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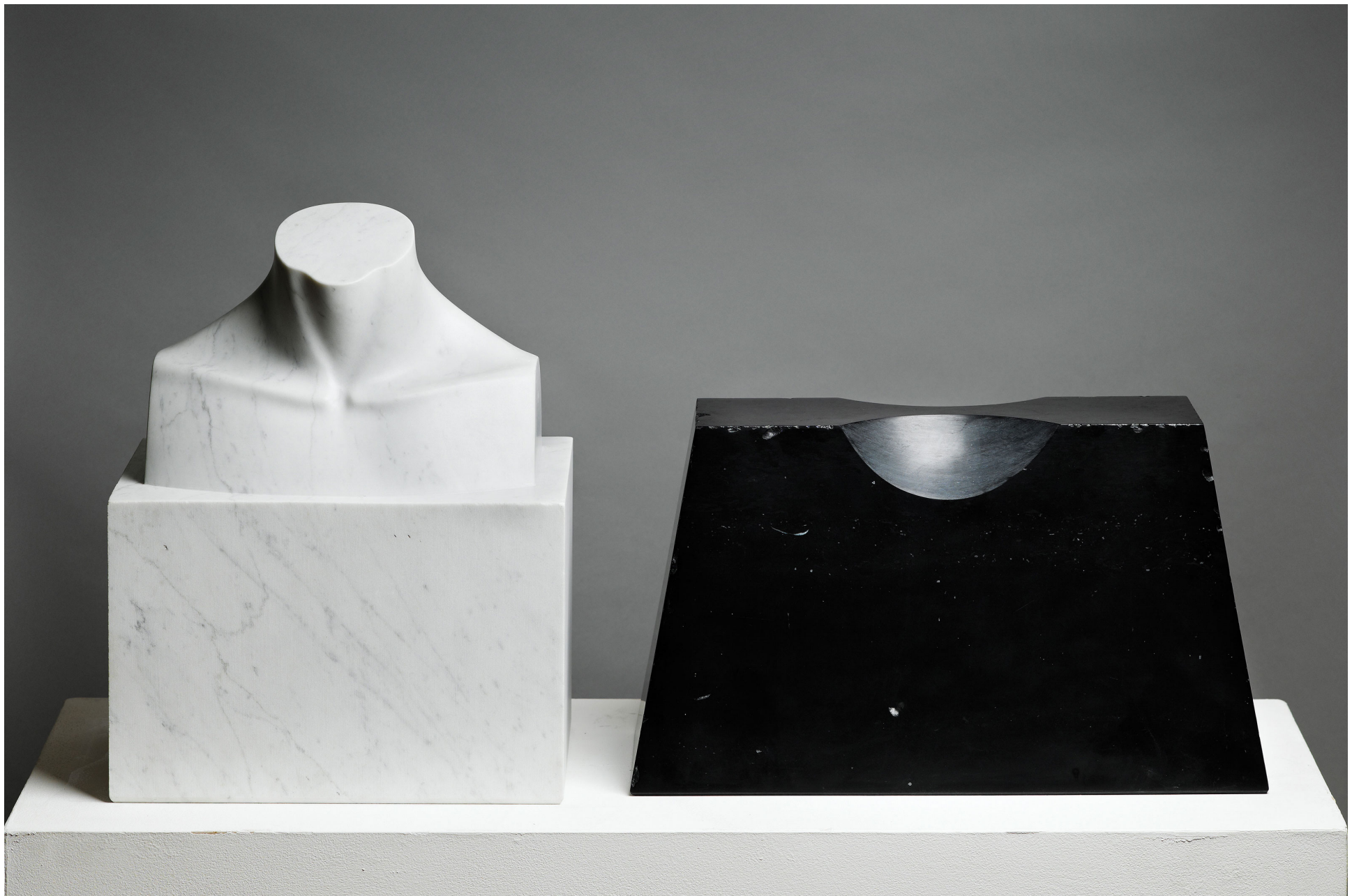
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Anne Boleyn I & II, 2012. Carrara marble and Kilkenny limestone, 70 cm. high. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

Jason Ellis: Arresting the Wheel of Mortality

September 1, 2018 by [Brian McAvera](#)

Jason Ellis, a sculptor of English and German parentage who moved to Ireland in the early 1990s, is a stone carver of considerable accomplishment. As a guitar player, he likens the process of carving stone to that of playing pop music: every now and then, something new seems to “just happen,” defying a limited, rule-bound palette of established chords, beats, and traditional progressions.

