

Mortal Remains

Published 23 Oct 2012 in *Northings*, Highlands and Islands online Arts Journal .

An Lanntair, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, until 17 November 2012

IN THE world of Contemporary Art Steve Dilworth is a rarity, an artist that defies classification in being uniquely himself.

WORKING since the late 70s with once living materials from land and seascape, his beautifully crafted works redefine our perception of sculpture and of the art world object. The ritual of making, with the inner construction and outer form as equal elements, is central to Dilworth's practice. He's an artist who consistently offers questions rather than answers in his transformation of materials and prodigious command of form.

Twenty years after his first solo exhibition at An Lanntair, *Acts of Faith* (1992), *Mortal Remains* presents a review of his extraordinary work, aptly coinciding with Faclan, Feis Litreachas Innse Gall/ The Hebridean Book Festival (31 October – 3 November) and its theme of Creideamh/ Belief.



Exhibition shot with Porpoise in foreground (John Maclean Photography)

Throughout his career the truth of making and the belief in art as a bridge between the physical and metaphysical have continued to define Dilworth's unflinching and visionary work. Like an explorer bringing back artefacts from the depths of our collective unconscious, the artist reinvests power and meaning in creative process:

“I want to retrieve that moment of understanding, not by describing but by making. Of course I’ll fail, but in that chemistry of making another moment will appear. These objects are drawn from an internal landscape of shifting sands, connections are constantly being discovered.”

The transformation of material as part of the artist’s creative process and the idea of illumination through darkness, with the artist and viewer as protagonist, are an integral part of the interior life and psychology of Dilworth’s art. Archetypal narratives and collective folklore permeate his choice of “materials as sources of power” and “construction as ritual”.



The Hanging Figure (1978-79) (courtesy Steve Dilworth)

Crafted from a human skeleton, bovine meat, heart, liver, horsehair and sea grass, *The Hanging Figure*(1978-79) is represented



Hanging Figure Under Construction (courtesy Steve Dilworth)

in the exhibition as a photographic triptych in black and white with a further sequence of 16 colour photographs recording its making. Sold to the Richard Harris Collection in the United States in 2011, the departure of this seminal work from the UK in the context of world Art History is a national disgrace. In Dilworth’s oeuvre and in the history of art in this country it represents a significant point of departure, an initial exploration of the energies of raw materials, their histories and origins that has shaped all subsequent work.

Unlike the work of many contemporary artists, Dilworth's work presents art as an offering, creating objects greater and more expansive than themselves or the egos of their makers. The artist introduces the idea of altruism into an art world that falsely presents cultural value and monetary value as equal. The elaborate inner structure of many of Dilworth's works, often containing precious objects or elements hidden from sight, place imagination at the centre of human experience as a core value and an agent of transformation.

In its use of materials *The Hanging Figure* brings the viewer into visceral contact with many of society's taboos. The reanimation of human bone with sea grass and blackthorn, which binds and articulates the figure, displaces raw decaying material from mortal time. In the mind's eye it becomes something else, a timeless ritual of creation; a moment of understanding for all eternity. The artist embodies life, death and transformation in a single object; a bridge between the physical and metaphysical akin to shamanic practice; in full knowledge of the responsibility of making, the artist becoming a channel.

Woven into the spine of the *Hanging Figure* is the same genesis of craft and intent consistently present in later work such as *Porpoise* (Bronze, Sterling Silver 2004). Here the hollows and contours of the sculpture, form within form, are dynamically fluid, encouraging the viewer to move around the work to contemplate from every angle the embryonic nature of becoming. The outer form conceals and reveals the silver vertebrae of a creature turned in on itself. Like the conception of *The Hanging Figure* as part human, part animal, there is a strong figurative association in this work expressed in its craftsmanship, presenting human perception in malleable form, shape shifting before our eyes.



Sea Chest (courtesy Steve Dilworth)

This sense of power and human vulnerability is also conveyed in *Sea Chest* (Driftwood, Driftrope, Sand eel 2010), seemingly dredged from the ocean of our collective unconscious. Found materials drawn directly from the land and seascape of Harris are transformed by the artist into an object of individual and collective contemplation. There is a profound feeling of loss held in the interior mindscape of the object, it feels as though it has travelled incalculable distance, a timeless archetypal human mark on landscape and memory.

