Jeremy Moon and Sculpture

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In a letter of June 1972, Jeremy Moon suggested to his gallerist, Alex Gregory-Hood, that he might hold an exhibition of sculpture. It could include older, previously un-exhibited works as well as new pieces Moon was working on. Anticipating Gregory-Hood's potential unease at a change of lanes by an artist whose reputation rested on his painting, Moon was reassuring. There were, he suggested, many good examples of twentieth-century painters trying their hand at sculpture – and in any case, his new sculptures were very close to his paintings.[1] In the end, the exhibition did not happen.

3D 1 1972 was the only sculpture included in Moon's last solo exhibition at the Rowan Gallery in May 1973, six months before his death, and was shown a second time at his memorial retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery in 1976. Despite this unfinished story, or perhaps because of it, Moon's sculptures are worth investigating. They have their own distinct identity, while also providing insight into a wider body of work that has attracted fresh attention in recent years. Perhaps primarily for its clarity, the simple and direct pleasures it affords, Moon's work retains an inscrutable core, a sense that something is hiding in plain-sight, or is just about to slip through our fingers.

When Moon arrived on the London art scene in the early sixties, he was grouped by some with the sculptors from St Martin's School of Art.[2] He had been close to St Martin's sculptor Phillip King since their undergraduate days at Cambridge University, and became a part-time sculptor tutor at St Martin's in 1963. Interdisciplinarity was encouraged in the St Martin's sculpture department, where the 'onward of sculpture' was advanced under the influence of painting, whether the cut-outs of Matisse or the expansive scale and extremity of the American paintings that followed in the wake of Abstract Expressionism, and particularly what became known as Post-Painterly Abstraction.[3] Color, planes, and silhouettes – attributes most naturally associated with

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[1] Jeremy Moon to Alex Gregory-Hood, 25 June 1972, The Jeremy Moon Archive Collection.
[2] "Obituary: Jeremy Moon," *The Times*, 4 December 1973. Anthony Caro was a tutor in the Sculpture Department at St Martin's at this time, as was Moon's friend, Phillip King, who had previously studied under Caro. David Annesley, Michael Bolus, Tim Scott, William Tucker and Isaac Witkin were also part of the St Martin's group of sculptors had been tutored by Caro. All returned to teach in the department.
[3] The "onward of sculpture" was a favourite phrase of Anthony Caro. See Tim Scott, "Tim Scott on Caro at the Gagosian," *abstract critical*, 18 July 2013. Available at: https://abstractcritical.com/article/tim-scott-on-caro-at-gagosian/index.html (accessed 10 September 2019).

painting – were central to the sculpture produced at St Martin's in the sixties. Surfaces were generally smooth and covered in coats of acrylic paint, with color that was non-naturalistic, artificial, and saturated. There was a general scalelessness and a complete lack of tactile appeal. Photos taken in the department show Moon conducting a crit alongside King, with students Gerard Hemsworth, Bruce McLean and Roelof Louw in attendance. In a letter of 1972, he drew attention to the importance of Anthony Caro, the dominant figure at St Martin's, who had taught King and an important group of King's peers. Caro, Moon recalled, was "one of the artists I have spent most time over the years talking and arguing with – and although I don't agree with some of his commitment, he is one of the very few people I know who has as much, or more vitality and mental energy towards art as I feel I have."[4]

Moon only completed a handful of sculptures. Two of these, *3 Cubes with Variations* and *Split Cube* (both 1962), show the influence of Constructivism, and so stand outside the central stream of his art. Moon's mature art takes some of the means of Constructivism – geometry, clean surfaces, fastidiousness – and turns them to very different ends. Within Constructivism the grid – in many ways the tendency's emblematic motif – tends towards the general, the impersonal, the objective. For Moon, the grid was "not a grid in the sense everyone knows it but is a system of verticals and horizontals which represent a particular thrust carrying a particular colour and a particular feeling."[5] Moon was concerned with the subjective, with feeling, however ambiguously he approached it. Or perhaps Constructivism allowed Moon to engage in a kind of double-bluff; to act as a sort of revealing disguise. Certainly, his art reminds us that personality, even in those we know well and like, can be as much a matter of reticence, gaps and evasions as confidences, communication and candor.

