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IMPORTANT
CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE

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THE relations between Painting and Sculpture - as found in painting - can be perceived as a relation of form or of subject, and in a small number of cases as both. As a subject for painting, sculpture has been presented as literal fact or as metaphor, and in a small number of cases as both. In the more serious work of Tony Clark since 1987, we find a continuous preoccupation with the representation of sculpture which can be briefly outlined as follows: in 1986 the artist made a terracotta-coloured plasticine pagoda in relief, which he then painted from observation. This small work generated the 'Chinoiserie Landscape' series in which images of pagodas and trees were painted as if in low relief against flat organic - abstract backgrounds. In 1991 he began the Kufic Landscape series in which Arabic scripts were decorated and elaborated with various organic motifs and painted as red faux-relief panels in asymmetrical groups.

In 1992-3 these panels evolved into the 'Jasperware' paintings in which Josiah Wedgwood's neoclassical, decorative ceramic idiom was pressed into service as a representational vehicle for bulbous, pustular forms, sometimes suggestive of diseased Henry Moores in *flagrante delicto*. It is in these paintings that Clark's interest in sculpture as subject and as form, as fact and as metaphor became focussed. The 'Jasperware' paintings adopt the form of outsized ceramic reliefs and their subjects (if we read their abstractness as abstraction 'represented') are hypothetical sculptures.

As a symbol or metaphor sculpture almost invariably addresses the notion of the Classic. Sculpture as a motif in Renaissance art was customarily used to evoke pagan Antiquity. The frieze-like compositions of Poussin are an instance of a sculptural form being used to metaphorically enhance the *gravitas* of his subjects.

'Disputes' between Painting and Sculpture were occasionally used as a form

of theoretical conceit by Renaissance writers on art, and the relative merits of the respective art forms are still, surprisingly, referred to in current art discourse. Clark's adoption, as a painter, of the sculptural mode, might be seen as a kind of symbolic repudiation of his own medium, a harkening back to his youthful 70s-Duchampian tastes when the medium of painting was, as now, officially frowned upon.

Be that as it may, Important Contemporary Sculpture continues the theme of conflict between classical form and anti-classical subject which the 'Jasperware' paintings initiated. In this case the subject is not mere Moore-ish but a specific, late Eva Hesse: *Untitled (Rope Piece)*, 1970. The string and latex of the original, documented in a photograph, have been represented as fake metal and the spaces of the original, arbitrary and spontaneous, flattened into a distorted grid. In his reworking of it, the Hesse piece has some formal resemblance to Clark's 'Jasperware Mural'

in the St. Kilda Library in which a Bedrock-type feature wall is suggested by a grid of white pseudo-relief lines. This grid could also be seen, however, as a net or open membrane wrapped *around* the wall, and this may have encouraged Clark to pay homage (if such it is) to the Hesse work.

Clark's appropriation of the Hesse is different from his previous 'borrowings' from artists and history. Whereas he usually incorporates source material into his work synthetically, making it over as his own, his appropriation here is both more blatant and approached more gingerly. What are we to make of this appropriation, by a male artist, of a canonical female 'master' piece? Clark's work might be seen as a doubling of the inversion performed by feminist artists, most notably Sherrie Levine, in her appropriations of works by famous male artists. Is it for Clark a plagiaristic method of discovering the 'feminine'? Or is it a jibe at the reified aura of Hesse? Does Clark's work

do violence to its ostensible subject? Hesse's work, which could be characterised as feminine in its 'formlessness' is in Clark's re-presentation metaphorically captured in a perspectival gridded image. Clark's mural, consciously or not, makes explicit the process of a male normalisation of women's art. If Clark saw the freedom of the Hesse work as a threatening manifestation of the 'other', he has tamed it by upgrading the rope and latex to a notional metal (the correct material of macho sculptural practice). And the abstractness of the Hesse, another index of freedom, is controlled by, literally, pushing it against the wall and refashioning it as representation.



