

# Positive Space

Art is a thoughtful activity. This statement might seem contradictory: how can you both think and act at the same time? But that's precisely what making art enables you to do. As they work, artists become increasingly alert, playing with their medium, trying this and that, rejecting and settling, ruthlessly eradicating, then homing in, their eyes shining, focussed and inspired, like a hawk closing in on its prey. What artists are hunting for is what they have to say.

How can art *say* anything? Surely that's just art-speak: a bubble of wishful thinking as bombastic and hollow as claiming that art is a thoughtful activity. Art is inert, dead. How can it be alert, and speak? But speaking is just what it does, in the minds of both the artist who makes it and the person who looks at it, across the spaces that separate people, transcending centuries and cultures.

Though it's the product of an age of motorways, Helen Denerley's *Horse* could happily stand in a cave at Lascaux, snorting proudly at the paintings evoking its wild ancestors which pounded across the hills far above their creators' heads. Art doesn't just bridge physical and temporal distances; it calls even from beyond the chasm of death.

How can lifeless materials – dead wood, stone and metal, marks, scratches and paint, and in Helen Denerley's case, pieces of scrap – speak to us? By magic. By being modelled in a mind that makes them appear to come to life. This vital, momentary melting pot is the elixir that goads artists on, in the hope that it will go on happening at their fingers' ends time and again, each time more vividly than before. And that's the elixir that makes us, the viewers, want to look at art again and again, and to live with it, a companion of animated space that makes us feel less alone.

How can space become animated? Isn't it inert – an essentially negative, passive absence? I've watched Helen Denerley at work, her eyes like skewers, her fingers pincers, as she adjusts a piece of scrap so that the angle is precisely right, before she welds it into place. What she's looking at, searching for, is not just the forms, the shapes, but the spaces which they leave, the unspoken volumes that they help to carve. Her sculptures are heavy, massive even, but they're never solid, or set. They're all air. That's what gives them their liveliness, and their look. The angles of a head, a limb, a wing, are always true to the animal in the fullness of its life, never in the grip of death. But it isn't just a creature's particular personality reaching out to us. Rather eerily, her sculptures themselves *look*. They look, and they see.

Eyes are the axis of her art. The stare of a cow, a dog or a bird provides her with an invisible beam to which all the movements in the animal's form can be related. That's why her sculptures are so alive and so light. They pivot around the sense of sight, nowhere more brilliantly than in *Hen Harriers – the Food Pass*, a masterpiece.

Who else would conceive of, let alone dare to make, a *sculpture* of one of the most remarkable aerobic sights in nature – a male hen harrier warily dropping a vole into the claws of its much bigger, hungry, brooding mate, while both are in mid-flight?

Helen Denerley can rise to such a challenge because she's a sculptor not of substance, but of absence. She sculpts the space between things, in this case between the male harrier eyeing his mate and his mate eyeing her food. Once she had the angle of those looks just right, everything else fell into place. Eyes are crucial to her art, because it deals not just with looks but with what is behind a look. Her skulls are hollow caves of consciousness. We are back to acts and thoughts.

Philosophy and religion attempt to make sense of the light in our eyes, the light that goes out when we die. So does art, but in a less ponderous way: it makes what is inert appear vital; it invites death to join a dance. This is the absence that Helen makes active, the emptiness that she fills with life. Of course her art is full of resonances – of her feelings about species loss, and the havoc we are wreaking on the world, as well as her own private grief. But her art comes before that; it's a duel which she fights with her sense of emptiness. That's why, for Helen Denerley, space has to be made positive.

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