"3D? Not 2D"

Although Moon produced only a small number of sculptures, sketches in his archive show that sculpture was often on his mind. For example, a group of paintings from 1962 – *Eclipse, Garland, Plaque I, Plaque II* – all draw on his ideas for sculpture. *Garland* very directly relates to a drawing for an upright circular sculpture, with the painting's motif retaining a clear sense of three-dimensional potential. The motif of a wavy-line often occurs in Moon's sketches for sculptures in the early sixties. In his painting *La Danse* we

[4] Jeremy Moon to Jennifer Bryant, [September 1972], The Jeremy Moon Archive Collection.
[5] Barry Martin, "Jeremy Moon, 29th October 1973, Interview with Barry Martin," *One Magazine*, April 1974: 8.

see this line repeated three times, each laid over the top of each other, as if the line was a physical thing – a piece of cut metal, perhaps – rather than a painted element in a picture. Other sketches show a striped pattern imposed on a three-dimensional structure, which appears in the paintings *Eclipse* and *Plaque II*. Moon returned to this idea a decade later, in corrugated reliefs such as *Untitled 1973*, and employed the same motif in an illusionistic manner on the flat surface of *No 1/73*. This gives some idea of the complexity of the back and forth between painting and sculpture in Moon's art.

Moon annotated one of his early studies for sculpture "3D? Not 2D".[6] The equivocation is revealing. Moon's paintings often proceed in opposite directions at once. Flatly painted surfaces give his works a definite physical presence, asserting their existence within the room in which they are shown, rather than acting as carriers of illusions, leading elsewhere. When Moon started to employ non-rectilinear shaped canvases in 1964, he simply made more explicit an already present characteristic. However, a number of Moon's paintings contain motifs that suggest abbreviated three-dimensional structures that, at times, have markedly sculptural qualities, even as they are positioned in or against an un-atmospheric, un-spatial flatness. Although this tendency is most marked in 1962, when Moon's sketches show he was particularly engaged with sculpture, it appears periodically throughout his work, such as the bouncing orbs of 1965, or the crosses and grids of 1969–71. Anti-illusionistic paintings that assert themselves as objects are made to contain motifs, which assert their own sense of truncated three-dimensionality despite the flatness that surrounds them. This is perhaps the central productive paradox in Moon's painting – and it seems unlikely he could have arrived at this point without his involvement in the broader context of contemporary sculpture.

Where sculptors like King and Caro were engaged in releasing flatness into three dimensions, Moon's paintings subsume three-dimensionality within flatness. King's early works often seem to result from a complex and paradoxical back-and-forth between two and three dimensions, resulting in sculptures imbued with elements of pictorial art freed from the task of depiction – silhouette, line, shadows, color. Moon approaches the same territory from a different direction. His paintings are imbued with elements of sculpture – its hardness, its impenetrability, its sense of existing in space rather than containing space – but with these qualities ambiguously freed from the actually three-dimensional.

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[6] Jeremy Moon, File: "3D closed 1963," [1963], The Jeremy Moon Archive Collection.

Untitled 1964

Untitled 1964 is a happily provocative sculpture. Each of the four corner elements is a quarter of the size of the central square they encircle. Yet beyond this, it is hard to see a logic connecting the corner elements – we are not really offered any explanation why one is a cube, one an empty right-angle, one a sort of teardrop, one a triangle. The elegance and precision of a Constructivist-type sculpture such as *Three Cubes with Variations*, with its implication of a governing rationality, is replaced by something reminiscent of blocks from a child's game.

Artlessness, a kind of gaucheness, is seen fairly often in the British abstract art of the early sixties, and it is often hard to fully disentangle this from its sophistication, or knowingness – a line walked with particular dedication by Moon. As one reviewer asked of sculpture by recent Royal College of Art graduates in 1967, "are they the ju-jubes of some Brobdingnagian child, dropped from above?"[7] The newness of the Constructivist aesthetic implied a slate wiped clean, proposing an ideal geometry as the underpinning for a new, rational society. In contrast, while abstract art of the sixties had its own rigor, often based in geometry, symmetry and sequence, its newness often implies a kind of wonder; the world not changed, but rather seen afresh. And particularly in the early years of the decade, this wonder seems to be glimpsed through childlike eyes.

