his ideas. "Its a means of getting the kernel of an idea out of your head and down on paper. It manifests in terms I can then respond to and alter."

Through repeated drawing he tests, develops and rejects ideas. Many of these ideas remain two-dimensional, but by keeping to a smaller scale the drawings can be placed side by side to provide comparison and contrast. Unlike his sited works there is no need for scale.

Sculpture can out of necessity be a slow process



Drawing for Two Tribes - Forty Shades 1994



Drawing in Ink & Wash 1988-90

and the immediacy of drawing is important in his daily routine of bringing ideas closer to sculptural reality.

Materials & Working Methods.

It is not only images and ideas that Doug Cocker gleanes from his environment. The heavily forested landscape of Deeside has also been a treasure trove of raw materials such as bark stripped from wind damaged and fallen trees. These provide a rich variety of colour, and texture with which to explore his ideas. He works

his ideas out through construction of small models or maquettes. When working on large commissions he has assistants to help him with the realisation of pieces.

Using machine and hand tools Cocker has worked with a wide range of materials and techniques. In the late 1980's he worked a lot using wood - carving and constructing



Mad Carpenters last Moondance 1987

- and many pieces using bark cladding. Making a piece of sculpture is not simply a question of having an idea and then realising it in a given material.

"The nature of the raw materials is going to influence to some extent the piece you are going to make".

Commissions & Public Works

Commissions play a very important part of a sculptor's output and income. Doug Cocker has been commissioned to produce work by Councils and Trusts all over Britain. These pieces of 'public' Art can be seen and enjoyed by us all. Many of his sculptures are sited outside and they possess a monumentality that imbues the work and the site with a powerful presence.



Oldbury Ring 1993