

Artforum

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Barry Flanagan, *no. 5 '71, 1971*, fabric and wood, 25 x 104 x 99".

Barry Flanagan

TATE BRITAIN

The British sculptor Barry Flanagan (1941–2009) was best known for the bronze hares he began to produce in 1979, which earned him immediate and lasting commercial success. Despite their popular appeal, these leaping leporids were in many ways detrimental to Flanagan’s critical reputation, eclipsing the seriousness of his contribution to twentieth-century sculpture.

Thankfully, this carefully selected and elegantly installed exhibition, “Barry Flanagan: Early Works 1965–1982,” provided an alternative perspective on the artist’s career. Foregrounding his radical sculptural production between 1965 and 1982, curators Clarrie Wallis and Andrew Wilson pursued a subtle line of argument, tracking the playful, organic, and ritualistic aspects of Flanagan’s early work right through to the solitary bronze hare (*Large Leaping Hare*, 1982) in the final room.

One of the earliest sculptures in the exhibition, *aaing j gni aa*, 1965, was first shown in a countercultural bookshop when Flanagan was a student at St. Martin's School of Art. Appropriately, it was displayed at the Tate alongside the Concrete poems Flanagan published in the magazine *Silâns*, which he coproduced with Rudy Leenders and Alastair Jackson during the mid-1960s. Literary influences were evident elsewhere in the show, most notably in Flanagan's adoption of the pataphysical spiral in homage to Alfred Jarry. This ludic line was found cut into a stretched canvas, unraveled like a peeled orange (*untitled I*, 1972); carved ritualistically into stone (*a nose in repose*, 1977–78); and coiled into a series of ceramic pots from 1975–77. The communicative power of the line always remained central to Flanagan's sculptural vocabulary, asserting the relationship he perceived between sculpture and writing.

Flanagan's use of pliable materials that he heaped, bundled, piled, or hung paralleled contemporaneous developments in post-Minimalism and Arte Povera. Yet his eye for color set him apart, aligning him instead with the sensuous, phenomenological approach to color later pursued by Anish Kapoor. Saturated, tangible, and weighty, Flanagan's intense hues pit opticality against tactility, holding both in a productive tension. The stacked branches of *no. 5 '71*, 1971, have something in common with the early work of Jackie Winsor, but they are bound by stripes of brown, red, and pink felt to startling and idiosyncratic effect. Elsewhere in the same room, a shaft of light falling on a pile of jute sacks (*light on light on sacks*, 1969) was revealed to be a projection, the apparently serendipitous image carefully constructed. In Flanagan's work, "nature" always appears in quotation marks, explicitly staged or re-presented.

Like many of his contemporaries, Flanagan was concerned with the relationship of artmaking to labor and industry. In 1966 he joined the Artist Placement Group, set up that year to encourage closer collaboration between artists, industry, and government. For short periods during the 1970s, he worked as a builder's laborer and then as a stonemason, doing anonymous jobs that nevertheless fed into his artistic practice. When Flanagan turned to fabrication in the late 1970s, he seems to have been as interested in the collaborative process it entailed as he was in the final product. *Untitled (2b x 4)*, 1982, is a lump of pink marble that appears to have been rendered temporarily pliable—kneaded, twisted, and imprinted with the trace of gargantuan fingers. It was based on a small clay maquette, cupped and pressed in the artist's hands and scaled up in marble by a stone-carving atelier. This enigmatic object transforms an incidental gesture into something monumental, mediating the artist's touch through anonymous, collective labor. Pragmatic yet poetic, Flanagan's work has assumed new relevance in light of contemporary sculpture's love affair with the accidental, the provisional, and the everyday.

—Anna Lovatt