ELISABETH FRINK AND THE GEOMETRY OF FEAR

TANIA MOORE

I think that's very much part of human beings – vulnerability and strength – the mixture of both that I find in the male figure is very important to me as an idea.[1]

Elisabeth Frink, 1985

Elisabeth Frink's human and animal subjects explore humanity and masculinity, and the coupled yet contrary traits of vulnerability and violence. Even by the time she emerged from art school, Frink had already established these themes, and she would go on to develop them throughout her career. Her work, and that of her post-war contemporaries who came to be collectivised as the 'Geometry of Fear' group, had an existential anguish, undoubtedly caused not only through memories of the recent war, but also through the real threat of imminent nuclear conflagration. Her themes need to be understood within this context.

Frink came to sculpture during a particularly active time for the arts in Britain, immediately after the close of the Second World War. When she enrolled at art school in 1947, the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Institute of Contemporary Arts had been established the previous year. These ambitious institutional developments were echoed across society, with the introduction of the National Health Service in 1948 and increased access to higher education. The Arts Council, a product of a government committed to public education, staged exhibitions around the country to promote the arts to as wide an audience as possible. The ICA, an independent institution, was founded by Herbert Read (1893–1968) and Roland Penrose (1900–1984) to promote modern and experimental art, and was international in outlook.

In 1951 the Festival of Britain was committed to national recovery, and to a positive, modern vision of British life. The organisers encouraged the population to engage in the arts and science, and aimed to showcase British art and industry to the world, launching a new generation of artists and designers. In addition to the main activities on London's South Bank, events were staged around the country to coincide with the Festival, including Tate's first retrospective of Henry Moore (1898–1986). He, like many others, had benefited from increased access to higher education and attended art school after the First World War, thanks to an ex-serviceman's grant. Moore gained international status during the 1940s, in part due to sustained promotion by the British Council. The institutional support given to artists at this time invigorated the arts, as artists had new international opportunities to exhibit and travel. Those who followed in the 1960s gained not only from the institutional systems set up in the post-war period, but also from the profound developments made by the artists of the 1940s and 1950s.

Moore was one of thirteen British sculptors commissioned to make work for the Festival of Britain, along with other established artists Frank Dobson (1886–1963), Jacob Epstein (1880–1959), Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975) and Uli Nimptsch (1897–1977). Other artists were selected who were at the start of their careers: Robert Adams (1917–1984), Reg Butler (1913–1981),

Lynn Chadwick (1914–2003), Geoffrey Clarke (1924–2014), Karin Jonzen (1914–1998), F. E. McWilliam (1909–1992), Bernard Meadows (1915–2005) and Eduardo Paolozzi (1924–2005).

The following year, some of these young artists were showcased in the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in an exhibition titled *New Aspects of British Sculpture*. It marked a pivotal moment in British art – one that was acknowledged internationally. Eight young sculptors were presented, marking a change from the work of Moore and Hepworth that had been exhibited there in 1948 and 1950 respectively. They had shown works in wood and stone, demonstrating their belief in direct carving, in which the form is guided by the material. In 1952 three exhibitions filled the pavilion: paintings by Graham Sutherland and Edward Wadsworth, and *New Aspects of British Sculpture*. Adams, Kenneth Armitage (1916–2002), Butler, Chadwick, Clarke, Meadows, Paolozzi and William Turnbull (1922–2012) were all under forty, and until this exhibition only Adams and Chadwick had exhibited outside the UK. A single work by Moore outside the pavilion positioned him as the forefather of the sculptors, as described in the catalogue essay:

> Henry Moore is in some sense no doubt the parent of them all, and a single work of his, more recent than anything yet shown by him in Venice, stands at the entrance of the Pavilion to give an orientation for the surprising developments that will be found within.[2]

This work by Moore differed in style from the carvings that he and Hepworth had previously shown in the Pavilion. It shows the influence of Surrealism, which had become important to Moore in the 1930s. Although he later returned to humanist figures, during the 1950s he was closer in style to the younger generation who followed him.

Exhibited outside the pavilion, *Double Standing Figure*, 1950, cast in bronze, is composed of two sinuous forms intersected with triangles and planes of metal, suggesting human-insect figures. Butler's *Woman*, 1949, was shown on the opposite side of the steps, a slender figure in forged and welded iron. A similar juxtaposition had been made the previous year in the Arts Council's *Exhibition in the Open Air* in Battersea Park, with Moore's single *Standing Figure*, 1950, in bronze and Butler's *Torso*, 1950, in iron. The sculptures signposted a new direction that an international audience could find within the Pavilion.

In the catalogue essay, Herbert Read described this new style of the younger artists:

> These new images belong to the iconography of despair, or of defiance; and the more innocent the artist, the more effectively he transmits the collective guilt. Here are images of flight, of ragged claws 'scuttling across the floors of silent seas', of excoriated flesh, frustrated sex, the geometry of fear.[3]

Read had opened the essay with the fact that these artists were not part of an organised group. However, owing to his memorable line, they were thereafter collectivised by the label 'Geometry of Fear', being known for welded metal representations of humans and animals.

Read notably mentioned Adams as being distinctly 'isolated in his architectonic pursuits'.[4] Adams was more closely involved with British Constructivism, forming friendships with, and exhibiting alongside, Victor

Henry Moore, *Double Standing Figure* at the British Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1952

The British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 1952 with work by Bernard Meadows

Pasmore (1908–1998), Kenneth Martin (1905–1984), Mary Martin (1907–1969), Adrian Heath (1920–1992) and Anthony Hill (b.1930). Although known mostly for abstraction, Adams's work did at times suggest lithe human figures. In 1949 at Gimpel Fils, he presented a series of sculptures in wood, cement and stone, which were formed of cone shapes pieced together to suggest the human anatomy. They are reminiscent of the *Endless Columns*, 1918–37, of Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957), which Adams had seen in Brancusi's Paris studio the previous year. Adams also produced a series of wiry figures in welded metal, suggestive of those of Butler, but more abstracted, with lines that delineate space rather than form. It was these works, in both wood and brass, that were selected for the Venice exhibition. Although they suggested the figure, it was acknowledged that Adams was predominantly an abstract artist, both in Read's line above and previously by Patrick Heron (1920–1999), the artist-critic who compared Butler and Adams in 1951: 'In comparison with a Butler he is abstract' . . . 'The fierce animalistic quality, the "living presence" of a Butler figure is quite missing from Adams's sculpture.'[5]

When these artists were presented to the British press in advance of the Biennale, the reception was largely unfavourable. One critic in *The Observer* asked, 'Will our foreign critics discover in these bronze and iron abstractions any real contribution to sculpture?' The critic favourably mentioned Butler and Armitage, but concluded: 'it is unlikely that the other sculptors will cause much stir in the British Pavilion'.[6] The answer, however, was that they would, and the exhibition was noted by the international press as one of the most exciting in the Biennale. A wider, international audience would have been more used to the aggressively angular, abstracted form of figuration that these artists were exploring. The ragged narrative conjured up by Read and illustrated by the spiky forms of the artists was foreshadowed in France by the jagged forms of Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) and Germaine Richier

(1902–1959); and Richier, too, exhibited at the 1952 Venice Biennale. Her *Spider I*, 1946, integrated wire for the first time in her work, in a style that was seen in Butler's work in the 1952 Biennale.

