

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Jackie Wullschlager, 'Phillip King, Thomas Dane Gallery, London', *Financial Times*, June 8, 2014



'Genghis Khan' (1963)

The twirling pink column "Tralala" (1963), the orange, open-beak triangular form "And the Birds Began to Sing" (1964), the swirling purple cloak of "Genghis Khan" (1963): Phillip King is the great colourist of British postwar sculpture, bringing wit, flexibility and openness while maintaining a strongly formalist basis.

This condensed survey, focused on the 1960s-70s but including recent and new works, celebrates King's 80th birthday. It begins with his earliest wood and plaster experiments, utilising what he believed to be sculpture's most primal act: standing two objects on end leaning against one another to create a triangle or apex. Unpainted, these stark white pieces represent sculpture stripped down to simple forms – an exploration of geometry that determined the rest of his oeuvre.

Visiting Documenta in 1960, King reacted against a European art "dominated by a postwar feeling which seemed very distorted and contorted. It was somehow terribly like scratching your own wounds, an international style showing the same neuroses." He favoured, instead, American optimism, large scale and "less involved" styles. In the sugar-pink inverted slit cone "Rosebud" (1962), a highlight here, he pioneered the use of PVC plastic to create a smooth surface and allegorical form – sexual as well as pastoral – with a formal reference back to Cézanne. "Blue Blaze" (1967), a multipart timber arrangement, drenches the viewer in royal blue and has echoes of classical architecture, Lego blocks and surrealism. "Sure Place" (1976-77), a hut-like structure or hideout, is wrought in domestic building materials and engages with brutalist architecture.

Immediately accessible and engaging, eccentric, pluralistic in his references to the external world, from memories of his Tunisian childhood to English gardens, and in his use of materials, King's work defies sculptural conventions of weightiness and solidity. His expansive approach has wide influence – his students included Richard Long and Michael Craig-Martin – but he is also in deep debate with tradition: modernism, minimalism and his experiences as assistant to Henry Moore and Anthony Caro.

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from Wednesday to July 26

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