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Shapes of Things Before My Eyes

It may have been a sculpture he made at the age of eight – of Italy’s fascist dictator Benito Mussolini – that set Paul de Monchaux on the path of a lifetime in art, but it took another 70 years before his first solo show. Time then, surely, to reflect on the public and the private sides of his work...





Paul de Monchaux in the office at the top of his house in Brockley, south east London. Left: the maquette of his *Cranked Column* and other works



'I feel like a child when I begin a piece. I'm full of apprehension'

At the tender age of 80 you might be excused for assuming that sculptor Paul de Monchaux would be content to put his feet up, switch on *Test Match Special* and take a long deserved rest. You would, however, be wrong.

'I'm eager to get to work,' he confides from his study in his South East London home, where a happy balance of ordered chaos seems to reign. 'Whereas most people my age are ready to... die. I'm very lucky indeed. Anyone that has something to do even when they're beginning to collapse is lucky.' De Monchaux speaks with the sagacity of someone who has lived a long and fulfilling creative life. His mind and imagination is still fired every morning. And it's accompanied by a trepidation that has to be resolved at the beginning of any new piece of work.

'I feel like a child when I begin a piece,' he says. 'I'm full of apprehension really because I know from experience that for every one that works there is another five or six that don't. There's always that excitement and tension as to whether this is going to be interesting.'

And de Monchaux certainly knows about interesting. His life has been, and remains, a testament to the word. Born in Montreal ('by sheer chance') to accountant parents who moved up and down the east coast of North America, his tale takes in the 1950s Manhattan fashion industry, a move to the UK later that decade, a two-year sojourn teaching in Nigeria, the influence of Jackson Pollock and John Cage and a 20-odd year stint teaching in London.

His sculptures include memorials in honour of individuals as diverse, and possibly divisive, in our recent history as Winston Churchill and Wilfred Owen. His work is often elliptical, abstract and figurative. There are no easy answers in de Monchaux's bold renderings. And where can this fruitful journey in art be traced back? Believe it or not the head of fascist Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

As a child de Monchaux liked to make things. He was

fascinated by art galleries and loved to attend the education programmes held at these various places.

'I think there was a crucial moment when I must have been about eight,' he recalls. 'I went to this class in Rochester, upstate New York, and we were invited to paint a rabbit in a cage. I remember trying to do it and getting very distressed because the colours all turned to mud. I couldn't handle it at all. To keep me quiet the teacher gave me some clay. I immediately got going on it and produced a head of Mussolini, because I remembered his great jaw from photographs. A shrewd teacher got the class to stop what they were doing and come and admire the Mussolini. And that was it. I've not tried to paint a picture since.'

Smitten with sculpture, de Monchaux moved to New York after leaving school aged 17 and enrolled in evening sculpture classes. By day he worked as a messenger in Manhattan for a studio that did photographic retouching. Having a naturally inquisitive nature he was soon having a go and in turn he graduated from the street to the studio. It was, he says, the perfect apprenticeship for someone going into the visual arts. The work ethic was fantastic – and vigorous. 'I met quite a few of the big-name photographers of those days. It was very useful as a young kid to absorb how they operated, which was incredibly intense, with a fanatical attention to detail.'

Sculpture was still the aspiration, however. And while a marginal activity in New York ('Most of the art schools were devoted to commercial art and graphic design'), he did rub shoulders with ex-servicemen studying on the GI Bill who had either seen action in Europe and visited the great museums on this side of the pond or had visited Europe since the war. De Monchaux suspected that Europe, and specifically Britain, via the work of Henry Moore and Reg Butler, among others, was where he needed to be. A cousin who worked at University College London introduced him





Left: Paul de Monchaux's *Studies for Male & Female Columns* (2014-15), and, above right, his *Volute IV* (2013), all displayed in his architect-designed studio/gallery space in the garden

to a professor at the Slade art school and eventually he was admitted. 'I didn't have a portfolio or anything like that,' he jokes. 'It was a case of straightforward nepotism.'

Back in the 1950s, The Slade was still under the influence of the Euston Road Group. The sculpture department was run by Alfred Gerard, who had worked with Moore on the Underground Building (55 Broadway) at St James' Park, and F.E. McWilliam. Moore and Butler both came into teach. The atmosphere was lofty. Any talk of money or commercial considerations in relation to art was considered vulgar. De Monchaux loved it.

'I was like a duck to water,' he says. 'It was a great time, because the New York school had been pretty sloppy and amateur in comparison. And the Slade under Gerard's leadership was highly disciplined and very demanding.'

Upon graduating from The Slade, de Monchaux, his wife and fellow artist, Ruth, and their three-month-old baby found themselves in Nigeria. A new campus had been established at an art school and it needed teachers. 'We were destitute and I had to make a living. It became a bit of a colonial outpost for people who needed a job,' he laughs.