The director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr (1902–1981), wrote in a letter in the *Manchester Guardian*, 'it was the group of young sculptors that provided the greatest surprise of the entire Biennale. Adams, Armitage, Butler, Chadwick, Paolozzi and others aroused not only international admiration but – what is more conclusive – a wide-spread desire to buy.'[7] He himself bought work by Adams, Butler and Chadwick for MoMA.

The artists included in the Venice Biennale exhibition were conspicuously all men. This wasn't especially surprising; since the British Council had taken control of the British Pavilion's programming in 1938, Hepworth had been the only woman to show in 1950, and no other woman did until Bridget Riley (b.1931) in 1968. However, Frink refused to acknowledge or be perturbed by gender prejudice, affirming, 'I didn't think of myself as a "woman sculptor"' and 'In the arts you cannot differentiate between the sexes: men and women are equal.'[8] Rather, she cited her age as being why her work had been excluded: she was six years younger than Paolozzi and Clarke, for example, the youngest of the artists in the exhibition. She was still studying when the exhibition was held.[9]

New Aspects of British Sculpture toured internationally, and the British Council arranged a number of additional touring exhibitions to introduce young British sculptors to the world, some of which did include Frink. In *Young English Sculptors*, which toured Germany and Rotterdam from 1955 to 1956, she showed alongside some of the artists who had exhibited in Venice and other contemporaries. It included her primeval *Horse's Head*, 1955, in plaster, *Dead Leveret*, c.1954 in bronze and two drawings. In a touring exhibition of the same name in Sweden in 1956, Frink was the only woman artist included and presented only a single work, *Horse's Head*, this time in bronze.

Press coverage from the exhibition in Sweden makes clear that the British Council succeeded in their aim of promoting British sculpture as innovative and exciting. As one reporter wrote:

> In recent years the experimental school of sculpture has won a more and more dominant position in the development of English art. For a long period of years England had only two or three sculptors of truly international class, but in the post-war period English art has been enriched by a whole generation of considerable sculptors. The material for the present exhibition has been drawn exclusively from this circle.[10]

While discussing the term the 'Geometry of Fear' in a recorded interview, Frink said, 'well, you know, people still call them' and then quickly corrected herself: 'call us that'.[11] Although she exhibited regularly alongside the 'Geometry of Fear' artists,[12] she seemed conflicted as to whether she was part of the group. In fact her reluctance was to do with not wishing to be part of any group, rather than a negative reaction towards the 'Geometry of Fear':

> I think it is incorrect to say, as so many do today, that English sculpture in the fifties was all spiky, gloomy and aggressive, which puts us all into a single group, that is, Meadows, Armitage, Chadwick, Butler and myself. We were all working in very different ways and as artists never worked together or pursued a single communal aim.[13]

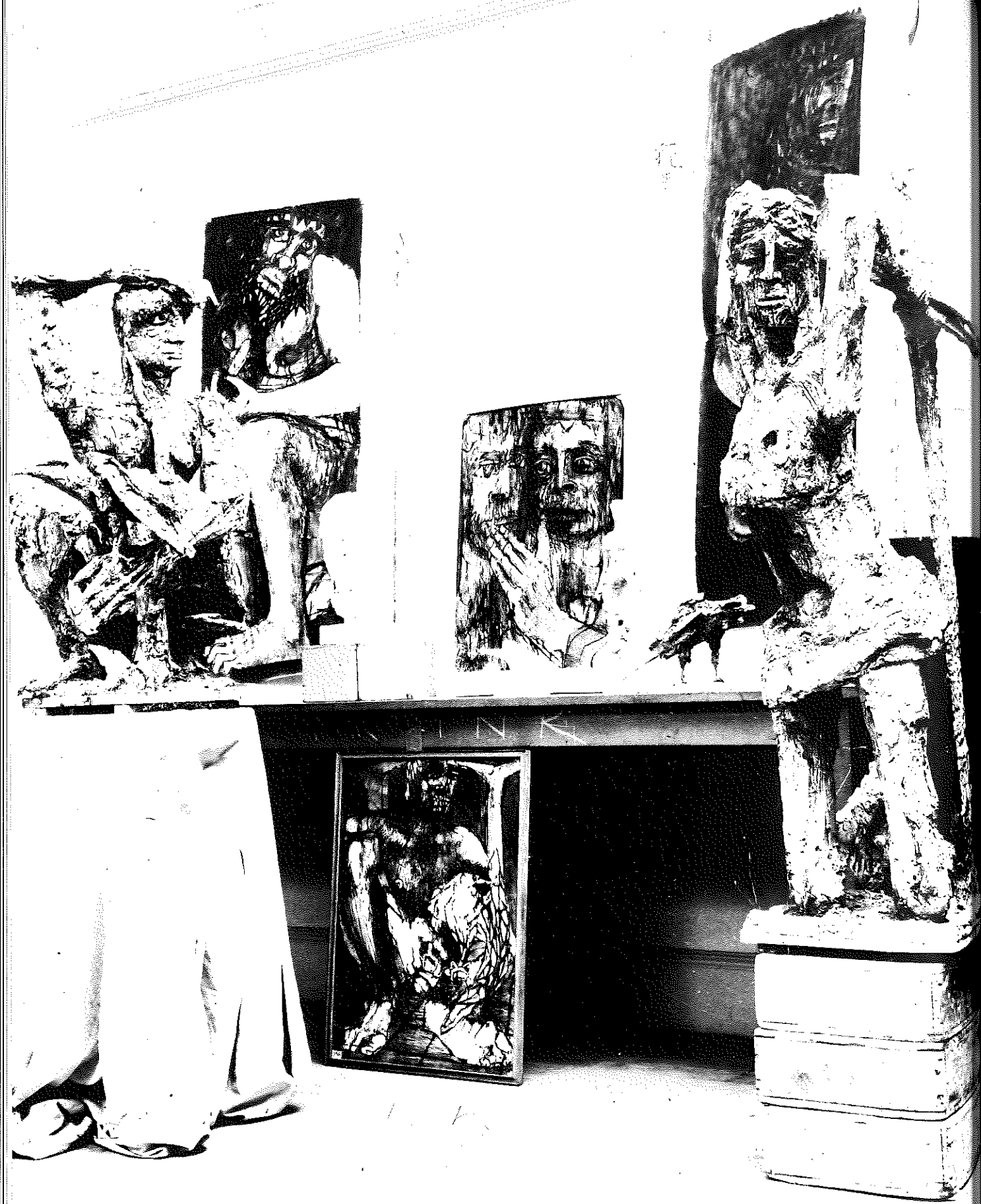
Frink's early skill and success were marked by her participation in the international competition for the Unknown Political Prisoner, organised by the ICA in London. In January 1952, the competition was announced at a press conference by Moore. Frink heard about it through Chelsea School of Art, where she was studying. Artists all over the world were invited to submit proposals for a monument to commemorate victims of war. The press announced that 3,500 artists from fifty-seven countries had entered (although this figure may have been inflated by the organiser, Anthony Kloman [1904–1993]). Of these, eighty won prizes, the biggest contingent coming from Britain, with a total of twelve. British artist Butler was the overall winner. Chadwick, Hepworth and Frink won prizes – Frink being the youngest artist to do so.

