

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Fiona Maddocks, 'Fit For a King, *RA Magazine*, Summer 2014



The RA's painters, printmakers, sculptors and architects

Academy Artists



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Fit for a King

FIONA MADDOCKS meets sculptor and former RA President Phillip King in his studio in a converted north London factory. Photograph by DAVID VINTINER

Phillip King RA, internationally renowned sculptor and past President of the Royal Academy, made his earliest objects out of the sands of North Africa. Born near Carthage in 1934, his childhood playground was the Mediterranean coast, his boyhood horizons those Aeneas saw as he abandoned Queen Dido and sailed from the harbour in quest of Rome.

King's own ambitions at that time were more modest but in their own way heroic. 'I had a wonderful, free childhood,' he recalls during my visit to his studio in London's West Hampstead. 'I had a close group of friends and we ran wild, getting up to terrible pranks. Our house was almost on the beach and the waves would lap against it in a storm. If you dug deep into the sand, after about two feet you found clay.' That's when King began making things.

As a boy, he also witnessed extraordinary events at the climax of the Second World War. Ships were blown up right outside the family home. His eyes, a striking bright blue, twinkle with animation at the memory. 'Our house was strategically placed. It's a wonder it wasn't requisitioned. We had the Eighth Army coming down from Libya, and the Allies had arrived in Algiers and were sweeping to Tunis to squeeze the Germans out – all this right on our doorstep. We left for England soon after.'

All this is a far cry from the ramshackle yet coherent space that is his studio, not far from the house he shares with his novelist wife, Judy Corbalis. Several small, interconnected rooms are used for displaying maquettes or keeping archives, as well as for making the work itself, while a space remains clear for the display of sculpture. There are signs of the innumerable materials King now works with: fibreglass, plastics, resin, steel, foam PVC, wood, bamboo, phosphorescent acrylic, concrete, slate, asphalt, tar, polystyrene and an array of other industrial products. The building, which he has had for 'about 15 years', was once a factory for making cast-iron stamping machines.

King's ever evolving style – from the angled and delicately painted, to the robust outdoor, to the more traditional and figurative – has made him hard to categorise. 'Abstract lyricist' is perhaps the most accurate classification. As we sit in one of the upstairs rooms in his studio,

we examine the exquisitely made maquettes all around, particularly several small conical ones of dancing dervishes.

'There's plenty of northern light, which is especially good for looking at sculpture. I play around at making things, and I conceptualise ideas: it's a dual process. I don't converse with myself through drawing, rather through making.'

King had his first exhibition while at Cambridge University in the mid-1950s, and then decided he needed some formal tuition. 'I was in Foyles bookshop in London and I asked if they knew anything about art schools. "You're right next door to St Martin's," they replied. So I went next door and asked for the sculpture department. The first person I encountered was Anthony Caro.'

The rest, in a manner too long to catalogue here, is history. For a time a pupil and for a much longer period a friend and colleague, King remained close to Caro and their work is often mentioned in the same breath. He followed in Caro's footsteps as an assistant to Henry Moore and by the 1960s was becoming a highly influential figure associated with American Minimalists such as Carl Andre.

King loves being at the studio, still doing most of the heavy lifting work himself, as he always has done. Using machines for sanding, grinding, compressing and sawing remains a pleasure for him, as he approaches 80 this May. With three exhibitions imminent, his career is buoyant.

He missed this freedom during his years as President of the RA. 'It was a time of immense challenge for the Academy, particularly regarding the finances, and it's wonderful to see it now in such a good period, especially with the forthcoming expansion into Burlington Gardens.' The best aspect of having been President, he recalls, was the way he learned to appreciate the work of fellow RAs. 'You have to look in a completely open-minded way. For that experience I will always be grateful.'

Phillip King Thomas Dane Gallery, London, 020 7925 2505, www.thomasdane.com, 11 June–26 July. King also shows in the grounds of Royal Hospital Chelsea for **Masterpiece London** 020 7499 7470, www.masterpiecefair.com, 26 June–2 July with his works on view until 29 Aug **Phillip King** Tate Britain, London, 020 7887 8888, www.tate.org.uk, 8 Dec–1 March 2015