

Steve Dilworth

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Beyond Sculpture

GEORGINA COBURN examines the work of the Harris-based artist Steve Dilworth

THE LANDSCAPE of eastern Harris is both rugged and beautiful in the extreme, with exposed rock three thousand million years old left by scouring glaciers from the last ice age. There is a sense of precariousness travelling through The Bays, the twists and turns of man-made single track roads you can never quite see beyond, on the edge of an archaic world beyond any living memory.

It is a place that once seen is not forgotten, a lunar strangeness coupled with raw elements of water, wind and stone shaped by time and nature's will. This energy and presence is powerfully conveyed in the work of artist Steve Dilworth who has lived on the island since 1983.

Though tactile visual language and use of materials such as stone and bronze often define Dilworth as a sculptor, his work frequently transcends these boundaries or expectations. Exploring the art of the object inside and out, the artist's work is unparalleled, containing a resonance at the heart of human creation.

Holding the cast of a 30,000 year old Venus of Willendorf in the palm of your hand has the same timeless meaning today as the day it was created, and this perfection of form holds true in Dilworth's art, both conceptually and aesthetically.

His is a practice that explores the physical and metaphysical aspects of our existence and archetypal meaning in a way which is endlessly fascinating and compelling. "Lure" (2005) in alabaster and rivets is such an object, deriving its shape from a hawking lure and the ancient simplified female form of a Venus stone. An ambiguous object of purity, fertility and deception, "Lure", like all of Dilworth's work, invites contemplation.

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The internal construction of many of his objects is just as important as what we see externally. "Stormwater" (1987) a piece made from alabaster and containing a vial of sea water taken during a storm or "Hooded Crow" (1990) made from Bog Oak, Steel, Yew, are superbly crafted, reverent objects that are indigenous in nature.

As in the making of an ancient sarcophagus or ritual vessel what we call religion and art are inseparable, both in the making and the meaning of the object. They draw inspiration from a specific landscape but also reach far deeper into the earth and our place upon it. They are acts of engineering, perseverance and faith.

The hidden aspect of the work is part of its inherent mystery. "Porpoise" (2004/2005), containing 60 Stirling silver vertebrae mostly hidden in a bronze carapace, is a complex form both internally and externally. To reveal all to the audience is not the point, nor (I would argue) should it be.

This is encapsulated in the ingenious design of Dilworth's 1992 exhibition catalogue for "Acts of Faith" published by An Lanntair, the cover stitched shut so that it became an act of faith to open it in order to view the contents (not that the gallery shared his intention, leaving an open copy on view, which the artist removed at every opportunity!)

Dilworth's attitude is refreshing, trying to "retrieve that moment of understanding, not by describing but by making." "Drawn from an internal landscape... connections are constantly being discovered." It is a creative process that does not rest on familiarity or accomplished technique.

Speaking to Dilworth about his work one is left with a sense that his concern is with the height of what can be achieved in artistic/ human terms. This lack of compromise and the desire to continually expand and refine his practice is what makes his work so remarkable and potent.

Land-based works and ritual are part of the artist's practice, and although Dilworth does not describe himself in shamanic terms, his work makes the connection between the spiritual and physical, allowing the audience to make connections between form and content in an archetypal way.

The body of a heron encased in elm, taken from a boat at low tide and bound in fishing line, is pure alchemy, a combination of materials and elements that in the artist's words "make absolute sense". Both the wood and the species have the ability to survive water and like many of Dilworth's objects, this piece incorporates naturally occurring phenomena; the effects of the sea, human and animal interaction with the elements, and death itself.

Whilst the use of dead matter may be shocking to some this is not the intention.

Use of once living material was being incorporated into Dilworth's art practice long before Damien Hirst first caught a whiff of formaldehyde. Dilworth's life sized "Hanging Figure" (1979) constructed from a human skeleton, heart, liver, meat, horsehair and sea grass is a seminal work in its use of materials. It marks the start of his exploration of once living materials and of death integral to life and artistic creation.

Destruction is absolutely necessary in order to create and evolve not just in terms of the artist's practice but throughout human consciousness. Whilst the artist makes no distinction between ourselves and animals at a physical or material level his work engages directly with what makes us human intellectually and emotionally. Creating this balance is part of a challenging creative process for both the artist and audience.