Despite its geometry, there is something anthropomorphic in *Untitled 1964*. Its four subsidiary parts are arranged around a core; the lower pair stand on the ground, almost like feet; and it has a distinct sense of having a front, back and sides, even if front and back are reversible. Its faint, but I think undeniable, personhood is likely behind the sense that the sculpture – roughly four and half feet high and equally wide – feels somewhat small. It is hard not to measure it against our own height, adding to its childlike air. This partly denied, partly encouraged figuration, expressed with blocky geometric forms, links *Untitled 1964* to the 'Cubi' series David Smith was then engaged upon. Moon would have been aware of Smith through his importance to Caro, and would certainly have known his work through reproduction, even if he had not encountered it in the flesh. *Untitled 1964* is flatter than the Cubi sculptures, close to a displaced

[7] The review related to the *New Generation RCA* show at Galerie Givaudan, Paris, France, in 1967. Quoted from a contemporary newspaper clipping held in Nigel Hall's personal archive (source unknown), in Sam Cornish, *John Panting: Sculpture*. Bristol: Sansom & Company, 2012

painting, where Smith employs a dynamic interplay between the pictorial and sculptural. Moon's work also avoids the monumentality that Smith aspired to even in his small sculptures, as well as his general concern with deep or traumatic feeling. Instead, it is somewhat perky in feel; playful, almost cheeky.

Beyond its position on the floor rather than the wall, *Untitled 1964* differs from Moon's shaped canvases in its more complex outline and is markedly thicker than his generally thin canvases. Moon's paintings assert their physicality through their flatness; their direct paint-handling – generally careful, sometimes perfunctory; their denial of atmospheric space; their simplicity. Frank Stella, whose work Moon looked to in his paintings of 1967, was much keener to stress the literal bulk of his paintings and is widely described as working in two and a half dimensions. Moon's paintings – even his shaped canvases – and perhaps also sculptures such as *Untitled 1964,* could be said to operate in something like two and three-eights; that is, slightly lesser than Stella, but also slightly more evasive, harder to put one's finger on. The difference is probably at least in part of temperament – Moon is nothing if not indirect. On first glance, he may seem in eager agreement with Stella's quip "what you see is what you see;" but a second look generally suggests that things are not quite so simple. These differences between the two artists also point to the different sculptural responses to Abstract Expressionism in Britain and the United States. Stella was formed in relation to the blunt spatial occupation of minimalism, whereas the modernist sculpture by King or Caro, with which Moon was familiar in London, was much more overtly pictorial and open to ambiguity.

3D 1 72

The thirteen irregular pieces of *3D 1 72* are spaced two inches apart on the floor, forming a motif that implies an almost – but not quite – arbitrary fragmentation. The effect is closer to the crazy paving in a suburban garden than a shattered sheet of glass. Moon is interested in the pleasure of the irregular more than the threat of disintegration. The fragmentation of the motif is atemporal, in that rather than spreading from part to part, it exists evenly across the surface, without explanation or justification. It is as if, perhaps, the all-over webs of Jackson Pollock's paintings had been hardened, stylized, cleansed of all traces of action, and then left on the floor, rather than being turned ninety degrees and raised up to the wall. As with *Untitled 1964*, the effect is confrontational but affirmative. The sculpture can be enjoyed but not understood,

recognized not rationalized. And perhaps the implication is that the world is like this as well.

Orientation is the most fundamental difference between Moon's sculptural ideas of the early and mid-sixties and those of the early seventies. In common with many of the sketches for sculpture in Moon's archive, *Untitled 1964* is flat and upright, as if the physical structure of a painting, or the motifs it contained, had been pulled off the wall to stand isolated in the space of the room. In the early seventies the primary orientation of Moon's sculptures, and his ideas for sculptures, was horizontal. The floor, rather than the wall, became much more of an issue.

