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Dr McKenzie, Janet: *Barry Flanagan: Early Works 1965-1982*

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## Barry Flanagan: Early Works 1965–1982

Sculptor Barry Flanagan (1941–2009) is associated with instantly recognisable, over-sized bronze hares that mock the gravitas of formalism and conceptual art of the past 40 years. It is his early work however, that is the focus of Tate Britain's show, which includes only two hares, as if to avoid displaying or stating the obvious.

Tate Britain, London

27 September 2011–2 January 2012

by Dr JANET MCKENZIE

Waldemar Januszczak describes the show as a half-retrospective, work from the 1960s to the 1980s, and wildly variable in quality, though he observes, “the first couple of rooms are superb”.<sup>1</sup> Flanagan's early work is first characterised by the use of unconventional materials such as hessian, felt, sticks that represent his maverick nature and his conceptual ambitions. The sculptures of hares, which occupied him from 1982 to his death in 2009, are exuberant, joyful and gently ironic, mocking the solemnity of high art, such as the views of Clement Greenberg that dominated international, abstract art. The period covered by *Barry Flanagan: Early Works 1965-1982* has been chosen emphatically to stop at the hares. As a consequence, the exhibition ends abruptly, leaving one disappointed, not because the work itself is disappointing, but because the leap, to a hare in mid-air, is not explained. Indeed what motivated the artist to make the abrupt about turn in his art practice would have been an ideal focus would have underpinned a major retrospective. From hessian to bronze, humble to grand, whilst retaining wit and energy are the questions most visitors would like to see addressed. The catalogue essays embrace many of the issues but the exhibition itself feels somewhat incomplete.

The curators have emphasised the importance of Flanagan's obsessive interest in Alfred Jarry, but one can appreciate the exhibition without stopping for an explanation of Jarry's “Pataphysics”. As he explained:

I was drawn to Jarry not so much as a writer but as a poetic character. I first read him in 1963. I was lent a book, and I immediately adopted him as my historical hero, a symbolic figure emblematic of the individual imagination in revolt. What I like best about Jarry was his invention of the science of ‘pataphysics, or the science of imaginary solutions. It’s a kind of anti-philosophy that challenges traditional ideas’.<sup>2</sup>

*Joie de vivre* exists too and he is, as many have observed, playful. There is also at times an understated ability to capture rare, sometimes incongruous moments and a sense of adventure in the neatly folded hessian, inspired by family blankets and the marvellous thick rope placed across the floor like a winding river, a sensual brush mark without the use of a brush or paint.

Asserting the importance of chance with enigmatic, mysterious forms, accidental creations or those found in nature (and embellished such as, *Nauts and crosses* ’76 (1976)) Flanagan questions the heroic monumentality of sculpture in a traditional hierarchy of the arts, its permanence and importance. Marginalizing the bronzes might be a way of reminding the public that Flanagan’s true nature was more iconoclastic, and less commercial, where process and experimentation are more important than finished work. Perhaps the finest works, though not the most dramatic in terms of scale or placement, in the Tate show, are three pieces made in the late seventies by experimenting with sheet metal. The cut spirals in *VII 78 the corn’s up* (1978), *VII 78 as night* (1978) and *VII 78 moon thatch* (1978) can be seen as spatial drawing; they can also be seen as a key link between the early work of Barry Flanagan and the anthropomorphism of the hares.

Peter Briggs, with whom Flanagan produced his first cut sheet metal pieces in 1977, has explained how, “the elegance of his solutions consisted in projecting line into space whilst letting the surfaces form themselves. A way of surfaces coming into being automatically, he enjoyed the idea of directing and inventing an operation productive of form from line”.<sup>3</sup> The spirals in these lyrical pieces also refer to the *gidouille* or spiral that marks that fat belly of Ubu Roi, the monstrous anti-hero created by Alfred Jarry, whose “pataphysics”, Flanagan remained interested in. Spatial drawing, in this case using cut metal, captured the exploratory nature of Flanagan’s early art practice, and his interest in going beyond the dualities of ground/figure, subjective/objective. Clarrie Wallace observes: in “The business is in the making”: “Flanagan does not wish merely to indicate the brute physicality of his materials in these works, but rather to use this raw stuff as a prima material that, somewhere between chance and necessity, is transformed to achieve a unity of opposites.”

