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Trigg, David: *Barry Flanagan*

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Barry Flanagan, installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

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by DAVID TRIGG

Hares are mysterious and unpredictable creatures; leaping and darting through the landscape, they have beguiled and bewitched humanity for centuries. As George Ewart Evans and David Thomson discuss in their book *The Leaping Hare* (1972), the long-eared mammal crops up in the legends, folklore and superstitions of many divergent cultures – from a symbol of resurrection in Chinese mythology to an object of sacred worship in pagan Europe. In ancient Egypt, the animal was chosen for the hieroglyph denoting “existence”, a fact that certainly resonated with British sculptor Barry Flanagan (1941-2009), for whom the hare became a major preoccupation.



Barry Flanagan, Leaping Hare, 1981. Installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

In Flanagan's art, the hare invokes a nexus of meanings, standing as a surrogate human figure as well as a metaphor for his own elusive character. Dancing hares, musical hares, leaping hares, boxing hares, acrobatic hares, shamanic hares and philosophical hares are all found among his copious bronzes. Indeed, between 1979 and 2009, the animal dominated his practice to such an extent that it is often all he is remembered for. This comprehensive exhibition at the Ikon Gallery seeks to redress the balance by revealing the true breadth and depth of Flanagan's oeuvre. Curated by Jo Melvin, director of the artist's estate, it joins the dots between his best-known works and the ostensibly disparate elements they have overshadowed.



Barry Flanagan, installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

The tone for the show is set by the first room, which juxtaposes two hare sculptures with early works involving sand. *Sand Pour* (1968) is a deceptively simple work comprising, as its title suggests, a pile of sand on the gallery floor. The use of such material was subversive in its day, appearing at a time when new generation sculptors – including Flanagan’s tutor, Anthony Caro – were busy welding steel girders and sheet metal. While his peers went heavy, Flanagan went light, employing dyed hessian, sacking, paper and, indeed, light itself in works such as *Daylight Light Piece 4 '69* (1969), in which a projector’s beam illuminates a blue hessian square pinned to the wall.



Barry Flanagan, installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

The introduction of cast bronze brought literal weight to Flanagan's work, which throughout the show is played off against his more pliable materials. For example, adjacent to *Sand Pour* is *Juggler* (1994), a spindly hare clutching juggling clubs, which, in addition to referencing Flanagan's circus-performer uncle, speaks to the artist's juggling of divergent materials and ideas. Sand appears again in the nearby film *Sand Girl* (1970), in which we see the material falling on to a recumbent female body creating various contours and mounds. Towards the film's end, the woman gets up, leaving an imprint of her body. It is an apt image, evoking the removal of a cast object from a mould.



Barry Flanagan, Miracle in the Cabbage Patch VIII 78, 1978. Installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

According to Melvin, the key to understanding Flanagan's eclecticism is his interest in 'pataphysics – "the science of imaginary solutions" that was conceived by the symbolist poet and playwright Alfred Jarry (1873-1907). Writing in a 1963 issue of *Evergreen Review* that was devoted to the subject, Roger Shattuck defines 'pataphysics as "a method, a discipline, a faith, a cult, a point of view, a hoax". It is, he asserts, "all of those and none of them". Such equivocality was a revelation for Flanagan as it allowed him to simultaneously inhabit different positions and break down previously held rules and assumptions about art; for example, the differentiation between figuration and non-figuration, which he deemed arbitrary and irrelevant.



Barry Flanagan, installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

The influence of pataphysical thinking on Flanagan's early work is seen in the absurdly quixotic film *A Hole in the Sea* (1969), produced for German television. Shot from above, the black-and-white film shows turbulent waters splashing around a Plexiglas cylinder positioned vertically near the shore. The dark disc that emerges from the spiralling waves recalls hurricane satellite images, or even Malevich's *Black Circle* (1915). The artifice is disclosed at the end of the film as the artist is shown retrieving the cylinder from the water. Revealing Flanagan's early interest in transience and elusive phenomena, *A Hole in the Sea* introduces a line of enquiry that later found expression in his haers.



Barry Flanagan, Heap 3 '67, 1967, 1967. Installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

Colour is introduced nearby with a pile of limp, sand-filled sacks titled *Heap 3 '67* (1967). Lying on the floor, the green, yellow and pink sausage-like forms ostensibly cock a snook at the muscular metal sculptures that were in vogue among Flanagan's peers. This playful spirit continues with a series of colourful abstract collages, taken from a 1968 sketchbook, that have never before been shown in Europe. Made with cut and torn paper squares, these improvised compositions rely heavily on chance. Pataphysical overtones are in evidence here: green, for instance, which predominates these diminutive collages, is the colour of vitality, sexuality and life in 'pataphysics.



Barry Flanagan, Large Troubadour, 2004. Installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

Evoking a type of abstract notation, the collages also speak obliquely to Flanagan's love of music, which is referenced outside the gallery in Birmingham's Oozells Square, where the cello-playing hare of *Large Troubadour* (2004) is located (Bach's cello compositions were a particular favourite of Flanagan's).



Barry Flanagan, Monument, 1996. Installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

There is something deliciously contradictory about taking a creature associated with speed and transience and casting it in a material that has traditionally implied permanence and solidity. As if freezing time itself, Flanagan often depicts his hares mid-leap, such as *Leaping Hare* (1981), or in the midst of a spirited dance as with *Monument* (1996). The latter, with its three jaunty figures atop an amorphous mound, makes explicit reference to Auguste Rodin's *The Gates of Hell* (1880-1917).



Barry Flanagan, installation view, Ikon, 2019. Courtesy The Estate of Barry Flanagan and Ikon.

Elsewhere, Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) becomes a stand for another leaping hare in *Pirate Wheel* (2005). Notably, the turning wheel – an essential feature of Duchamp's original – is immobilised, as if to deny the passage of time itself, or at least encourage contemplation of stillness. This thought is reinforced by the adjacent hessian wall hanging, *Stand '76* (1976), where the titular word hovers like a command painted on to its surface.

Sand appears in virtually every room at the Ikon Gallery, a material that is, of course, another measure of time, filling the hourglasses that are frequently seen in *memento mori* paintings as reminders of life's temporality. Indeed, ideas of time and duration saturate the show, which thanks to Melvin's careful selection demonstrates the threads of continuity that run throughout Flanagan's oeuvre. It is clear that, contrary to the assumption of many, the artist's hares were not an abandonment of his earlier interests. Rather, they solidified a formative set of playful yet sincere reflections on an ancient idea: the fleeting nature of human existence.