Butler had proposed a towering structure dwarfing three figures on a rock base, which, if it were built, would have reached 100–400 feet, depending on its location. Although no site was proposed when artists were submitting entries, a site in West Berlin was eventually chosen. Butler's structure of rods and platforms simultaneously suggests architecture, a cage, surveillance equipment and broadcasting transmitters.

A number of the prize-winning entries were composed of geometric forms in wire, including those by Naum Gabo (1890–1977), Richard Lippold (1915–2002) and Antoine Pevsner (1884–1962). Hepworth was true to her organic, carved shapes with three pierced standing figures suggesting the human form. Chadwick, on the other hand, proposed an abstract composition of jagged triangles held together with rods. The combination of metal bars and diamond shapes is reminiscent of his *Cypress*, commissioned for the Festival of Britain. The varied prize-winning maquettes were exhibited at Tate in 1953, earning Frink national recognition in the press. Butler's winning maquettes, now in the Tate collection, were exhibited by the British Council at the 1954 Venice Biennale, alongside paintings by Francis Bacon (1909–1992), Lucian Freud (1922–2011) and Ben Nicholson (1894–1982). Sadly, the entire project became subject to Cold War tensions, the political machinations ultimately preventing it from being realised. Butler's monument was never installed, the financial backers withdrawing because his sculpture was 'too ultra modern'.[14]

Frink's entry is particularly interesting in the current context. She submitted a maquette titled *Man with Bird*, 1952, of a seated male figure with a bird on his wrist in plaster (since destroyed). She described the bird as a raven and the man as a victim – a juxtaposition of aggressor and victim that she would continue to explore throughout her career. A reviewer noted the relevance of this work to Frink's oeuvre, describing her as 'one of the few prize-winners who is naturally a humanist, and her seated figure with a bird is genuinely tragic, even though it may not be especially adapted to this particular tragedy'.[15]

Many reviews of the competition entries echoed the sentiment that artists had submitted versions of existing works, rather than addressing the theme of the competition. Like many of the artists mentioned above, Frink did in fact present a variation on an existing subject. However, for her, the subject of victimhood was natural and one that would occupy her throughout her career. The Unknown Political Prisoner theme of commemoration to 'all those men and women who in our times have given their lives or their liberty to the cause of freedom'[16] chimes with Frink's assertion, decades later, that her *Tribute Heads* and *In Memoriam Heads* of the 1970s and 1980s respectively were 'for those people who are living in oppressive regimes, who are not allowed



Frink's Chelsea studio, c.1952 with *Man with Bird*, 1952 and *Christ at the Column*, c.1950

freedom of thought, who are being persecuted for their politics or religion, or being deprived of the dignity of daily living and working'.[17]

Frink's first major gallery exhibition was in 1952 at the Beaux Arts Gallery in Mayfair, London. Beaux Arts was run from 1951 by Helen Lessore (1907–1994), who became one of the most influential women in British art of the twentieth century. She promoted avant-garde artists such as Frank Auerbach (b.1931), Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915) and Leon Underwood (1890–1975). She gave many young artists their first solo exhibition and exhibited a number of women. Frink showed alongside John Harvey and Michael Werner, all three artists exhibiting sculpture. She presented *Man with Bird*, 1952, which was a large-scale version of the Unknown Political Prisoner maquette; an aggressive-looking *Bird*, 1952; and *Horse and Rider*, 1950, a mannered

Horse and Rider, 1950
Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993)
Ink on paper
Frink Estate and Archive

composition in which the rider poses on one knee on a proud horse. It is a sculptural rendition of her drawing, *Horse and Rider*, 1950, in which a skeletal figure kneels on a gaunt horse. The drawing is related to an *Apocalypse* series created while Frink was at school. Contrasting with this style, she showed two naturalistic busts. Sculptures titled *Don Quixote*, *Standing Man* and *Standing Woman* were also exhibited, but are since lost and no images are known. Frink received more positive reviews than her fellow artists. Critic John Berger (1926–2017) described her, in the New Statesman and Nation, as 'the most obviously talented'.[18] He foresaw her later preoccupation with the human-bird hybrid creatures, describing *Man with Bird* as 'her best piece and only at the back, where the man's buttocks change into the raw haunches of a stripped fowl, does the emotional tension slacken into disgust'.[19] Tate bought *Bird*, and the following year the Arts Council acquired a second cast, thanks to the exhibition, a remarkable achievement for a student of just twenty-one.

At the same time as the Beaux Arts exhibition, Frink exhibited an earlier work, *Christ at the Column*, c.1950, with The London Group at New Burlington Galleries, London. The London Group was an artist-run organisation that staged open-submission selling exhibitions, as a reaction against the conservatism of the Royal Academy. Frink first exhibited with them in 1952 and regularly thereafter. In 1952 membership was varied and included Robert Adams, Eileen Agar (1899–1991), Vanessa Bell (1879–1961), Chadwick, Epstein, Heron, McWilliam, Kenneth Martin and Meadows. They encompassed Constructivist, Surrealist, Realist and other forms of Modernism. A newspaper caption

Bird, 1952
Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993)
Bronze
Private Collection, UK

Frink at the London Group exhibition, 1952 with *Christ at the Column*, c.1950

alongside an image of Frink with her sculpture described her as 'only twenty-one years old. But her life-sized sculpture, "Christ at the Column", promises to be the most controversial exhibit in the London Group's 1952 Exhibition'.[20] The piece depicts an emaciated Christ-figure kneeling with his arms twisted behind him, bound to a post. The emotive subject is matched by the tension in the composition and materiality of the plaster, which has been violently modelled and carved.

