

***Drawn from the Well:* photographing sculpture, a sculptural practice**

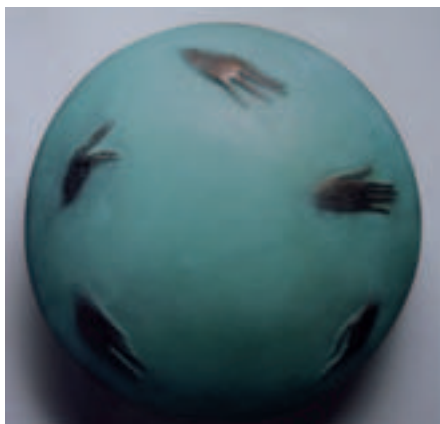
Felicity Powell

Photography and sculpture are to my mind closely bound together. As a sculptor I have always used photography as a tool, as part of the development of my work, and as a way of documenting and collecting information and ideas. But it has also been more than that, much like a working drawing becoming something in its own right.

In 2001 I was commissioned by the Sculpture Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum to make a medal to commemorate Sir John Charles Robinson (1824–1913),¹ first Curator of Sculpture in the earliest history of the museum (fig. 1). It was largely due to Robinson that the museum's Sculpture Collection was established.

During the process of research on Robinson I made many drawings, and took numerous photographs of the spaces in the museum and the objects he had collected. I made digital copies of letters he sent back to the museum from Europe,

1. Felicity Powell, *John Charles Robinson Medal, 2002*, Victoria and Albert Museum, inventory number A.5-2002



where he was making many significant and major acquisitions from 1852 to 1867. I looked at early twentieth-century photographs of the sculpture courts in South Kensington depicting the building works, the transitional moment when objects were yet to be placed, the arrangement of objects, and the tangible atmosphere of space and light.² We perceive historic sculpture and artefacts to be permanent: the same expression gracing a face, in stone, bronze or terracotta, for centuries. A solid three-dimensional presence conveys a sense of immutability, even with the patina of time. A continually changing play of light, day after day, animates the fall of shadow across form, but the essence of a piece is unchanging.

Nevertheless a moment captured in a photograph is always underpinned by our knowing that that time has passed, but a photograph of a sculpture can heighten that sense of time fleeting, more so because of a sculpture's illusion of permanence. The context, positioning and relationships to other objects around a sculpture give it life and a particular ambience. The joy of moving around a sculpture is that it unfolds in time and space; but a momentary convergence in a line of vision from one perspective, as in a photograph, can be surprising and revealing. That is why, in photographing sculpture, one sees, through the still moment captured and composed in a frame, a configuration that is unique to that moment, and it allows another kind of understanding.

Drawing and photographing sculpture offer quite different insights. I never draw from a photographic image of an

object, preferring to see it first hand. Observational drawing is much akin to making or modelling sculpture. Time taken in the act of looking while drawing slowly reveals specific aspects of the three-dimensional. Photography offers other insights, mediated through a viewfinder, lens or a digital screen. The flat compositional and instantaneous reckoning allows a certain distance, and time is played out in another way.

The Robinson medal commission opened up the possibility of working with some of these ideas. I chose to portray Robinson on the medal not by a likeness from existing photographs or portrait bust, but with his own handwriting. 'Now is the time', he wrote in a letter to the museum from Spain.³ His hand was urgent and these words were reinforced with an imperative stroke to underline the message. That moment was still as fresh as wet ink and just as pertinent in our own time. I used it directly on the medal, and felt inspired to act on it too.

The idea of making a site-specific installation to appear concurrently with the display of the commissioned medal, in the adjacent room, was formed and carried out in 2002. Subsequently the photographs and film of this piece, as well as what has happened in those galleries since, has added an archival dimension to this body of work.

With Art and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) funding I worked collaboratively with the museum and most significantly with the curator, Wendy Fisher who, with Marjorie Trusted, initiated the original commission for the Robinson medal. The magnificently carved wellheads had



Figure 2

wooden covers. I felt there was a better solution that could be more sympathetic to the objects themselves, beautiful as they are, and to the particular atmosphere in that room.