Like many of Dilworth's objects it contains that which we cannot see, a kist of precious things held within; a vessel and an enigma. Hidden inside is the bronze cast of a sand eel revealing an essential relationship between living and decaying matter, mortality inverted by the relative permanence of metal, held beyond sight. Dilworth is not secretive about the inner contents of his work; rather the inner and outer design of his sculptural objects makes a "physical connection to the mysteries" of life and death. The organic curvature of soft wood grain exposes closely bound fibres of rib-like rope and form powerfully directs our associations; open carapace, burgeoning seed or still beating human heart.



Mother and Child (courtesy Steve Dilworth)

Mother and Child (Bronze, Meadow Pipit 2008) is arguably one of the most beautiful pieces in the exhibition, a supremely elegant expression of creation, life and death. The inner golden patina of bronze is possessively guarded by avian claws, clasped around an egg with the real "sculpture" of a bird held inside. The form itself folds inwards upon the idea of nature or nurture, the gentle maternal instinct suggested by the title evolving into a more complex reality of instinct.

The complexity of its inner workings is its freedom both for the artist in the act of making and the viewer in the act of seeing. *Mother and Child* creates connections between what we see, sense and feel; we are increasingly drawn towards the edge of our awareness as a potential core of expanded perception in powerfully tangible bronze. The superb finishing of this work is, like many of Dilworth's objects, extremely tactile.

There are many fine examples of smaller throwing objects which whilst distanced from their function in the confines of a gallery space were created to be touched and held. *Throwing Object* (Wood, Bird, Rivets 2004), *Swift* (Harris Stone, Bird 2012) and *Dolphin Tooth Rattle* (Harris Stone, Ivory 2012) are examples of objects

designed to be “cast into our internal landscape”. The scale of Dilworth’s work is both intimate and infinite, drawing on the geology and prehistory of the ancient landscape in its use of materials and archetypal form.

Lure I (Soapstone 2004) is a magnificent example, inspired by hawking lures and reminiscent of the Venus of Willendorf (24,000-22,000 BCE) in the fecundity of its sensuous curves. Timeless in its “connection to the mysteries” and “independent of time and place” both the Willendorf Venus and Dilworth’s *Lure I* are steeped in rituals of human creation.

The powerful translation of form in this hand held object can be seen in the monumental scale of Dilworth’s *Venus Stone* (2008) installed at the Goodwood Sculpture Park, West Sussex. Whilst *Venus Stone*, its masculine companion piece *Claw* (2007) in 9 tonnes of polished black granite, the artist’s land-based works and other larger scale work such as *Ark* (Nickel Silver and Bronze, 2000) are understandably absent from this exhibition, a full scale retrospective acknowledging and celebrating Steve Dilworth’s work nationally by an institution like Tate Modern is long overdue. *Mortal Remains* draws acute attention to the remarkable scope, continuity and integrity of the artist’s work which is of international importance.



Cat and Rat (John Maclean Photography)

