

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Brumfitt, Stuart. "Sculpture is about reaching for the sky". *Amuse* Online. 1 December 2017

Amuse

"Sculpture is About Reaching for the Sky"

83-year-old British artist Phillip King talks Zen gardens, patricide and growing up in a war zone



When you meet an 83-year-old sculptor, be prepared to shake an impressive hand. Tunisian-born British artist Phillip King's main artistic instruments are strong and slightly gnarled (owing to decades of heavy work and arthritis, which he combats with Flex It) and his grip is full of vigour.

King has assisted Henry Moore, been taught by Anthony Caro, represented Britain at the Venice Biennale and is held in various international collections (from the Tate to MoMA and Pompidou to Louisiana), but not widely known outside of art circles. Now's the chance to discover the extremes of his practice at two separate shows at Thomas Dane's two St James's galleries in London.

At 3 Duke Street St James's, *Colour Me Pink* is series of leaning and propped cartoonish slabs (with Swiss cheese-like holes), whilst at 11 Duke Street St James's, there's a collection of his neutral, unglazed ceramic pots from 1995 to present day (he was late to the interview because he woke up and decided to get to work on the latest of these). "Steeped in both ancient tradition and a modernist clarity," explain the gallery, "these new works reveal the investigations of a peerless sculptor who continues to challenge the limits of his materials."

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Phillip King Bodhisattva, 1995

colour on the wall, and it seemed to work very well. It's the first time I've created my own background for a sculpture and it seems to be an exciting development. Trouble is, if you're a collector, you don't want to repaint the wall for a work of art.

Whoever buys this should definitely repaint their house in the same colours.

I guess the work would survive without coloured walls, but it does make a difference.

Do you think your teaching and contact with young artists has meant that you've kept a contemporary voice?

The reason why I've taught for such a long time is because I did enjoy the contact with the young artists and it made me feel challenged. You become more tolerant as well. The ivory tower artist, I don't like that idea. I'm not a socially-minded artist – I don't go around thinking I want to put the world to rights through my work – but I do want to be engaged with people in the world and not be in an ivory tower. So teaching is a good way of keeping in contact with the outside world and developing my own work in some way.

I hear that when you were teaching in your mid-30s and there was a younger crew of artists coming up and tearing up the rulebook, you got a bit of shock and wanted to make sure you didn't get left behind.

Yes. There's a French critic and gallerist who had an exhibition of the history of sculpture, with Epstein, Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread, I think. In the catalogue he wrote that British art was a form of patricide. He talked about Henry Moore wanting to kill Epstein, and so on. It's not a tolerant culture like in France. You sort of want to get rid of your parents.

We caught up with him on the eve of opening to find out about his childhood playing in the ruins of Carthage, his love of Japan and why British artists always want to knock off the older generation.

Did you make the pots in Japan, or are they influenced by Japan?

I learnt my technique there because I used to go fairly regularly. I've been about 25 times to Japan over the years. My sponsors there had a son who was a potter, and he became a sculptor. I used to go and work, stay in a little flat on my own, and use his kilns. They even got me a teacher, so I learnt all the glazes in Japan, and I did an exhibition after. I think I went there four or five years running, learning a technique, and I did an exhibition at Takashimaya, a big department store.

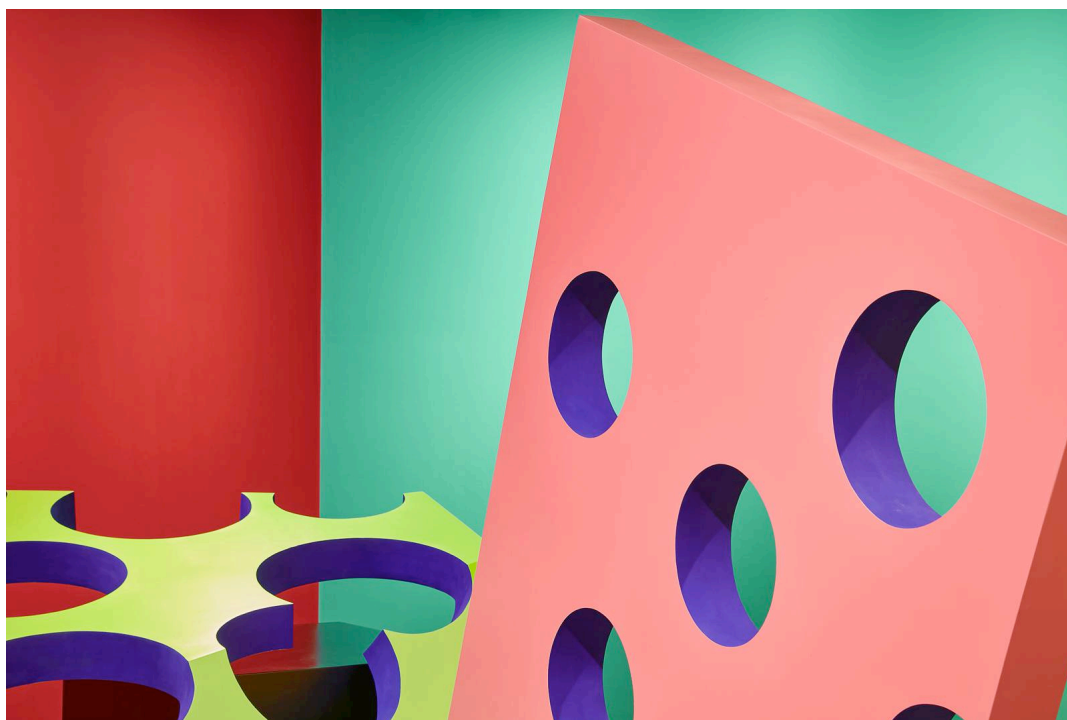
You taught throughout your career, and it sounds like you're always keen to keep learning new techniques.

