

Frieze

Thurston, Nick: *Review*

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FRIEZE

Barry Flanagan

& Model, Leeds, UK

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BY NICK THURSTON IN REVIEWS | 09 JUN 17



I have long wanted to watch the 16mm film version of *A Hole in the Sea*, which Barry Flanagan made in 1969 for Gerry Schum's famous TV exhibition 'Land Art'. A preliminary variant, made as two drawings in 1967, proposes the illusion of a hole in the canal water or sea water of Amsterdam. My first encounter was with a still from the TV footage, reproduced in a catalogue as a conceptual photowork. It must have been in the Leeds College of Art library around the turn of the millennium. It was the moment I realized that this Welshman cast more than the bronze hares that became his signature from the early 1980s. From 1968 through the 1970s, he also cast light and played with its capture on bodies, walls, fabric and film. Flanagan, light, the shoreline and Leeds have overlapped in my imagination since then, yet I have never quite been able to square the formal weightiness of

his monumental statues with the lightness (in every sense) of his earlier practice.



Barry Flanagan, *Sand Girl* and *Sand Pour*, both 1970.
Courtesy: & Model, Leeds

Through illustrations, cards and posters, the myths of hares and nature are dotted throughout 'Light Pieces and Other Works' at & Model. Likewise, blue rope, blue canvas, a blue fake bollard, blue skies and blue valleys colour-coordinate the seven re-staged sculptures, videos and archival documentation that make up the rest of the exhibition. Regardless of the symbolic connotations of these tropes, the show is led by the shifting interactions of light, sand and site of display across the three floors of run-down office building occupied by this artist-run gallery.

The simple brilliance of *A Hole in the Sea* is that one perfect dot manages to interrupt the infinite swell of water, appearing both as a sunspot and a black hole: the marker of a greater phenomenon above or the drainpipe to somewhere mysterious below. In doing so, it scuttles the surficial cliché of a shimmering ocean – the dappled charm of a sublime unknown onto which fantasies can be projected. As with his 1970 Super 8 film *Sand Girl*, in the best of Flanagan's work matter appears both massive and malleable. In their granularity, sand and water are materials that we can move through, can pass objects through, can impress upon, but can never perfectly control. As the woman in *Sand Girl* demonstrates, their surfaces and textures can be danced with to create a performative equivalent to Flanagan's better-known sculptures from the late 1960s. The prescient provisionality of these works was built up from the poles, flax and cloth that Flanagan stood, pinned and heaped in galleries to establish his first signature style, before the bronze haars shifted things towards the traditionally heavy.



Barry Flanagan, *One Ton Corner Piece*, 1967.
Courtesy: & Model, Leeds

By coupling *Sand Girl* and a small pile of real sand, *Sand Pour* (1968), in the ground floor back room, guest curator Jo Melvin introduces this connection as her organizational schema from the outset. Compositional echoes ring between the various pile-ups presented, which also include *One Ton Corner Piece* (1967), *Heap 3 '67* (1967) and – in a more complex sense, because it depends upon layering lights, material, the building and shadows – *Daylight Light Piece 4* (1969). A pair of pen-drawn diagrams from 1970 shows outlines of flat colour planes leaning against a wall – a direct reminder of the poise that was central to his work during this prolific period. The best of both his 'light pieces' and other pre-hare sculptures overlay their material on the space of display or performance like filters – at once projections onto its surface and interventions in its texture – and they seem to invite the space to push back.

Main image: Barry Flanagan, Sculpture diagram July 1 70 & 2 70, 1970. Courtesy: & Model, Leeds