While there, de Monchaux attempted to educate his students about the worth of their indigenous art. Unfortunately they only seemed to be interested in learning how to be successful modern artists. He persevered, and undertook a 2,000-mile trip around Nigeria looking at sculptures. A student accompanied him as a companion and guide of sorts. Recently de Monchaux was contacted by an art historian at Princeton who was writing a book about Nigerian art. It turns out that the student who had joined him on his trip had become an eminent artist in Nigeria and the journey had proved pivotal in his education as an artist and to incorporating his own culture into his work.

Upon returning to these shores, de Monchaux and his family took up residence in South East London, initially teaching at Goldsmiths, before moving to Camberwell School of Art in 1965, the same year he moved into the house we're currently talking in. Back then, he says, it was like the slums. 'Now it's bankers everywhere,' he explains with an air of resignation.

Teaching gave de Monchaux a means to provide for his ever-expanding family. He continued his own pursuits outside the classroom. A big jazz fan and a devotee of Jackson Pollock, he liked to improvise. 'Especially after three years at The Slade where all your work is done under supervision,' he says. 'I did some work where I set myself the task of allowing the thing to make itself. I had a certain amount of success. Things got picked up by galleries.'

Eventually he began to re-appraise his methods. 'I think it was John Cage who said that chance is interesting by chance. So after a year or two of allowing the clay to speak for itself I realised that this was the case. I began to think that my work needed more structure. So I went back to life study really.'

Unfortunately the teaching started to get in the way. 'It became a... what's the right word?... a drain. Your ideas are offered up and perhaps rather crudely realised by your students. When you could have been doing it more



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authentically. When you go into a studio with a bunch of students you have to do something with them. And what you do is what you know, so I think that the answer is, on the whole, if you're taking it seriously and you're trying to educate the students, then it's a draining affair. And there's many a teacher who gets burnt out by the process – some very talented people find that after five to 10 years of that they haven't got the focus or the concentration.'

Just before he left Camberwell he hit upon a significant change in his methods of work. Hitherto de Monchaux had worked from subject matter. Then, in 1983, he assembled a piece that had no external reference at all. He was simply using geometry as an instrument. He likens it to the notes on a piano.

'It has no significance unless used in combination and the combination is what has the significance, not what it is representing. It was a bit of the clearing of the mind. I had always used geometry – anyone that's ever sculpted gets to know about geometry. The invisible space, the space inside things... so I came to the realisation that that was what I was interested in. I was more interested in the process than the subject, so that was a highly important threshold.

'What I've learned very slowly, over many, many years



Making plaster
prototype moulds for
works in progress in
his workshop



– I’m a slow learner – is that you have to have two things. What amounts to a score or a script, and then improvise around that. So the idea, I suppose, to continue with the musical reference, is you take an old standard, which is anything you know, and you develop it and do variations on it and the chances are that you’re going to come up with something that you have never seen before. Whereas you’ve heard the old tune, but the development of it remains out of sight and because it remains out of sight it remains interesting. If you ask me why I make a sculpture I say nowadays, to see what it’s going to look like.’

So it’s a kind of focused improvisation then? ‘I think there’s an awful lot in that. I’m full of admiration for people that do that. Music has no direct relation to what I do, but, what’s the correct word... the spirit. It’s in the spirit of what I do.’

And at the risk of sounding trite, your work is more about the journey rather than the destination then?

‘I think it has to be,’ he responds. ‘I think obviously there is a point that everyone dreams about when everything will fall into place and it will be impossible to remove or add anything – there must be a word for that state of affairs, if there is I’ve never learned it. Where things are in such a precise state of equilibrium that to remove or to add to it would destroy it. And that is the moment that one is looking for. And it’s far from secure because you can’t anticipate how that is going to work.’

Since leaving Camberwell 29 years ago, de Monchaux’s inventive works have taken in a number of public and private commissions. His views on commissioned work have adjusted accordingly. Having espoused the once commonly held view that the commercial art world isn’t authentic art, he’s changed tack. ‘It still seems to me that you have to regard whatever you submit as another sculpture. It’s never been a separate category in my mind. I’m quite happy to stand by the commissioned work in exactly the same way I’d stand by the freestanding work. It’s all the same to me. I don’t make any distinction.’

And having had his first solo gallery show in 2013 (at the Piper Gallery) – aged 78 – de Monchaux can freely comment on a life in art with perspicacity. He can join the dots between private and public art. He sees how the wheels continue to turn, stretching back to antiquity and into the future. ‘I’m much more conscious of those links than I used to be. And the idea that we’re standing on the shoulders of giants is very present in my mind all the time. So I find that as I’ve got older the more I see the art of any period as being all the same – there are certain qualities that persist. When you’re young you think you’re somehow striking out, finding new territories, but the older I get the more I see these connections.’

A lifetime’s journey, with detours, about turns and stunning vistas thrown in: not bad from a starting point of Benito Mussolini. ●

Paul de Monchaux will be exhibiting with Megan Piper in the Emerge Section of Art15 (Olympia, May 21-23); meganpiper.co.uk



Left: once the finished prototypes are cast and dried, work begins on sculpting the forms. Right: on the ramp leading up to the storage workshop in the garden

