

Edward Allington

“We live everywhere in an aesthetic hallucination of reality.” Jean Baudrillard, ‘Simulations’, 1983

Edward Allington’s seminal sculptures of the early 1980s provide a starting point for viewing ‘Pleasure Gardens’. Allington’s recreations of the classical world and its iconography are characterised by playfulness, erudition, and a love of contradiction. ‘Oblivion Penetrated’, illustrated here, is at once a philosophical provocation; an experiment in extending the language of sculpture; and an alluring emblem of its time. Here, Allington complicates what qualities and characteristics might be defined and described as ‘sculptural’. At first glance, we can say that ‘Oblivion Penetrated’ creates two illusions which confound our expectations of sculptural form. Firstly, we are seemingly asked to suspend disbelief in the work’s defiance of gravity (rather than being invited to assess the ‘sculptural’ properties of weight and mass). Secondly, it evokes liquidity rather than solidity, appearing poured rather than constructed, carved, or modelled. At a formal level, it is not possible to readily decipher the edges of the work, as it has no clear contour or outline. Yet unlike those practices associated with ‘anti-form’ it is elegantly choreographed and ‘neoclassical’ at least in some sense – though trying to define in which ways leads us into further uncertain ground.

The artist’s early works also address a constellation of wider intellectual problems which might be said to define the conditions of art production in our time. These works predate Baudrillard’s quotation above, though echo its terms. One of these problems is why (and indeed how) the individual artist might create new artefacts when they are patently unable to compete with industry’s capacity to generate new objects. A second is how the artist may create new and bespoke objects “in an age of mechanical reproduction”, to use Walter Benjamin’s term. A third is how it is possible to create novel and unique meanings by using objects which are manifestly neither novel nor unique. Allington’s responses to these compound problems pushed British sculpture in a more philosophically inclined direction. His work is, though, invariably leavened with wit and paradox. There might be said to be three immediately observable paradoxes that ‘Oblivion Penetrated’ embodies. Firstly, it is a unique ‘luxury’ commodity composed from thousands of disposable, inexpensive components. Secondly, whilst it is held in perpetuity by a national museum, it is constructed from non-durable materials. Third, whilst the function of the horn of plenty as a motif is to celebrate the fecundity of the natural world, the components here are blatantly manufactured. Accordingly, the work redirects our attention to the ‘fecundity’ – the productive capacity – of consumer society.

The origins and purposes of artworks in classical times, Ernst Gombrich argues in ‘Meditations on a Hobby Horse’, are substitution rather than representation. This is to say that works of art create illusions in order to ‘become’ their referents in our imagination. Allington’s approach to ‘representation’ in sculpture complicates this, and is characteristically double-coded. ‘Oblivion Penetrated’ is scarcely a substitute for either a ‘real’ predecessor, whether fruit or classical sculpture, nor does it ‘represent’ them as such. It might be better seen as giving concrete form to a particular mindset, in which representational objects made of valuable materials are repositories of an extraordinary value. ‘Oblivion Penetrated’ functions through what is best classed as auto-criticism or self-reflexivity: through making its own contradictions tangible. We might say that by concealing the ‘scaffolding’ which makes the work defy gravity, the artist draws attention to the conceptual ‘scaffolding’ similarly sustaining our ludicrous investments in works of art. Allington has memorably described our collective investment in art objects’ uniqueness and totemic power as a form of “mass psychosis”. The psychological space the viewer inhabits when confronting ‘Oblivion Penetrated’ might be seen as redoubling such a condition. To adapt another of Benjamin’s terms, Allington creates a ‘dialectical fairyland’ in which the spectator is initially entranced through spectacle before being invited to query their own response.

By employing illusion as a tactic of engagement, we are forced to submit to and then question our attraction to the object as art. If we take Frederic Jameson’s description of reification as “the transformation of social relations into things [through] the effacement of the traces of production”, then Allington might be seen to pursue a strategy of ‘reverse reification’. ‘Ordinary’ goods are presented both as vehicles of astonishment and as tools of ‘counter-knowledge’. Indeed Allington’s wider practice is, often based upon reading material culture ‘against the grain’. By re-presenting those very things thought of during the modernist period as nostalgic or escapist, as fantastical or inviting deference, he transforms their meanings even while their appearances remain the same.