

## ‘STILL AND STILL MOVING’

Essay by Alexander Massouras

‘When one crosses a landscape by automobile or express train, it becomes fragmented; it loses in descriptive value but gains in synthetic value. The view through the door of the railroad car or the automobile windshield, in combination with the speed, has altered the habitual look of things’. Fernand Léger’s account of familiar sights changing when framed by new experiences, first published in 1914, needs little adjustment to describe the contemporary practice of the sculptor Nick Hornby. A century later, what disrupts perception is no longer the car or train, but the parallelism of our real lives and our digital lives on screen: it is a new kind of locomotion where selves are distributed in many places at once, through images shared across social media, or by the dispersed presence of video calls. To borrow the T.S. Eliot line from *Four Quartets* which titles one of the exhibited works, this is today’s version of being ‘still and still moving’. These experiences create fragmentation, just as speeding through a landscape did for Léger, and they create new kinds of synthesis too.

The slippery relationship Hornby stages between flatness and depth plays with this current, ubiquitous mediation of screens and data. His sculptures set up their recognition as silhouettes, familiar when glanced from a particular view. Seen that way, the sculptures are briefly like images on a screen. There are strong twentieth century echoes in Hornby’s occupation of this space between two and three dimensions. In one of the earliest accounts of cubism, in 1910, Jean Metzinger described it as a means by which Picasso combined visual with tactile perception. The unity of linear perspective was switched out for what Metzinger called a ‘free, mobile perspective’ where multiple viewpoints fragmented the subject, a haphazard iteration of 3D scanning described at the dawn of the twentieth century. The cubist picture plane was still flat, but it described its subject from several directions in ways that lent it peculiar depth. Many cubist works are—in the strictest, material sense—collages, but even the paintings are collages when it comes to their use of perspective. This is where Hornby’s sculptures differ: if his cubist precursors showed a unified subject through pluralizing lenses, Hornby’s subjects are already plural and he instead unifies them in a single, three-dimensional form. So although his sculptures share many of the preoccupations of cubism, and some of its appearances, they are—by process—an inversion of cubism.

Hornby’s tendency to use canonical ingredients—from Michelangelo to Matisse—inflects his work with a preoccupation with origins through repeated references to the art of the past. A historicist leaning might also inform his use of the fragment. All Hornby’s work is fragmentary to the extent that it might take just one profile from a complex three-dimensional object, and in its response the dissociative noise of contemporary life. But *Offcut (Reduction 1)* spells out, in the title, its fragmentary nature and gives it particular force through its scale and presence: what is seen, however grand, is the legacy of other forms being cut away. The process of splicing together ‘masterpieces’ evokes the hadron collider at CERN, where particles are smashed into each other in order to better understand their structure and, in turn, the origins of the universe. Intersecting portrait busts from the Victoria and Albert Museum in *Vanity Working on a Weak Head Produces Every Sort of Mischief* does something similar, suggesting an essence each contributing bust shared, and pointing to structural similarities which might pierce the very different patrons, muses and professionals depicted. The exercise disintegrates authorship, through the number of artists involved, and through Hornby’s interest in the sitter as much as the artist. If distributed authorship comes partly from the sculptures’ hybrid subject, it also comes from Hornby’s process, where software and the intercession of fabricators sit alongside more conventional sculptural activities like carving or casting. Seeing versions of the same work in completely different media—in this case marble and bronze—points again to these separations. There is also elegant symmetry in the fact that a sculpture germinated from multiple sculptures can itself assume multiple material forms. Their sameness across different materials is uncanny, and through it a trace of their digital creation—on a screen where material is subordinated to a matrix of

measurement and contours—lingers. That original digital life seems to inform the sculptures' finish. In life, their immaculate surfaces can almost feel unreal; the physical sculptures have not entirely separated from the digital avatars that preceded them.

Placed among the work of twentieth century masters, Hornby's sculptures are displayed in a hall of mirrors. There are their conceptual affinities—like fragmentation and pluralism—and their similar attitude to the different 'nows' of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Visually, though, the combination calls attention to the significance of line throughout the exhibits. *Still and Still Moving* obscures Michelangelo's *David* despite using its inescapably familiar silhouette, which is twisted through ninety degrees such that it folds and crumples, like fabric. Outlines are strange. As recounted in Pliny the Elder's stories of the very first paintings and sculptures, outlines are a visual truth: a traced silhouette is an indexical record of whatever it was that cast the shadow, recording the presence of its subject as surely as a footprint. But outlines are also, at least partly, fictions—edges where planes meet, dissolved when the light shifts or when the viewpoint changes. *Still and Still Moving* rotates *David* through ninety degrees, the same rotation seen in Picasso's *Painter and Model* (1954). The drawing depicts the process of its creation, or rather the creation of something similar but with a perpendicular viewpoint. The canvas the painter works on divides the drawn page vertically, like a curtain splitting artist from model. And although the activity being depicted is visual, what the drawing shows is tactile: the artist's hand holding the brush is the fulcrum of the image around which everything turns. Since neither artist nor model is looking at each other, the drawing's subject is touch as much as sight. These contradictions within the image are reminiscent of the playful concealment in Hornby's work. When Picasso's drawing depicts an artist and a model, the artist in it has become a model too. Similarly, Hornby's subjects are other artists' work, but through it the artists themselves and, in turn, the very notion of authorship. The tantalizing invisibility of the image being made by Picasso's artist is a reminder of the invisibility that permeates Hornby's work: if they can be seen and recognized from one or two aspects, for the rest of the time his sculptures stage a confusion where that flat visualization melts into three dimensions. The sculptures' silhouettes are sometimes true, revealing the forms that generated them, but more often than not they are something more complicated and obfuscatory.

In many respects, line in the twentieth century was a gateway to the formalism of high abstraction, where canvases became surfaces in their own right rather than things to be seen through. A conspicuous and flat line, like that in Matisse's *Head of a Woman* (1950), takes figuration to a similar point: the line is as much a barrier as the drawn easel is in Picasso's *Painter and Model*. It is so reduced and economical that the woman's features become almost symbolic. But when it comes to line, it is Fernand Léger's *Women with a Parrot* that is perhaps the most fitting company for Hornby's work, particularly the new color versions of *Vanity Working on a Weak Head Produces Every Sort of Mischief* where Hornby has brought visual elements from Matisse and Hans Arp to the series. On the one side we see Léger painting flatly but in three dimensions: his bold, schematic lines prevent any visual illusion of depth while themselves jutting out of the ceramic surface. On the other, Hornby takes the flat painterliness of Matisse's color and wraps it around the three-dimensional bust. The dipping process used to transfer the image is a negation of touch: the image is suspended across the surface of water, and it is transferred to the sculpture by slowly submerging the sculpture through it. If screen culture informs Hornby's approach to sculpture, these 'painted' sculptures are made by, in essence, being pushed through a screen. Sculptures which first took form digitally, on a screen, enter the material world through complex and exacting fabrication only to be processed through a screen once more. To return to Eliot, 'in the end is my beginning.'