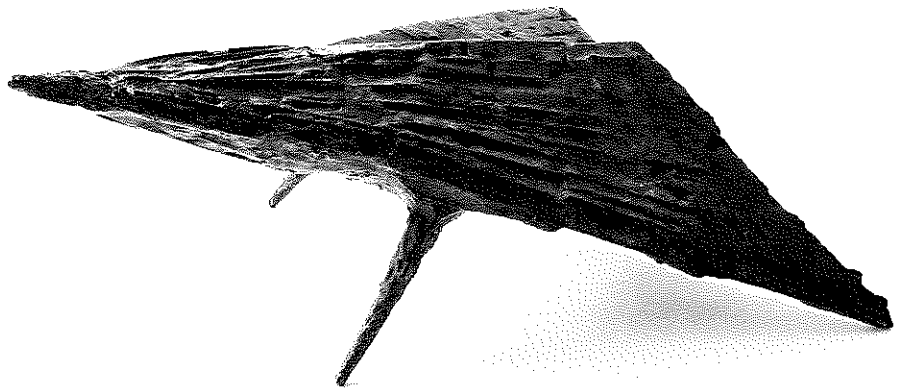
Frink was not sheltered from the effects of war. Her father served in it, and in Thurlow, Suffolk, she witnessed military aircraft returning in flames, and pilots falling from the sky in local airfields. She spoke of resulting nightmares that continued into adulthood – of herself or other bodies falling. These images were captured in childhood drawings and surfaced again in her later work, such as the *Birdman*, *Spinning Man* and *Falling Man* series of 1959–62. These figures may also relate to her personal relationships with military men. She described an early boyfriend she had, who had been injured in the RAF, as 'another sort of way-out hero, if you like . . . another "flying man"'.[21] Another source of inspiration, which she shared with the French artist César Baldaccini (1921–1998), was Léo Valentin (1919–1956), the real-life 'Birdman', of whom she had images in flight pinned to her studio wall. Valentin was a performer who jumped out

of aircraft and glided to the ground with makeshift wooden wings. He fell publicly to his death in 1956. In many respects, there is a deeper sense of fear and angst in her work of the 1950s and early 1960s than in that of any of her contemporaries.

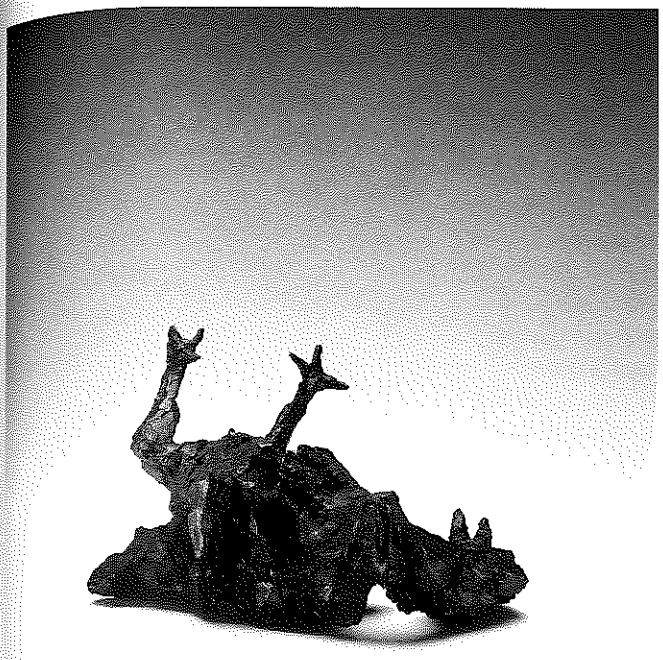
The bird was a common theme among artists in the 1950s. After her *Man with Bird* maquette for the Unknown Political Prisoner competition, and the larger version presented at Beaux Arts, Frink went on to produce a series of individual birds, followed by man-bird hybrids. She described them as 'really expressionist in feeling . . . that is, emphasis on beak, claws and wings – and they were really vehicles for strong feelings of panic, tension, aggression and predatoriness'.[22] In particular, Frink shared the bird motif with Meadows. Like her, Meadows saw the creature as a means for conveying the human condition, saying that 'birds can express a whole range of tragic emotion, they have a vulnerability which makes it easy to use them as vehicles for people'.[23] The titles of Meadow's birds – *Fallen Bird, Shot Bird, Startled Bird* – serve as a reminder that these states of emotion can be human as much as animal.

In his monograph on Meadows, Alan Bowness (b.1928) proposed that through his teaching at Chelsea, it was Meadows who caused a renewed interest in animal sculpture and, having taught her, was a particular influence on Frink's subject matter.[24] While Meadows was undoubtedly important for Frink, she had in fact been drawing birds and horses since childhood. She maintained that her birds were those she had grown up alongside. 'The forms I sculpted were the ones which were most natural to me – animal and bird forms from Suffolk. However, I changed them enormously because they became much more like something else. They turned, almost, into a sort of bird madness: quite fearsome, I think.'[25] She also referenced childhood visits to the Tower of London, where she saw 'those sinister, evil ravens squatting on the turrets',[26] a vision of perching birds that comes out in her *Standard* series of 1965.

The differences between Meadows's *Fallen Bird*, 1958, and Frink's two works titled *Dead Hen*, from 1956 and 1957, show an entirely different approach to the theme. Meadows reduces the bird to pure geometries, whereas, in her expressionist manner, Frink remains faithful to the bird's anatomy. In Frink's 1956 version, the bird's beak gapes open in fear and its legs are erect, frozen in rigor mortis. The later work has a bloated body, stiff legs



Bird IX, 1959
Lynn Chadwick (1914–2003)
Bronze
The Estate of Lynn Chadwick and Blain|Southern



Above. Dead Hen, 1956
Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993)
Bronze
Private collection, courtesy of
Pyms Gallery, London

Above right. Fallen Bird, 1958
Bernard Meadows (1915–2005)
Bronze
Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

and an awkwardly crooked neck. These were Frink's only two dead birds, and she selected the domestic animal, in contrast to the wild birds that she tended to show in states of aggression.

