



'For Those in Peril', 1992, bronze, brass, steel, wood, glass



'Ship of Fools', 1993, bronze, copper, brass and steel

MARITIME SCULPTURES

Evocations of an early machine age, crafted with an exquisite sense for materials, the maritime sculptures of Trefor Prest possess a reverie that defies their highly polished, finished outlook. Text by Henk Bak.



'Sun God', 1993, bronze, copper and brass

THE creations of Trefor Prest are reminiscent of bathyscaphes or bathyspheres, of deep-sea exploration, of the way in which shipwrecks grow by disintegration and quiet transformation, through corrosion and sedimentation, seaweeds and shells, in the dark depth of a seabed.

As a rule, Trefor Prest shapes and forms the elements of his compositions to his own specification: the work of a metalsmith and a toolmaker, mechanic and woodworker. Over the past 15 years or so the forms have evolved from structures to vessels, to composites of both; from the purely mechanical to an increasingly organic feel, with strong metabolic tendencies. The titles of the works have partly come as a reflection on the finished piece, partly as a motive developing through the work, as with *For Those in Peril* (1992) and *Dogger Bank*. The latter is the only piece that is mainly composed of timber. The way Prest works with wood creates a fair amount of dust and ventilation problems, which he thus far has tended to avoid, although he has the equipment, fan and ducts, to face them. For the time being wood sits more comfortable in his work as a warm and enriching element incorporated into handles or vessel bodies, enlivening them with a touch of quiet charm.

Prest's own rare hints as to the meaning of his work

allude to notions of “escape” and “nostalgia”. His reticence is appropriate, for the work is quite capable of speaking for itself and words are not the language in which it speaks. His sculptures are distinctly sensuous. Anyone with a healthy sense of touch and balance, vitality and movement, warmth and sound, will have much to explore and to delight in. Modulations in surface texture, alternations in materials such as wood and metal, generate variations in tactile temperature, amidst an all-pervading warmth articulated through cooler elements. The pieces appeal to both the “material” imagination (Gaston Bachelard) as well as the “formal” imagination, and include warmth or temperature in the range of their aesthetic qualities – a possibility that the sculptor Joseph Beuys had been the first to explore with materials as diverse as copper, fat and felt.

The mechanical, automated or tool-like appearance of the sculptures, suggestive of the whizz and clatter of fast-moving parts, supplemented with the occasional suggestion of a sounding horn, creates a fine stillness around them. There are, indeed, some moving parts and one can experience some complex transmissions when trying them out, but these modest “real” sounds cause only tiny ripples in the atmosphere of stillness. These movable contraptions are fun, kind of gentle jokes; deceptively simple, like good comedy, playing down considerable input of effort and skill.

If a reviewer’s first task is to intensify the viewing of the work, a second task may be to expand the viewer’s context, thus uncovering some of the work’s potential and its possible direction. In both cases the key to any reviewing lies in the work itself, even if references to other people’s work and to the literature may be helpful in the clarification.

There are some affinities with the work of Geoff Bartlett and the late Anthony Pryor. One could try to classify Trefor Prest’s work as post-Modern, Modern, constructivist or surrealist. (Ref. Max Ernst’s *The Elephant of the Celebes*, 1921.) These may be valid ways of expanding the context for his work.

For the purpose of this elucidation it may be useful to adopt a different line of approach, for many viewers are intrigued by the “living” quality of these machine-like, lifeless objects.

If art does not copy things but makes them visible, tangible, audible and so on, then what Prest’s sculptures manifest is what Michael Polanyi has called the “tacit dimension”: i.e. the way we are present beyond the physical boundaries of our bodies, in our instruments and tools; for example, a blind person, at the top of his or her walking stick.

In seeking to explain life by purely physical and chemical laws, scientists tend to look for mechanisms, as they seem to represent the purely physical and chemical laws in action. What those scientists don’t seem to realise is that mechanisms are explained by their purpose, not by physical and chemical laws. Mechanisms and machines work in a margin of freedom that the laws of nature allow them. There are limits to what pressure, tension, torsion, friction, etc., materials like metals and wood, clay and glass stand up to. When a mechanism breaks down, it has transgressed one or more of these limits. Physical and chemical laws explain a machine’s breakdown, not its function. A machine works through a purposeful use of its margin of freedom. Purpose is a