For me what is so compelling about this artist's work is a response to the modern world that strives to make sense of what we are through the art of making. It satisfies this most basic human need and is absolutely driven by the urge to create. In an interview with Dilworth last year he described this process of making the "object stronger and more powerful than the space it occupies".

His practice is not about surface or artifice but the perfect fusion of materials, technique and ideas that will continue to endure and nourish an audience. His work is, I believe, not just of our time but for all time. The key to this is the artist's intent and intuitive method.

"Mountain Air" (2002) a work in bronze containing phials of air trapped at mid summer dawn is an example of ritual in the creation of an object reflecting Dilworth's belief in "materials as power" and "construction as ritual".

This is also evident in "Heart of the Thief" (1998). Following an act of theft, a human outline was drawn on the beach on the site of the robbery by the artist and a fistful of sand taken from where the heart should be. This formed the heart of the object, encased in money, coins welded and polished, more in value than was ever stolen and then surrounded in a thicket of nails.

Now part of a private collection in Hong Kong this is a redemptive object that can be read on multiple levels. Containing layers of materials; sand, money, nails, the work transforms the original action that inspired it.

The form of Dilworth's objects is striking and contemporary. A work such as "Suntrap" (2001) whose sharp edges recall the very first striking of flint is expansive and intended to be orientated toward the sun. The stone form could be hand-held in size or an enormous enclosure like an ancient henge.

The timeless quality, superb craftsmanship and architectural conception of this piece are mysterious and impressive, intimate and monumental. "Rocking Stone" (2002) is another example, recalling the gigantic boulders perched upon the landscape of Harris in simple, sublime polished form.

Dilworth's series of throwing objects including "Wren" (1993) encases the once living body in a wooden casket and its own mythology. Considered an omen of death if a wren flew into your chest, "this throwing object can be cast into our internal landscape".

"Hooded Crow/ Twins" (2005), constructed from Harris stone, alabaster and bronze, contains the bodies of a hooded crow and two smaller birds. Like the egg form in "Gull" (1997) the objects contain both a beginning and an end to life, alpha and omega.

Dilworth's work can take many forms including land-based, sound and sensory explorations, as well as pieces such as "Claw" (2007), a simple form exquisitely rendered in granite 8ft high commissioned by the Cass Sculpture Foundation currently on show at Goodwood Sculpture Estate in Sussex.

Some of the most intriguing works are land based collaborations such as "Runes" 1997 with writer and poet Peter Urpeth, using mud and goose fat; "Eye of the Hag/ Seer Stone" 2004 with ceramic artist Lotte Glob; and "Fat Man/ Fat Andy" 2005, a work created in North Uist from animal fat.

These temporary works rely on the actions of nature to simultaneously complete and destroy them. Temporary work is often documented photographically by Dilworth's eldest daughter, Beka.

Although created in a remote environment, Dilworth's art is represented in private and public collections worldwide. The international appeal of his work transcends many boundaries, operating on multiple levels, both physically in terms of materials, and metaphorically.

Following his first solo show "Acts of Faith", which toured Scotland in 1991/92, the artist has exhibited extensively with solo shows in London, Chicago and Germany. Group shows have included "Thinking Big" Peggy Guggenheim, Venice 2002, the "International Shoe Box Exhibition" at the University of Hawaii Manoa, "The Great Book of Gaelic" film and exhibition and "Stirling Stuff" Pangolin Editions, Gloucestershire.

The artist has lectured at the Royal Academy London and The Hague, The Ruskin College of Art and at "Red Hot and Digital" in Amsterdam and Dubai. In the UK Dilworth's work is represented in diverse permanent collections including the Goodwood Sculpture Estate, Scottish Arts Council, Scotia Pharmaceuticals, Dundee City Council, Ferons Art Gallery, Hull and Knox Collection, Suffolk.

The art of Steve Dilworth is like "three dimensional poetry". Informed by such disciplines as sculpture, architecture, performance and engineering but confined by none of them, he transcends the culture of art world objects and reinvests power and meaning into visual expression.

His is a language with lasting resonance, extraordinary beauty and monumental presence. Human strength and vulnerability are reflected equally in his work and like all great art contact with Dilworth's work alters perception. The energy and presence of his work is infinitely sublime, magnificently crafted and always challenging both to the artist and his audience.

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