Robert Moon remembers his father experimenting with the fragments of found objects similar to those in his *3D 3 72* (pieces of pipe, corrugated asbestos board) on the lawn outside his studio, positioning them in different relationships. We can imagine the bright red of *3D 3 72* contrasted against the green of the grass, an arena in which pictorial and sculptural effects were merged. The switch in Moon's sculpture from vertical to horizontal reflects the increasingly lateral spread of his paintings; his move away from centralized motifs toward a great breadth, in tune with the panoramas so important to Abstract Expressionism and its progeny. The move from the vertical to the horizontal indicates a shift from an affinity with the object-based sculpture of Phillip King, toward the open, planar sculpture of Anthony Caro. At the same time, it perhaps shows the influence of American minimalist sculpture, whose impact can be seen in the work of many British modernist sculptors in the closing years of the sixties.

When compared to *Untitled 1964*, *3D 1 72* is at once more obviously related to painting and more physically assertive. Despite its flatness, it seems to open up to the room that contains it. It has a greater sense of physical assertion than Moon's paintings, which are generally self-contained, in that they do not seem to pressurize or activate the wall surrounding them or project off the wall. Likely taking its cue from Carl Andre's floor pieces, *3D 1 72* uses its relation to the floor as a short-cut to physicality, taking the solidity and weight of the floor into itself. The parts of *3D 1 72* are deeper than Moon's canvases, and the space of the surrounding room seems to seep into the gaps between them, at the same time as changes in light across its glossy surface emphasize that the sculpture is a part of the room in which it is shown. Viewed at another moment, the glossiness can be seen to bind the sculpture's surface together, detaching it as a plane from the depth of the matt-painted sides and emphasizing this plane as an image, in a

manner that would have been anathema to Andre. Clear distinctions between image and object, flatness and depth, are really the product of a posterior analysis, rather than accurately describing the experience of the sculpture. As with the best of the sculpture produced in Britain in the sixties, Moon is able to combine the simply stated or the matter-of-fact with the near hallucinatory.

In 1966, Gene Baro suggested that the horizontality of British sculpture was a "memory of landscape".[8] If so, it was a memory that most of the artists involved wanted to forget. The abstract art made in Britain in the sixties was predominantly urban in feel, its colors and materials those of the contemporary city, of product or industrial design. Yet by the early seventies this urban stance was increasingly under attack, as was the saturated color and pictorialism of British sculpture. Caro and King (along with many others) abandoned the bright color of sixties in the early years of the seventies. The opening of the new decade was a difficult time for many abstract modernists who had established themselves in the sixties. In 1971 Moon felt sufficiently threatened to write combatively about the "enemies of painting". To cite just one example of the change in sensibility, a badly received survey of British sixties sculpture, dominated by sculptors from St Martin's, at the Tate in the summer of 1971 was followed a few months later by a display of Richard Long at the Whitechapel, featuring his soon to be characteristic, temporary floor-based arrangements of natural materials.[9]

Among Moon's working titles for *3D 1 72* are "Garden Piece" and "Garden of Allah". Its color – well described by a recent reviewer as a "shiny disagreeable green that hovers between moss and pistachio"[10] – evokes nature as if in quotation marks, a distinctly artificial vision of grass. Clearly continuing much of the style and attitudes of the sixties, *3D 1 72* can perhaps also be seen – although it is hard to imagine an object less polemical in feel – as facing a changing context in ways that are both positive and slyly subversive.

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[8] Gene Baro, "British Sculpture: The Developing Scene," *Studio International*, 882 (1966): 177.
[9] Jeremy Moon kept a newspaper clipping review of the Richard Long's Whitechapel Art Gallery exhibition, which continues to form part of his archive: Richard Cork, "Inspiration in the mountain – Mapping out a sculpture," *The Evening Standard*, November 18, 1971.
[10] Robert Ayers, "Shades of Peculiar: Late-Blooming British Artist Jeremy Moon's Abstractions Turn Lines into Space," *Art News*, March 16, 2017.