She belonged to an approach to avian imagery that had grown in previous decades among European Modernists, notably Surrealism. This most powerful avant-garde movement had come to London dramatically in 1936, when Herbert Read curated the *International Surrealist Exhibition*. All the major Surrealists were there. It was the first time the British public was physically introduced to the movement, and it impacted dramatically on the English art scene. Highly organised, with offices, a journal and an established leadership, Surrealism was as much a political as an artistic movement.

Interestingly, a number of the Surrealists had adopted the bird, variously as a symbol of freedom, sexuality, cruelty and as a subject of metamorphosis. Birds and cats, and sometimes a hybrid of the two, were frequently the protagonists in the paintings of Remedios Varo (1908–1963), who, it is said, gave her characters her own features. Max Ernst (1891–1976) created an avian alter ego, *Loplop*, who appeared and reappeared throughout his career. Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and André Masson (1896–1987) frequently used bird imagery. Leonor Fini (1907–1996) chose to align herself with feline creatures, and Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) with the horse, and yet birds and other winged beasts frequently appeared in their paintings. However, while the Surrealists aligned themselves directly with animals, using them to explore aspects of the psyche, Frink and the 'Geometry of Fear' artists generally did not attribute such specific aspects of humanity to their animals. Rather, they drew behavioural comparisons, using birds and other animals to represent generic emotions, such as fear, pain and trauma.

Following the mood of the Surrealists, the new generation rising in the 1950s tended to reject their forebears. They denied the influence of Moore, Hepworth and other British artists, as they wanted to be considered on their own terms. Frink said that Moore 'in no way influenced my work, as it happened, but I admired his work enormously'.[27] Instead, they acknowledged the influence of European artists, like Julio González (1876–1942), Picasso and Giacometti. Adams stayed in Paris for a month in 1948, where his artist friend Maxime Tessier (1920–2000) introduced him to Henri Laurens (1885–1954) and

Brancusi. He saw the work of Picasso, González and Auguste Rodin (1885–1954). He returned the following year for three weeks for his solo exhibition at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher and showed in the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*. Paolozzi lived in Paris from 1947 to 1949, and Turnbull was there in 1947 and again in 1948. They were there with fellow Slade graduate Nigel Henderson (1917–1985) and the soon-to-be influential critic David Sylvester. Paris at the time still dominated the art world, and undoubtedly the experience was seminally important for them. Encounters with Giacometti and Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985), for example, whom they visited, no doubt set the development of their oeuvre.

The French artists brought Paolozzi, Turnbull and other British artists into the orbit of contemporary philosophy, in particular existentialism. At this time the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, had begun to impact upon the visual arts, bringing the core ideas of existentialism and phenomenology into contemporary practice. For William Turnbull, this was immensely liberating; he derided the 'habitual English refusal to talk about ideas'.[28] David Sylvester proved to be crucial in positioning a group of British artists within the orbit of existentialism, including Butler, Turnbull, Paolozzi and Bacon.

Frink first went to France in 1951, visiting Paris with friends from art school. She was particularly excited by Rodin, whom she had already cited as crucial in her development as a sculptor. She said that a book about his work had been the catalyst for her moving from the painting department to sculpture at Guildford School of Art. At the Musée Rodin she admired how the sculptures appear to animate as the viewer moves around them. Rodin's knowledge of anatomy gave his figures life, even when they were contorted or partial, which Frink undoubtedly took from him. She also saw the work of Giacometti and Richier, who went on to become her most valuable exemplars.

Frink met Richier in London in 1955 during an exhibition of the French artist's work at the Hanover Gallery. The Hanover was run by Erica Brausen (1908–1992), a visionary gallerist who staged Bacon's first solo exhibition in 1949, becoming his first dealer, and was Giacometti's primary dealer in the UK. Other exhibitions included the first solo exhibitions of Butler in 1949 and of Freud in 1950, and a group show with Paolozzi and Turnbull in 1950. Sylvester introduced Richier in the catalogue essay: 'Nobody, perhaps, occupies so central, so crucial, a position in contemporary sculpture as Germaine Richier.' He went on to describe her work, in a description that resonates with the work of Frink: 'she asks not only how much damage the human body can endure and still remain human, but also how far the human body can be twisted into the shape of sub-human entities and still remain human'.[29]

Later in her career, when Sarah Kent (b.1947) asked Frink whether she had had any female role models, suggesting Hepworth, Frink instead proposed Richier,[30] who created sculptures that morph between the human and animal. Richier's anthropomorphic forms resembled insects, skeletons or fossils. It is easy to see why Frink saw an affinity with the artist when they met, as she had created the prehistoric *Horse's Head* only that year, and was on the cusp of a resurgence in bird-human hybrids. *Horse's Head* oscillates between life and death, as if decomposing. The same is true of the heads in Richier's *Horse with Six Heads, Large*, 1954–6, and in *Man-Bird*, c.1954.

Horse's Head was included in Frink's first solo exhibition at the St George's Gallery in London in 1955, with other distorted animals, writhing figures, naturalistic portraits and drawings. In a review of the exhibition, Myfanwy

Man-Bird, c.1954
Germaine Richier (1904–1959)
Bronze
Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

Birdman, 1959 (detail)
Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993)
Bronze
The Frink Estate and Archive
and Beaux Arts London

Piper described her 1954 *Horse's Head* as having 'a sweating agony of skin as well as of twisted muscle. If she concentrated only on such subjects her talent could degenerate into a kind of hysterical naturalism, but her wrestling figures and her exploratory drawings show that her emotional interests are not narrow and her portrait heads that she can do a tamer job without losing vigour or sensitiveness.'[31]

Frink's biographer, Stephen Gardiner (1924–2007), suggests that the subject of *Birdman*, 1959, may have been influenced by Richier. *Birdman* has fragments of wings on his back and shoulders that look as if they are becoming wings, as if he has both lost limbs and is sprouting them. A helmet that encircles the head to the chin, shielding the eyes, suggests a military figure. *Birdman* is simultaneously bird, man, warrior and victim. The sensuously defined muscles and full lips suggest how Frink idealised military men. At one time, Frink said she stopped romanticising military men, after the images from Bergen-Belsen emerged when she was fifteen; at other times, she admitted it continued into adulthood. The images from the concentration camp obviously left a mark on the young artist, and the slender, almost emaciated *Birdman* can be said to be reminiscent of some of the horrific imagery. Despite its roughly hewn, amorphous form, the human anatomy is miraculously conjured. A large gouge through the centre of its back indicates the spine. Straight lines across the torso, where the plaster has been violently and crudely hacked, suggest musculature or the ribcage beneath. The evidence of the artist's hand demonstrates the physicality with which Frink handled her materials and her immense understanding of the human form.