In Ireland, stone carving dates back several thousand years; one thinks of megalithic carving, Kells High Crosses, and the figurative sculpture of the Lough Erne Basin. In more recent times, sculptors as various as Eileen MacDonagh, Michael Quane, Cliodhna Cussen, and Imogen Stuart have all demonstrated an often startling technical ability when it comes to stone. For Ellis, “If there’s a signpost I want to give the viewer, it is about the medium. Look at the incredible stone. I also hope the technical skill, which has been developing over 20 years, is apparent.” Technical skill, while still admired, is not a requirement of contemporary art. More important is whether that skill dovetails with concept and subject matter to produce art and not craft—a distinction that, though questioned today, remains important in relation to the work of a sculptor like Ellis.

After taking A Level sculpture, he went to art college at the University of Chichester, where one of his lecturers was a former student of Anthony Caro and, not surprisingly, an exponent of 20th-century British Modernism (Chadwick, Butler, and Moore). During a college trip to Paris, where Ellis visited Brancusi's studio, he had what he calls his "Damascus moment." Brancusi's sculpture became a dangerous influence—inspirational for its abstracting essence, but carrying an attendant risk of pastiche.



Tight skirt, 2007. Cornish serpentine and Aroca wood, 50 cm. high. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

After college, Ellis moved to London in 1986, where he spent several years playing in rock bands and then "stumbled" into a job as a conservator, learning how to repair ceramic, glass, and stone objects for the commercial market. For four years, he worked on everything from Greek antiquities to Victorian statuary. Then, in the early '90s, after beginning a series of homages to Brancusi, he left for Ireland, where conservators were a rarity, and started his own business, working for major institutions like the National Gallery of Ireland and the Office of Public Works. In retrospect, this experience was of critical importance to his development. Not only did it familiarize him with the properties and uses of different types of stone, but it also provided him with a far-ranging vocabulary. He could now combine his art school education with the hands-on experience of a craftsman equipped with a remarkable technical and historical knowledge base. Ellis's conservation work included orthostats in Newgrange and Knowth, megalithic tombs, Roman funerary urns and sculpture, Early Christian grave slabs, the Romanesque door



EDITOR'S CHOICE



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Berta Fischer



OLAFUR ELIASSON: *IN REAL LIFE*

Sheila Hicks: *Seize, Weave Space*

surround at Clonfert Cathedral, 14th-century tomb effigies, Canova's *Amorino* (1792), and J.H. Foley's Daniel O'Connell monument in Dublin, in addition to works by Joseph Beuys and Jeff Koons.

In 2006, Ellis decided to concentrate on his own work and, at the rate of roughly 10 sculptures a year, he has now produced more than 165 carvings in stone, ranging from large-scale public monuments such as *Figurehead* (2008), a seven-meter-high, Brancusi-inspired work in Kilkenny limestone on the UCD campus in Dublin, to *Third husband* (2015), a small-scale piece in Cornish serpentine. Ellis boils his process down into just a few steps, beginning with an idea or shape, which then takes form in clay or plaster. If the maquette is good, he commits it to stone. He works with many different stone types, "trying to find those that suit or enhance the form," and uses angle grinders, along with a mallet and chisel, to carve. After the carving tools are put away, riffling, sanding, and polishing can begin: "Polishing stone by hand becomes a meditative process; it requires patience and concentration, and sometimes I reach a brief moment of pure tranquility, as if attaining a 'oneness' with the object. These moments are rare, golden, and have elements of music or poetry to them."

Ellis's first major exhibition, at the F.E. McWilliam Gallery in 2010, featured a range of abstract stone sculptures described by curator Riann Coulter as harboring "differences in style, subject matter, and materials." Though the dominant influence was Brancusi, one imagines that Ellis had also looked at Arp, Oskar Schlemmer, Hans Bellmer, Boccioni, Max Bill, and Barbara Hepworth. Works such as *Sea Swim* (later re-named *The Foolish Virgin*) reveal a striking combination of sheer technical joie de vivre and an insistent appeal to the sense of touch—the polished, undulating, rhythmical forms incite a desire to stroke and caress, embodying the tactile values championed by Bernard Berenson and Roger Fry. At this stage in his career, Ellis was a technician defined by the sum of his influences. The craftsman was still in the ascendant, and the work celebrated the stone itself, sometimes with a hint of poetry, as when Ellis, remarking on a Kilkenny limestone, observed that he was the first person ever to have seen its fossilized oyster shells.



