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Glover, Michael: Toby Ziegler's exhibition in Salisbury presents figures of fun
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Toby Ziegler's sculptures have echoes of Rodin. But it is their playfulness that makes them so appealing to the viewer, as Michael Glover discovered at an exhibition in Salisbury

MICHAEL GLOVER | Sunday 10 August 2014

Toby Ziegler's trajectory as a sculptor – he has been showing in group and solo shows for 10 years – began in anxiety. After graduating from St Martin's School of Art, he lost faith in the idea of making objects. In common with other sculptors of his generation, he had a suspicion of the solidity and the permanence of the sculptural object, and this caused him to arrive at a different way of making altogether.

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Currently occupying a large studio in Willesden, north London (he was born in the capital in 1972), where he works with eight part-time assistants, he creates sculptures that have their starting point in images. In the past he has always shown his work indoors, in gallery spaces controlled by human calculation. Everything can be made to look just so in such conditions. Lighting. Positioning. The play of one work against another...

The outdoors sculpture park in Wiltshire where which his works are on display today does not quite allow for such rigidities, such exclusivities. Sculptors have to compete with one another here at Roche Court. A white horse by Mark Wallinger serenely overlooks a pair of skittishly acrobatic, impossibly balletic Flanagan hares further down the valley, for example. More important still, they have to compete with the vicissitudes of nature, ever changing, ever undependable. Sculpture, out in nature, confronted by the much greater and more enduring immensities of earth, air, sky, cannot afford to look diminished. Sculpture in the open is all about fight-back, standing one's ground, winning the space that the work occupies. This can be an awe-inspiring challenge.

There are other problems too.

Toby Ziegler, Sketch



Toby Ziegler, Sketch

Mass. Volume. Load-bearing. Ponderousness. These are some of words that have often been associated with the idea of making sculpture. Today, as I stand on this lawn, in the late morning sun, outside this Regency house, things look a little less certain. Is it, in part at least, a trick of the light? Ziegler's sculptures, forms which seem to exist on the cusp of abstraction and figuration, don't quite obey the rules. They have a tricky, silvery sheen about them that changes as the light changes. They are forms created from puffed out agglomerations of triangular facetings, bonded by rivets, and made from the thinnest variety of aluminium sheet that the sculptor could possibly source. Consequently, they look both substantial and insubstantial, simultaneously – and especially so when in the presence of the massive physical dependability of the holm oak which stands just a few metres away, on this same stretch of lawn, a tree of at least three hundred years' vintage. The sculptures have size and presence here, but rather in the way that an inflated balloon has size and presence. They belong to modernity, but they also seem to hark back, in a rather ghostly way, to older sculptural presences.

There are seven of them altogether, two out on the lawn and five others indoors, in the Orangery at my back, a long, shallow, sleekly stretched shop-window of a gallery whose huge, floor-to-ceiling windows enable us to feel that we are both inside and outside the space simultaneously. Some of the sculptures inside are paired with the ones outside – but in unexpected ways. They are crushed, deflated, wounded, humiliated versions of their out-of-doors selves.

The first surprise comes when a cooling breeze causes the largest sculpture of them all, Sketch, to tremor a little out on the lawn, as though shivering. This is odd. Sculptures are often characterised by their weight and their rigidity. Not so here. This one looks rigid – but it is not. Perhaps, in the course of time, it will evanesce or melt away. What is more, because of the way its base seems to taper, it looks slightly raised up off the lawn as it leans, perhaps with even a hint of tragedy. Its toes are not quite touching solid ground... This is sculpture which feels light, fleeting, almost airborne. And yet, at the same time, some idea of the ghostly physicality of a Rodin seems to be hanging in the air too.

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Installation view of Ziegler's new sculptures

Its form could be talked about in a variety of ways. The title seems to suggest as much: something provisional, a preparation, which has been arrested or perhaps even abandoned. It is about one and a half times the height of an average man, and it resembles a leaning, muscular figure of sorts reduced to a quasi-abstracted version of itself – there is more than the hint of a Hellenistic discus thrower about it – but that is very much an approximation because, being partially abstracted, it does not readily conform to easily reductive descriptive attempts. Stand at a slightly different angle, for example, and you see – if you wish to – testicles pendant in a scrotal sac... The surface of the piece is not even by any means – moment by moment it changes from slightly concave to slightly convex, from looking part sucked-in to part blown-out. There are dimplings and dentings, pockings and pimples across the surface, which looks part clouded and part reflective. This is a kind of geometrical idealism tempered by human frailty – or, at the very least, the human touch.

How does Ziegler make these works? They begin in computer modelling. He sources images from the web, and then refashions them on screen, transforming them into geometrised versions of the original image. He drags the image away from its origins until it is transformed into something part-remembered, part-forgotten, part-imagined. Once he is satisfied with this newly

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conjured virtual presence, maquettes are made, in three dimensions, and from there, the sculpture itself. So nothing begins out in the world.

Why should we value them though? We value them for the challenge that Ziegler is throwing down to his forebears. Starting back to front as he does, he is admitting into sculptural practice a lightness of being, a strange sideways shift of fabrication, elements of play, teasing and transience, which also challenge us to think about how we remember objects, and what in fact we remember of them when we think we remember them very well. There are few things more undependable, more shiftingly uncertain, than our own best cherished images of that which we think we know so well. So much looking is to do with our own conjuring. Every time one of Ziegler's pieces shivers in the wind, its appearance – and therefore its character as an object – changes slightly. So perhaps these sculptures are in covert collusion with nature after all. μ

Toby Ziegler, New Art Centre, Salisbury (01980 862244) to 7 September