In 1948, the newly formed London County Council and the Arts Council had held its first open-air exhibition in Battersea Park. In the 1954 open-air exhibition, held in Holland Park, Frink showed *Seated Man*, 1954. It was a concrete rendition of a figure with a slender anatomy, perched on a stool. The artists were asked to provide their own texts for the catalogue, and Frink explained that the work was 'an attempt to convey man's solitude and also his human capacity for thought and reflection'[32] (although, being reticent to theorise her work, the text was probably written by her partner). The sense of solitude chimes with the existential philosophy that was being explored in French culture, including by Giacometti, who in the exhibition was represented by his painted bronze *Figure*, 1954. It was the only time Frink was exhibited alongside Giacometti in his lifetime.

Seated Man is also reminiscent of Rosemary Young's *Jamaican Girl*, 1951, which was displayed in the same exhibition. Young was a talented sculptor who gave up her career to support her partner, Reg Butler. *Jamaican Girl* and *Seated Man* depict a similar pose, both held by a wiry seat. Young's girl seems more contemplative, with closed hands and feet and the head tilted down, and the surface is more uniform. Frink's sculpture, on the other hand, shows a male figure with chest held high and feet wide apart, demonstrating a confidence that is echoed in the bold way of working left evident in the sculpture's finish.

Frink went on to exhibit in all of the following *Sculpture in the Open Air* exhibitions organised by the Arts Council and the LCC. In the 1963 exhibition, *Dying King*, 1963, demonstrated her technique of combining wet plaster with remnants of dry plaster, in a method reminiscent of Richier's use of found materials. *Dying King* was inspired by a film version of Shakespeare's *Richard*

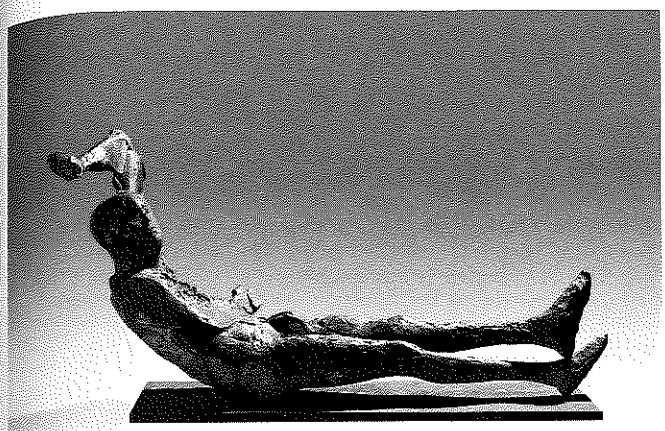
III, in which the protagonist raised his arm in defence as he was killed in battle. Frink pieced together the arm, which marks the final gesture of the king, using dried plaster found in her studio. The convex disc with a flat top, which depicts the upper arm, preserves the form of the mixing bowl in which the plaster dried. The subject was also explored by Moore in his *Maquette for Fallen Warrior*, 1956, in a rare depiction of the male form by the artist. For both artists, the subject offered an opportunity to explore vulnerability in a heightened state of masculinity: that of king and warrior.

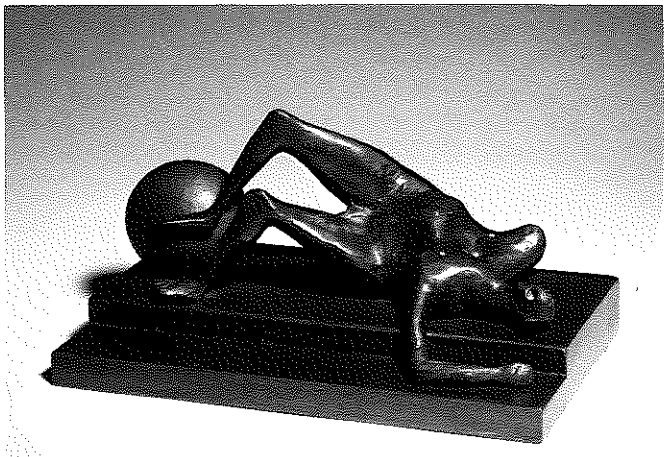
By 1963 the *Sculpture in the Open Air* exhibition revealed the growing importance of America to British sculpture, by including American art for the first time, with an equal number of artists from both countries. However, rather than suggesting an exchange of influence, the exhibition seemed to portray the two countries in opposition. Indeed, one reviewer described the predominantly abstract American sculpture as a 'strong team', which 'sets up something of a challenge both to its well-mannered, English parkland setting, and to the figurative British sculpture arranged to confront it on the main slope of rising ground'.[33] Frink's *Dying King*, 1963, was shown alongside the work of other British figurative artists, Armitage, Ralph Brown (1928–2013), Butler and Meadows. There were abstract works included by British artists, but these tended to be displayed in proximity to the American artists. Chadwick, in particular, exhibited one of his most abstract works, *Winged Figures*, 1962, which demonstrates an influence from time spent in California, particularly from David Smith (1906–1965). Foreshadowing a dissonance within British art and Frink's own trajectory, *Mid-day*, 1960, by Anthony Caro (1924–2013) was placed nearer the American artists and furthest away from the entrance where the British figurative artists were shown.

Caro had been making figurative work in the 1950s – voluptuous, craggy female forms modelled in clay and then cast. This changed dramatically when, in 1959, he went to America and met the Abstract Expressionist sculptor David Smith. A year later, at the age of thirty-six, Caro made *Twenty Four Hours*, 1960, his first abstract steel sculpture in the style for which he is now known: constructed metal sheets and beams placed directly on the floor. Frink recounted, 'he came back with the gospel, the new idea, and wanted everything to change'.[34] Frink and Caro were colleagues at St Martin's School of Art, where they had both started teaching in 1953. The change in Caro's work extended to his teaching. Under Caro's direction, studying from life was actively discouraged. This was a trend across art schools at large in the 1960s, when plaster casts, which had previously been used as teaching tools, were ceremonially destroyed. Frink lamented, 'I found that kind of rigidity strange in an art context. After all, during the developing years of Modernism most of the best abstract artists went through the figurative experience.'[35] Caro's impact became dominant; Frink stopped teaching in 1962 when he took over the department.