Yes, I like experimenting and discovering things all the time. I'm constantly moving on.

Can you talk us through the big colourful works in this show?

The idea of holes emerged not because I like having holes in works of art, but because of colour. I found that somehow having a hole – unlike Henry Moore who made holes in order to see through to the other side – enhances the colour in some way. That's what got me interested in the holes. I painted the walls, playing around between colour on the sculpture and

THOMAS DANE GALLERY



Images Courtesy The Artist And Thomas Dane Gallery. Photo: Luke A. Walker



Images Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery. Photo: Luke A. Walker

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN
TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Yes, there's always that rebel spirit in the UK and maybe less respect for what's gone before.
Yes, the older generation, get rid of them!

Are you especially popular in any particular countries?

Certainly Japan has been a very good place for me. I think it's probably due to the fact that one of the great Japanese curators was on the committee at that time I showed at the Venice Biennale in the British Pavilion. Bridget Riley won the international painting prize, and he told me when I later met him in Japan that they wanted to give me the sculptural prize, but they couldn't give it to people from the same country. And they gave it to a Frenchman whose name I've forgotten. But he was a great supporter always, and so I was invited to Japan in '60 for Expo. That was my first experience. I love the country. Ever since then, I've been back regularly and got a gallery, got support from a group of people that found commissions for artists. There's quite a lot of commission work in Japan, from the North in Hokkaido right down to the South.

Do you think that when a country responds to your work, that it suggests you have some aesthetic connection to that place?

Japan made a big impression on me, but funnily enough, whatever experience I get in life, it takes about four years for it to percolate through the work. Japan in '69 and '70 was a great experience, but it didn't percolate through until about '74, and I started using new materials. And I discovered Zen gardens in Kyoto. There were about 1,000 of them. I fell in love with various places. Zen gardens are basically created from 11th century paintings. It's a kind of miniature world. The sand could be sky, could be clouds, could be the sea. Rocks are mountains and bushes are forests and in one of my favourite gardens in Kyoto, it's a story of life. You start off with a very active sort of flow of sand, which goes through little arches and cascades down rocks and things, and moves into a sort of big area with two little mounds and raked sand. That infinity is how to discover peace and quiet through life.

I read that when you were a young man in Paris at the Louvre, you were allowed to touch the sculptures.

Oh yes, that's right, touching the sculptures.



Images Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery. Photo: Luke A. Walker

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

What do you make of it now? Do you think that something has been lost now that we can't really touch artworks anymore?

I do feel that once you understand sculpture, the joy is having your hands all over your body and you use your eyes in a way that you don't need to touch anymore. The feeling has sort of spread throughout the body. I'm conscious of sculpture through my feet as well as my hands in a way. So the whole of your body reacts to it in some way.

What do you mean through your feet?

Part of sculpture for me is dealing with gravity – we're really little ants crawling on the surface all the time, you know? We admire birds that can fly and I think a lot of sculpture is about shedding weight in some way, and reaching for the sky. Standing up is a way of moving up. One of my favourite public works is Brâncusi's *Endless Column*. That's a sort of link between the earth and the sky in a way. It goes up and up and you forget how tall it gets. It's as if it can go right through the sky in some way. And so the idea of weightlessness has been part of my work, and your feet are what makes you conscious of weight, because you're standing on the ground and your weight is feeling the ground all the time. Sometimes through looking at a sculpture, I feel lighter on my feet, as though my feet are tingling in some way. I feel as though I'm floating a bit more. I remember seeing a Buddha in New York, years and years ago in the '60s at the Metropolitan. There was some break in the wood, and you could see it was hollow. It was as though it was breathing in some way and it was caught on the breath in, and in a way that's what sculpture for me is about: a kind of weightlessness, that breathing-in moment, as though you've become lighter in some way.



Phillip King, Eye Vessel, 1995

11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdane.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

It shows that sculpture is your calling, if you have those kinds of reactions to things, because I think a lot of people wouldn't get such a strong feeling.

I think as I get older, my eyes have been trained a lot and I can visualise a lot. My sculptures, a lot of it gets worked out at night. In the middle of the night I wake up and I'm like, "Maybe I should try and do this." I can visualise what's going on, and I think it's a way of saving energy as well, because at one time I used to bulldoze ahead and just try things out in my hand as it were. Now I use my hands a lot still, but I let my mind carry me a bit more to avoid having to do extra work I don't need to do.

I hear you used to play in the ruins of Carthage as a child.

I was born in Tunis, next to Carthage. I found Roman coins in the schoolyard and I used to have wild games when I was a kid, all through the war. I remember the Germans, when they occupied Tunis for about six months, then the Allies liberated. It was an amazing time. Very dangerous. I don't know how I survived, but I remember handling grenades and taking bullets out, shooting birds and shooting with big guns out at sea. My mother couldn't keep control over me.

How old were you then?

I was about eight or nine. I was a very free child, I never saw my parents in the day until the evening. I sat in gangs, on the sea a lot, on the edge of the sea. I remember my first experience of making sculpture was finding clay. It was a part of this beach where it must have been under water, coming in from under the ground, and if you dug in the corner you could find clay mixed with sand. I used to make little animals and then try and flog them. That was my first experience at making sculpture. I had a boat of my own at one time. I don't know how I got it. It was a life saving boat from the British. I think my brother got hold of it and left it for me, so I became a sort of captain of my boat and all the kids had to do what I said.

Phillip King: Colour on Fire and Ceramic 1995 – 2017 runs until 3rd February 2018 at Thomas Dane Gallery thomasdanegallery.com

<https://amuse-i-d.vice.com/sculpture-is-about-reaching-for-the-sky/>