The installation *Drawn from the Well* consisted of four mirrors specifically made for each of the wellheads placed within their cavities. In many ways the mirrors acted like lenses, focusing and refocusing

on the surrounding environment of sculpture and architecture, which was drawn in and reflected at the centre of each well. The mirrors, reminiscent of water, recalled the prime function of wells. Drawings etched into the mirrors revealed themselves as the viewer moved around them, changing as the angle of reflection changed, fleeting and elusive against the weight of stone. Two of these drawings were of transient watery moments, ripples and tears held suspended (fig. 2). In looking into the wells, the surroundings turned upside down by reflection were recomposed in the circular mirror of each well, with a similar effect to the reflected image in a *camera obscura*.

When filming the installation I focused on these reflections. A mysterious topsy-turvy world is animated as the drawings appear to glide over reflections while the camera moves by. This film was later projected on to an enormous screen suspended across a pool at night, in the Hereford Salon Project Space in Los Angeles in 2004. The images of sculpture and architecture reflected in the mirrors at the V&A were now re-verted in the dark still water of the pool, itself acting as a mirror, directly linking water back to the images of wells. The video and photographs represented the particular atmosphere in the V&A gallery at that time and the unexpected configurations of sculpture, architecture and light. They have



Figure 3



Figure 4

also become something else, suggesting new meanings, layered now by the memory of what it was, a visual record of a place and time.

Drawn from the Well was extended from an original three-month display into 2004, when Gallery 50B2 was closed and used to store sculpture, as part of the V&A Future Plan for the development of the sculpture courts. I continued to photograph the space and the new arrangements, as more sculpture was brought in to be temporarily stored (figs 3 and 4). The new relationships between various objects were a revelation. Some had, no doubt, never been seen together before.

When Robinson acquired the Madonna Della Misericordia in 1882,⁴ effectively rescuing it, he described it with some sadness as 'a page torn from the record of Venetian art';⁵ so sensitive was he to context. He saw it dismantled and on the floor in six pieces in Venice. I saw the same pieces being carefully taken down, but with a sense of excitement. When I photographed them they were temporarily on the floor (fig. 5). The outer sides were reversed and faced in opposite directions. The carved figures appeared to be looking vainly out, searching for the central figure of the Madonna, who is usually to be found in their midst, protecting them with her mantle and to whom they are supposed to look up.

Colour has been an important element, as many of the images do not convey the same meaning in black and white. This is



Figure 5



Figure 6

surprising, because black-and-white photography of sculpture has an obvious and venerable tradition. Form, tone, light and texture are revealed so beautifully in monochrome. But the warmth that colour conveys and the surprising and subtle colour relationships between these multifarious sculptural objects are bound up in their material qualities. Colour can seem like a substance in itself, not simply reflected light, for example a red label on a waiting alabaster carving (fig. 6), the vivacity of bright colours of tin glazed ceramic reflected in glass, set against the warm charcoal colour of a lavabo.

An unforeseen pleasure has been to see some of these photographic images of a changing space, with the many surprising and fleetingly glimpsed combinations of sculptural objects, used by the Victoria and Albert Museum to promote the new Medieval and Renaissance Galleries planned to open in 2009.

1 N. Roth, 'Now is the time', *The Medal*, 42, 2003, pp. 75–82.
 2 P. Williamson, *European Sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London 1996, pp. 16–17.
 3 Letter from John Charles Robinson, in Madrid, to Henry Cole, dated 6 September 1866, Sheet 91 from the Robinson Reports, Volume V, Part II, 10 August–19 December 1866; National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum.
 4 *Virgin and Child with Kneeling Members of the Guild of the Misericordia*, c. 1445–50, by Bartolommeo Buon (about 1374–1467?), carved for the tympanum over the principal doorway of the Scuola Vecchia di Santa Maria della Misericordia, Venice; Victoria and Albert Museum (25-1882)
 5 P. Williamson, *European Sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London 1996, pp. 74–75.