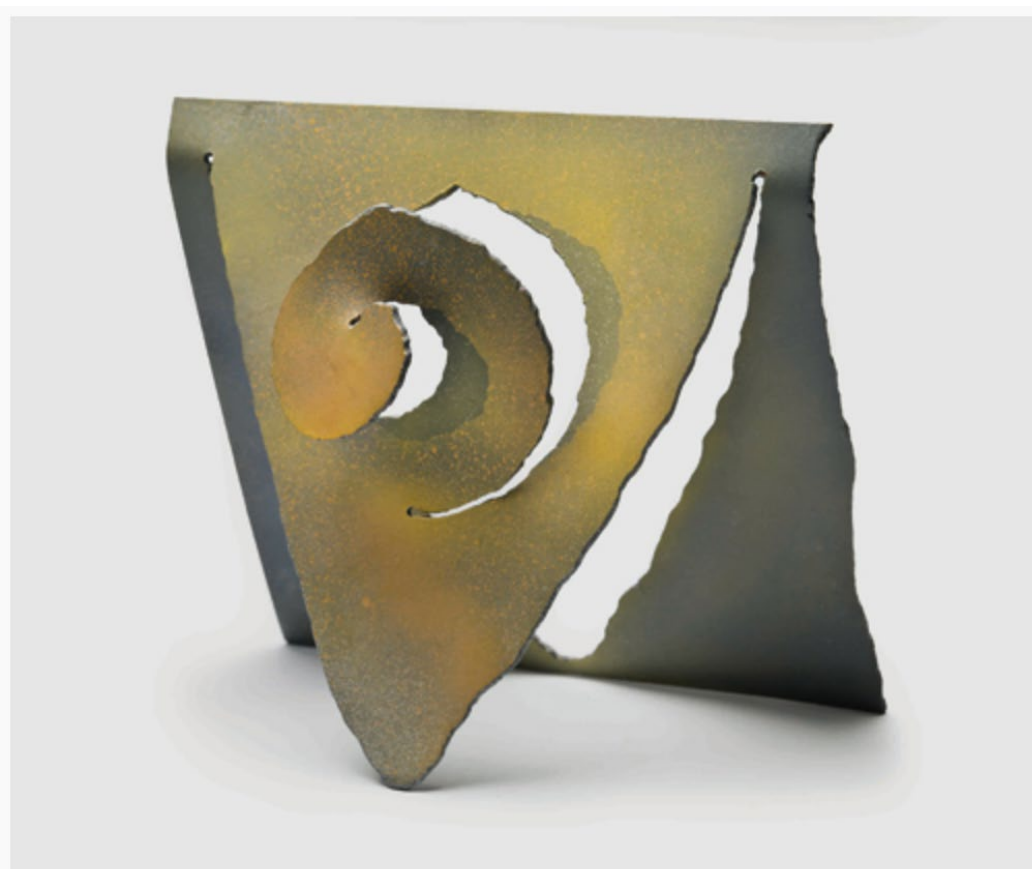
In the early eighties Flanagan expressed his growing interest in collaborative work with craftsmen and the open exchange of skills. He had been invited in 1979 by Andy Elton to work at A&A Sculpture Casting. Needing a subject for a body of work there, he read *The Leaping Hare* by George Ewart Evans and David Thompson, which explores the mythological attributes of the hare throughout history. Then the sighting by the artist of a hare in a field on the Sussex Downs, and the observation of its unpredictable nature and movement led Flanagan to cast his first *Leaping Hare* on 7 November 1979. The hare soon became the artist's emblem through which his works could be endowed with magical and mythological associations. Long-limbed, at times cartoon-like, libidinous, and elusive, the hare became Flanagan's alter ego. Flanagan's interest in Jungian archetypes found a perfect creature in the hare as trickster: "Throughout world mythology trickster figures transgress frameworks of right and wrong, delighting in breaking the rules, boasting and playing tricks on both humans and gods. They may also act as messengers between human and divine worlds, and most tricksters are shape changers, often appearing as animals, including, of course, the hare."<sup>5</sup> After decades dominated by formalism and conceptual art, Flanagan infused British sculpture with humour and a talismanic force.