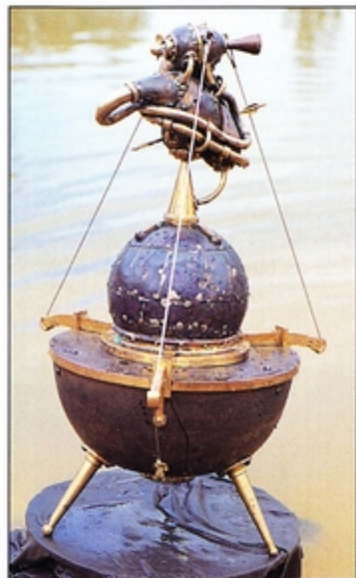
Right: *Alternative views of ‘Sinkers Lament’, 1990–91, brass, aluminium, steel and timber*



Detail of ‘Ship of Fools’



‘Desire’, 1993



‘Days of Hope’, 1994



Detail of ‘Days of Hope’





'Rope', 1994

category beyond the grasp of the physical sciences. Purpose belongs to the realm of life, sentience and intentionality, i.e. culture. In a nutshell, this is Polanyi's classic exposure of science's blind spot for the cultural basis of mechanistic explanations of life. A foreigner who was an absolute outsider to our culture and who knew all the chemical and physical laws of nature, would not be able to explain a wire, a handle, a vessel or a piston By getting to know our culture such a foreign visitor would start to understand how this culture uses Nature's margins to extend our bodies and our lives through tools and machines and to what purpose.

This brief excursion into the realms of theory and philosophy of science may help to enhance our appreciation of work such as Prest's: Without a clue regarding purpose, machines would remain a riddle, unsolvable in principle. Doubly riddling would be sculpture, as one needs to know purpose in order to transcend it. As a work of art, a sculpture transcends purpose. A sculpture in the form of a machine may be triply enigmatic, especially when some components of the "machine" are contrived to work with deliberate uselessness.

This three-step transcendence of physical/chemical law seems to convey a sense of life to them in the same way as their stillness seems to evoke movement and sound. In his earlier work this "organic" quality might have been latent (pure structures), and then interiorised in the second stage (vessel forms). At present it seems to have surfaced, emerging from their containing bodies (as in *Our Lady of Troubled Waters*, *Art Fair*, and *Albion's Dream*), or winding their way around those bodies like external intestines, in the way insects have their external skeletons



'In Days of Old', 1994



'Now Here's a Little Story', 1994

(as in *Sun God*, *Desire* and *Rope*). In other works those surfaced "organs" seem to have externalised themselves into a position that clears the space surrounding the container body (as in *Days of Hope* perched on the peak of a cone, or *Ship of Fools* cradled in the open ribs of a boat's hull).

In *For Those in Peril* the organic body remains inside but is made visible through the windows of its lantern-like container body, whereas in *Dogger Bank* the container body is an elaborate piece of architecture, tower-like, shed-like, ramp-like, in which the ship hangs high and dry. Mainly made out of wood, in this sculpture Prest plays with varieties of timber in the same way as with metal in his other work.

All mechanisms find their ultimate explanation in living organisms, the function of which they are extending: spades and hammers extend our hands, cooking pots our bellies. Living organisms themselves embody our sensitivities, desires, feelings and aspirations: reverberating and resonating with them, echoing and reflecting them. In this sense, the title may not only convey an escape from a sterile culture of electronised technology, a nostalgia for the time when machines still embodied humanness in their tangible handles and intelligible transmissions, but also suggest a timeless sense of machines as embodiment - from a personal to an individual mythology, from an individual artist's life story to the magic cauldrons of Celtic fairytales or the prophetic products of Ilmarinen's furnace in the Finnish *Kalevala*.

The concept of *organprojektion* was introduced by Ernst Kapp, over 100 years ago, in his philosophy of Technology: the idea that in tools and machines an organism projects itself outward. Mental projection, i.e. unconscious transfer of what lives in me as feeling or thought into the outer world, people, objects and so on, is a deep psychological concept, starting with Breuer and Freud. Although both concepts of projection may be useful in an appreciation of Prest's work, the most valuable one is *organprojektion*. Not only does it make sense of Prest's work up to now, but it also suggests something of its potential. In other words, we observe in the titles "mental" projections; condensations of what the maker sees in the work and passwords for the viewer to enter it. In the works themselves we see machines revealing their organic, human and cultural origins, projections of a more objective kind.

In his recent exhibition called "Pinacotheca" and at the ACAF Contemporary Art Fair in Melbourne (September-October, 1994), the works were seen removed from their aquatic element. Imagine them being lifted from the water, washed and shiny, dripping, causing rippling circles to spread ... it was no accident that Gaston Bachelard made his point on material imagination in a book on water. To this effect, a series of photographs of Trefor Prest's work emerging from and hovering above the water has been very helpful.

Henk Bak

Henk Bak is Senior Lecturer in History and Theory of Art, Faculty of Art and Design, Caulfield/Frankston Campus, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

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