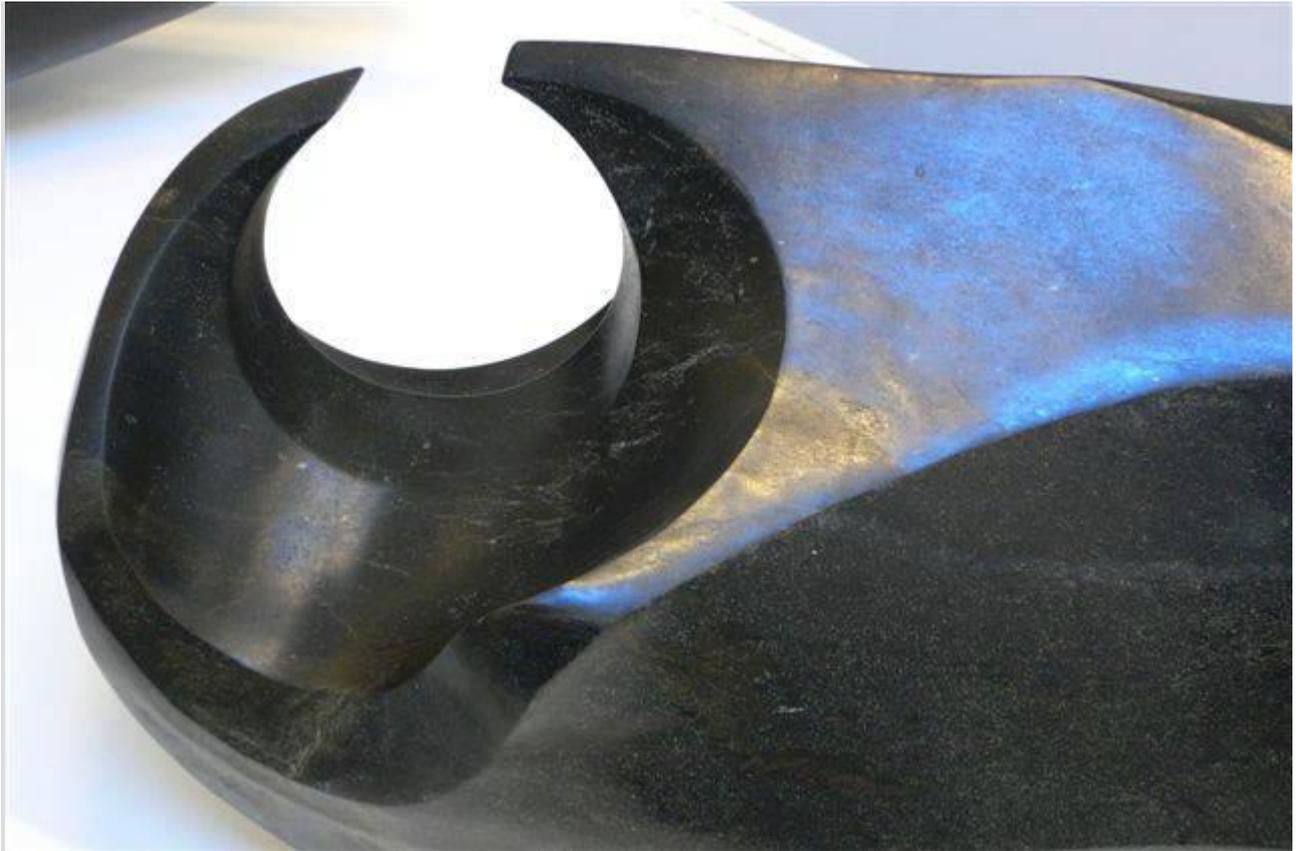
Although much is made of Dilworth’s dark materials the presence of *Cat and Rat* (Bronze, 2007) in the exhibition further defies classification of his work in delightfully humorous fashion. Of course the comedy is resoundingly black, but there is nursery rhyme joviality in predator and prey forever locked in an eternal dance upon a moon like disc of bronze. Exquisitely balanced upon their tails the two figures have curious elegance, like drawn marks of calligraphy or music. Although their mummified bodies are immortalised in metal, on closer inspection the

delicacy of decay makes the viewer feel as if a single touch would cause the entire form to disintegrate. A lively and comic *Memento Mori*, *Cat and Rat* cause the viewer to reflect on the macabre joke of the human condition.



Fledglings (courtesy Steve Dilworth)

Rook (*Rook*, Bog Oak, Nails 1980) preserves a once living body in a sarcophagus of its own mythology. Dilworth's materials are "equal in presence"; the alchemy of the rook, 10,000 year old bog oak and iron an act of poetic distillation, the beginning of a series of objects creating deepening hollows for the mind to wander into. *Fledglings* (*Fledglings*, Yew, Bronze 2011) is a more recent example, a poignant embrace of sharpened curves sculpted in the light and shadow of bronze patina. Although Dilworth claims to have left figurative art behind with the *Hanging Figure*, there is a sense in which every work is humanely figurative. Where nature is depicted it is our own nature that is implicated by design.



Detail from Moonstone (photo Georgina Coburn)

Moonstone (Harris Stone 2002) feels like an entire world in a single piece of stone. A precursor to the megalithic scale of *Claw* (2007), the concave hollow of the moon utilises pure light and positive/negative space in its abstract design. Hewn from Harris stone millions of years old, *Moonstone* digs deep into our collective psyche, an enduring fragment of the earth's geological forces and the human mind perceiving the landscape through ancient ritual. The ebb and flow of organic cycles and geometric lines of force create a play of light on the object bringing the sculpture to life from every conceivable angle.

Also screening in the gallery space the relationship between the artist and his chosen environment is explored in Paul Cox's insightful short film, *Steve Dilworth, A Portrait*, featuring commentary by Ian Sinclair and Robert Macfarlane. (Cox's film will also be screened in Inverness on 9 November as part of the Inverness Film Festival.)

Mortal Remains is an important survey of the artist's work including many pivotal works drawn from private collections. A cross disciplinary festival like Faclan presents a great opportunity for Dilworth's works as enduring, universal acts of engineering, perseverance and faith to be discovered and appreciated by a growing audience. Whilst it is a travesty that this exhibition will not be touring to other centres, An Lanntair are to be congratulated in continuing to acknowledge, celebrate and champion Steve Dilworth's remarkable work.