## References

1. *The Guardian*, 5 October 2011.
2. Quoted by Clarrie Wallis, 'The business is in the making', in *Barry Flanagan: Early Works 1965-1982* (Tate Britain, London, 2011), p.19.
3. Quoted by Andrew Wilson, 'Working towards poem', *ibid*, p.49.
4. *Ibid*, p.24.
5. *Ibid*, p.31.



Barry Flanagan. *4 casb 2*



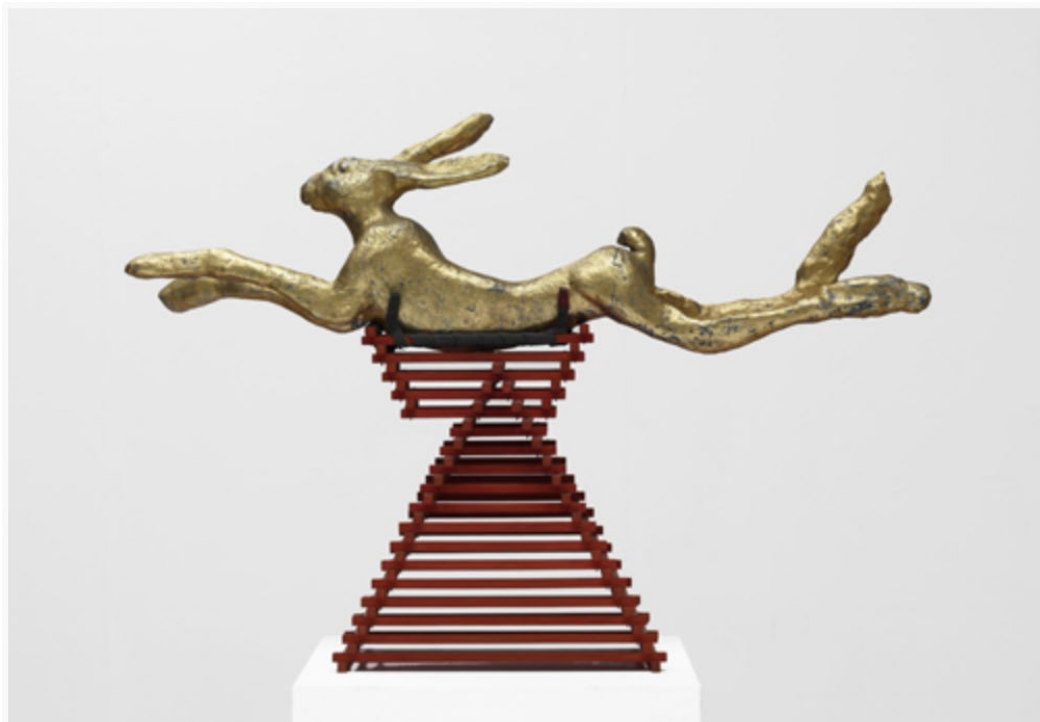
Barry Flanagan. *VII 78 the corn's up,* 1978. Painted metal, 22.8 x 25.4 x 17.8 cm. Lewis Biggs



**Barry Flanagan.** *VII 78 as night,* 1978. Metal, 24 x 26 x 20 cm. Private collection, Paris



**Barry Flanagan.** *VII 78 moon thatch,* 1978. Painted mild steel, 44 x 96 x 43 cm. British Council



Barry Flanagan. *Leaping hare, embellished, 2/3 jan*