Lake Balaton, 2013. Kilkenny limestone, 26 cm. high. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

"Corpus" (2013), Ellis's first show at a commercial gallery (Oliver Sears in Dublin) shifted from Modernist abstraction to Modernist figuration, filtered through the lens of Greek and Roman sculpture. In this body of work, the part stands in for the whole—a hand, an arm, a leg, a torso. This also suggests the beginnings of a Surrealist influence that would not fully emerge until later. Instead, these works display a range of figurative references, including Rodin, Maillol, Epstein, Duchamp-Villon, Medardo Rosso, and Bourdelle.

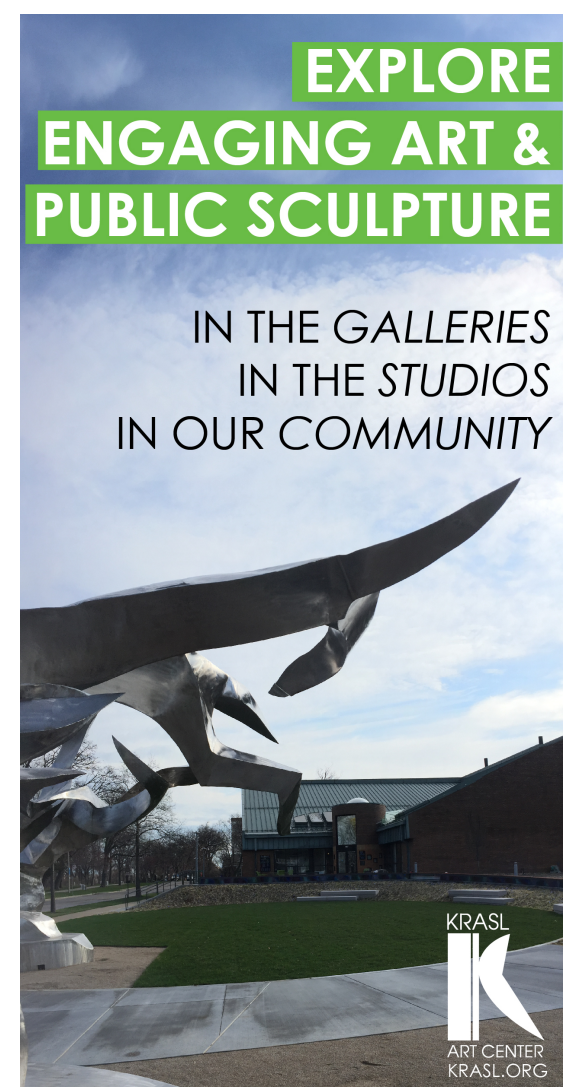
While Ellis's abstract work was essentially about form and materials, his figurative work concentrated on content: "I wanted to impose another layer of meaning." First, he would make a plaster cast from the live model, and then he would carve in stone. The assured surfaces shift from the cool drama of *Suppliant* (the matte Portland stone keeping the emotional temperature low) to the warmer sexuality of *Selene* in which truncated thighs and legs of polished Carrara marble invite the eye to contemplate the missing torso.



Antony Gormley: SIGHT

ISSUES

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It's noticeable that the face does not appear in any of these works. Ellis focuses on the body: "All the way from the *Venus of Willendorf* through Michelangelo and out the other side to Epstein, the body seems to be an inexhaustible source for artists; it's of us and about us. I don't think people will ever entirely lose the fascination with the body. Isn't most art about mortality ultimately? Trying to arrest the wheel for a split second?" This observation places an interesting delimitation on figuration. For most of us, one body part is not hugely different from another in terms of basic content. It's the face, the expression, the relationship (or lack thereof) between the face and the body, and posture that probe a personality, allow for psychological insight, and create the sense of a lived life. The removal of these elements requires us, perforce, to concentrate on surface, though Ellis's next exhibition demonstrated another option—delving into the interior of the body to create metaphors.