Although she was devotedly a figurative artist, many did not consider that it had to be a choice. As early as 1952, Butler wrote in a letter 'you must forgive me, but I can't work up any real gusto at the thought of helping to flog that poor old horse, the "abstract" v. "realistic" issue. It's the very last thing I want to be self-conscious about these days.'[36] Despite Butler's boredom with the topic, there is no doubt that the period saw a tension grow between representational and abstract artists.

Most artists assimilated both figurative and abstract aspects of modernity. Some didn't, however, going through radical transformation of their practice.





Above left. Dying King, 1963
Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993)
Bronze
Private collection, courtesy of Pyms Gallery, London

Above. Maquette for Fallen Warrior, 1956
Henry Moore (1898–1986)
Bronze
Private Collection, London

While a distinct and total change in an artist's work is rare, it did occur in painting with Victor Pasmore, who transitioned from Euston Road School realism to Abstract Constructivism, and from traditional painting through collage to construction. Although Constructivism did not continue in Britain throughout the Second World War, it resurged from 1951, with the group surrounding Robert Adams. This group had an ideological commitment to abstraction. By contrast, Moore had produced an abstract body of work in the interwar years, but he returned to figurative humanism after the war. Hepworth, on the other hand, persistently explored organic abstraction. Her aversion to abstract art may have led Frink to describe Hepworth's work as cold.[37] James Hyman writes of the 'bridge between sculpture and painting, and abstraction and figuration' that resonates in some of the key works of the 1950s, 'including Henry Moore's *Falling Warrior* (1956–57), Paolozzi's *Shattered Head* (1956) and Butler's *Study for the Third Watcher* (1954) which, with its strong, extended neck, echoed the upturned heads of Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944).'[38] Calvin Winner explores the resonance between Frink's *Small Head*, 1959, which has threateningly exposed teeth, and Bacon's screaming upturned heads, in his chapter of this book titled 'Black Wings: The haunting sculptures of Elisabeth Frink'.

Caro was the champion of the new abstraction. His students included Phillip King (b.1934), David Annesley (b.1936), Michael Bolus (1934–2013), Tim Scott (b.1965) and William Tucker (b.1935), who constructed abstract, colourful sculpture in steel and fibreglass and other materials new to sculpture. The young sculptors were showcased in *The New Generation* exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1965. Much in the manner of the 'Geometry of Fear' before them, the label 'The New Generation' came to mark them as a school. The title is now the epithet for the group of sculptors in this particular exhibition, but it was in fact the title of a series of three exhibitions: in 1964 presenting painting, predominantly in Pop Art and Op Art styles, and in 1966 showcasing both painting and sculpture.

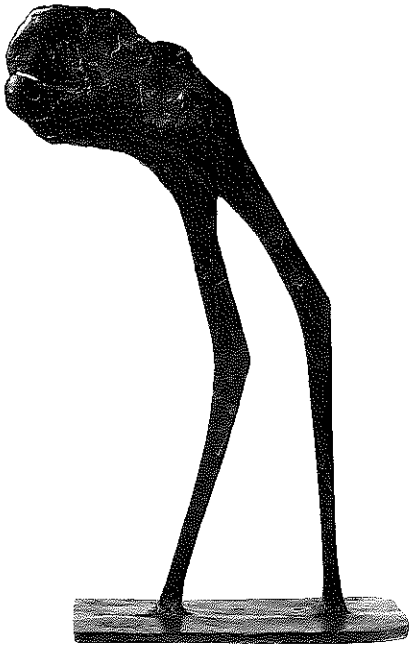
The New Generation was connected to a concurrent exhibition at Tate titled *British Sculpture in the Sixties*, which positioned Frink right at the heart of the establishment. She was presented alongside Moore, Hepworth, all

the artists from the 'Geometry of Fear' Biennale and Caro, among a range of other artists. Whereas *The New Generation* launched a group of younger artists, *British Sculpture in the Sixties* was intended to feature a more-established generation. By 1965, aged only thirty-five, Frink was being presented as part of a generation prior to a group of exciting, younger – abstract – artists. It is a credit to her establishing a coherent oeuvre at a young age, which gave her early success, that she was positioned in this way. However, as she herself felt, it may latterly have been detrimental, because she was no longer considered part of the avant-garde.

The Whitechapel exhibition has become renowned for presenting a new vision of British sculpture, whilst the Tate exhibition has not left a legacy. The organisers foresaw this and, in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, attempted to grapple with the problem of positioning a new group that was seemingly in opposition to more established artists:

> For the New Generation at Whitechapel represents a real challenge to almost all of them, in that this group of the younger sculptors so clearly rejects much of what their elders stand for. The public impact that the Tate sculptors would have made had they been shown together in London ten years ago (as they should have been) has been irretrievably lost, by familiarity and by maturity; and we now find ourselves in the position – unfortunately only too familiar in the fashion-conscious world of our time – of risking undervaluing them simply because they are not the latest thing.[39]

In addition to familiarity, the Tate selection may not have made as memorable an impact because the work was more disparate than that of 'The New Generation', who were more arguably a 'school', having studied together. Three works by Frink were included: *First Man*, *Plant Head* and *Soldier's Head*, all from 1964. *First Man* is a standing figure in a pose reminiscent of Rodin's *The Age of Bronze*, 1877. *Plant Head* stands apart in her oeuvre, as a playful relation to the animal heads she was making at the time. *Soldier's Head* was the first in a series of four that she made on the theme, with distorted, damaged features, which led on to her later *Goggle Head* series. Caro showed *Early One Morning*, 1962, a painted steel piece that is closer in style to the work of his students than to anyone else included in the Tate exhibition. Moore exhibited five bronzes, including two *Helmet Heads* and a reclining figure. Hepworth showed abstract carvings in stone and wood. The disparity in styles may be due to the fact that artists were asked to select work themselves, to be representative of the decade. Furthermore, these artists spanned generations and styles, from carving to welding to construction, and from figuration to abstraction. The diversity of work within the exhibition is testament to how quickly British sculpture was changing at the time.



Mirage, c.1967
Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993)
Bronze
Frink Estate and Archive

In 1967, Frink moved to a remote part of France with her second husband Edward Pool. Although she herself denied that she relocated due to feeling like an artistic outsider, it no doubt contributed to her decision, and she later complained about no longer being supported by the British Council and Tate at this time. She was not alone, and many of the 'Geometry of Fear' artists felt similarly overlooked from the 1960s.