Breathe, 2015. Cork red and Kilkenny limestones, 32 cm. high. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

With "Old Anatomy" (2016, Oliver Sears Gallery), Ellis noticeably changed gears. Given access to the collection of anatomical plaster casts held by the Department of Anatomy at Trinity College, Dublin, he photographed and drew them, modeled them in clay, and then remade them in stone. In the exhibition catalogue, he wrote: "The selection of casts is based on a set of criteria, form being a principal component—an upside-down stomach on a pedestal really is a thing of beauty—but I also want to examine the philosophical viewpoints that prompted their creation, from anthropological to pathological to purely anatomical. Why does the collection include a cast of the inside of Jonathan Swift's cranium or the arm of the bare-knuckle boxer Matt the Thrasher or the bound foot of a Chinese woman? Gathering this very personal selection of objects presents extra layers of meaning in interpreting the resulting sculptures. They are extrapolations and can be read variously as artworks, relics, curiosities, anatomical specimens, or anthropological phenomena."

Cabinets of curiosities were all the rage in the 18th and 19th centuries, and as the "Body Worlds" exhibitions of the German anatomist Gunther von Hagens have more recently demonstrated, the elegant display of bodies and body parts can combine a taste for Grand Guignol morbidity with intellectually nuanced aesthetic appreciation. On initial viewing, Ellis's pair of lungs (*Breathe*), kidneys (*Eight kidneys*), and heart with associated arteries (*Second cousin, once removed*) seem to confirm his mimetic gifts. One observes, with admiration, the technical skill, the celebration of the medium, the precise use of stone types, and the ability to create an aesthetically pleasing range of objects based on originals that most people would regard as repellent. The traditional elements of stone carving—truth to materials, balance, form, and a sense of elegance—are all brought into play, but

here they are applied to the internal organs of the human body rather than its external appearance; as a consequence, the sense of mortality is intensified, and metaphorical possibilities open up. A comparison between Ellis's carvings and the original anatomical casts reveals a definite slippage (transformation is too strong a word). For instance, the original cast of a Bedouin head has an unusually large mouth, which seems to be overflowing with teeth, whereas Ellis's Persian limestone *Bedouin Tribesman* markedly reduces both mouth and teeth. Likewise the coloration changes; the overall pinky red of a pair of lungs gives way to a much more variegated and mottled progression in Cork red limestone, moving from dark reds through light pinks.

Ellis, aware of the danger that he might be labeled a "copyist," began asking himself whether these works truly carried emotive force or if they were just reproductions. To satisfy himself, he shifted direction again, this time bringing an element of Surrealism to the fore. In *Me & the Devil* (2015), carved from marble and Kilkenny limestone hand-polished with wet sand, two armless and headless torsos rest on separate plinths. One is white, with jagged, uneven cuts at the arms and neck, as if it had just been found in an excavation. The other is black, and its cuts are pristinely clean and polished, as in a Duchamp-Villon. When the sculptures are viewed from the rear, the white torso has two bruised ridges running down its shoulder blades, as if wings had been brutally ripped off its back, whereas the black torso bears two long slits (not unlike the incisions in Giacometti's works from the late '20s), as if wings had been mechanically attached. We have yin and yang, a "good" angel and a "bad" angel, classicism and Modernism.



Me & the Devil, 2015. Carrara marble and Kilkenny limestone, 50 cm. high. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

Macrocephalus 1 and *2* (2016) intensify the Surrealist aspect. Stretched in either height or width, with the scale of the eyes exaggerated, each skull, instead of rising from a neck, rests on its upper row of teeth. One is irresistibly reminded of cranial deformations or of science fiction aliens, yet the elegance of the carving and polishing, the precision tooling of the white heads resting on their slab-like black plinths, creates a dialogue between humor and anxiety. What appeals to Ellis "is not the intellectual, it's the visceral." He is "trying to counter the Tracey Emin's of this world. People still want handmade objects, and I'm reacting to the contemporary art world." For him, stone has always offered "everything that I wanted: technically challenging, unforgiving, permanent, beautiful, and supremely suited to any Modernist discussions on material and form. Robert Jacobsen summed it up: 'Material repays in inspiration what you have given it in your attempt to serve it.'" After 20 years spent in "the attempt to serve," the craftsman has indeed become the artist.

Brian McAvera is a playwright and critic based in Northern Ireland.

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