In France, Frink's work changed, not due to an influence from other artists, but from the new visual experiences to which she was exposed. In her first year in France she produced a focused series of *Mirage* pieces in

Above. Head, 1967
Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993)
Bronze
Frink Estate and Archive

Above right. Oufkir, 1966
Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993)
Wash and charcoal on paper
Frink Estate and Archive

aluminium and bronze. She cited heat-hazes in the Camargue in which she saw 'creatures which seem to be sort of birds, or it could be a person, or a tree. Any of those make this extraordinary stalking shape that shimmers across.'[40] They may also echo the flamingos, grouped in their hundreds, that Frink would have seen near the medieval city Aigues-Mortes. They were among Frink's most abstract works, indefinably bird or human, like their visual source. Whilst not so violently aggressive, the *Mirage* sculptures are a development from Frink's man-bird hybrids made in London. Like the earlier works, they are earthbound and restricted from the ability for flight, in contrast with the *Spinning Man*, *Falling Man*, airborne humans.

Frink's next series in France, which has become among her best-known, were her *Goggle Heads*. Again these are a progression from work made in London, her *Soldier's Heads* from 1964 to 1965, which, although they were thuggish, showed distortions in their features that suggested injuries. The *Goggle Heads* are unmitigated brutes, and stemmed from mass-produced imagery of General Oufkir after the recently ended Algerian War. The 'goggles', sometimes in polished bronze, produce a striking figure. They were based on Oufkir's sunglasses, or the goggles worn by pilots or motorcyclists. In 1975, the *Goggle Heads* were followed by a series of *Tribute Heads*, which contrastingly portray the victims of war. They are also unseeing, with closed eyes and subtle tilts of the heads to suggest empathy. This period saw Frink begin to work the plaster to a smoother finish, which she attributed to the stronger light in France requiring less differentiation in the surface.

Although she made her work in France until she moved back to the UK in 1975, her career remained centred in Britain and she had almost annual shows at the Waddington Galleries from 1959 to 1981. She was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1971 (a preliminary category that no longer exists) and a full Royal Academician in 1977, when only six other women were members.[41] Of the 'Geometry of Fear' artists, only Geoffrey Clarke was elected before her, as ARA in 1970 and RA in 1975. Paolozzi followed as ARA in 1972 and RA in 1979. The only other two of the 'Geometry of Fear' artists to become RAs were Armitage and Chadwick, both of whom instantly became Senior RAs, a category for artists who are over seventy-five. Many of the avant-garde before Frink's generation – including Moore, Hepworth and Epstein – had refused to become part of the Academy, and when Frink was admitted it still had a negatively traditional reputation. Her position in the Academy and her Damehood in 1982 no doubt led her to be seen as part of the establishment.

Although Frink was prominent within the Royal Academy, when it was proposed to her that she become President in 1984, she refused, saying it would distract her from her work as a sculptor. She was the first woman ever to be put forward, and none has held the position since. She was committed to making sculpture, and refused to be distracted by institutional positions to secure her legacy. Instead the work she left behind would do that for her.

In 1985 the Royal Academy staged an important retrospective of Frink's work, a notable exhibition, even for a member of the Academy. The foreword to the catalogue positions Frink as 'mid-career', which is even more of an accolade, although in retrospect it was sadly inaccurate, due to her early death only eight years later. The exhibition aimed to present Frink's personal work, rather than commissions, justifiably arguing that it is more radical. Moreover, in the catalogue, Sarah Kent positioned Frink among contemporary feminist discourse. Other than an exhibition at the ICA in 1980, *Women's Images of Men*, it was the first time her work had been assessed in this way. Despite this important solo exhibition, Frink expressed frustration when she was not selected for the Royal Academy exhibition curated by Norman Rosenthal (b.1944) in 1987, *British Art in the 20th Century*, which only included eleven of the fifty living Royal Academicians, and only six artists of the seventy-one exhibited were women. Frink was briefly mentioned in the book, in just a few lines, before a considered study of Caro and his students. More recently, Frink and the generation of British sculptors in the 1950s have been given their deserved recognition, for the waves they made in sculpture and for paving the way for the generation that followed.

To celebrate fifty years since the 1952 Venice Biennale in 2002, James Hyman Gallery staged the exhibition *Henry Moore and the Geometry of Fear*. Like the original exhibition, it included only one work by Moore, his bronze *Animal Head*, 1951. Like Frink's *Horse's Head*, 1955, it morphs between life and death, as if fossilised. As in the original exhibition, Moore's inclusion was intended to show that he was in fact not so starkly opposed to the younger artists, as is often suggested.

In 2007 the Arts Council produced the touring exhibition *Geometry of Fear* from works in their collection, which included Frink, Berger, John Hoskin (1921–1990), Peter King (1928–1957) and Leslie Thornton (1925–2016). In a 2012 exhibition at Pangolin London, *Exorcising the Fear*, which convincingly argued that there was more playfulness in the works than is suggested by the moniker, Frink's work was introduced along with that of Michael Ayrton

(1921–1975), Brown, George Fullard (1923–1973) and Hoskin. Exhibitions such as these demonstrate the continued relevance of the sculptors of the 1950s and give them due credit in the development of British sculpture.

As Frink said, 'During the time that I've been working – forty years now – there have been enormous changes in art. In the way of doing it, the way of looking at it, the way of dealing with the public – the whole scene has changed.'[42] Arguably, the most distinct change came in the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s, early in her career. It is testament to her creative confidence that, despite these changes, she remained dedicated to her own vision and the themes she established from her sculptural genesis.

ENDNOTES

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3 Ibid.
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6 *The Observer* 13 April 1952, in Polly Bielecka, *Exorcising the Fear*, 2012, London, Pangolin London, p.5.
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9 *British Library Sounds*, 1 of 7.
10 Sven Lövgren in Morgon-Tidningen May 16 1957, translation Tate archive TGA 9712/2/152
11 Elisabeth Frink in Frink, Elisabeth. (1 of 7). National Life Story Collection: Artists' Lives, British Library Sounds, 28 December 1992.
12 In 1952 Frink was included in Young Sculptors at the ICA. David Sylvester selected 16 artists, which included Frink, all 'Geometry of Fear' Biennale artists except Chadwick and Moore and a number of other artists. The exhibition emphasised the importance of mainland European art to these artists, particularly that of Giacometti. Frink exhibited two standing figures in plaster and a watercolour titled *Horse*.
13 Bryan Robertson, *Elisabeth Frink: Sculpture*, 1984, Salisbury, Harpvale, p.32.
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40 Gardiner, pp.148-149.
41 These were Elizabeth Blackadder, Olwyn Bowey, Jean Cooke, Jennifer Dickson, Sheila Mary Fell and Gertrude Hermes.
42 Edward Lucie-Smith, p.62.