



We are as One (1991)

All photographs courtesy of Messum's

Organic forms from the Earth itself

Philip Vann champions the archetypal sculpture of Ken Smith

Born in Manchester in 1944, Ken Smith has been making and exhibiting dynamic, humane, alluringly tactile sculptures since his mid-twenties. His work touches on themes that are both current and perennial, encompassing the range of human experience. Yet it is only recently that his uncannily empathetic, ecologically aware art has received the degree of public and critical attention it deserves.

Writing in the *Financial Times* in mid-2016, the art critic Jackie Wullschlager made Smith's exhibition at Messum's Gallery in London the main Critics' Choice of the week. "This is Smith's first [solo] London show," Wullschlager wrote. "His is a fresh, poetic voice, unafraid of big themes – from political censorship to the nature of beauty and suffering – distilled with the consummate skill of a master craftsman."

I had the good fortune to first meet Smith when attending the 1974 opening of a London show that included a good range of his early work. It was many years later, around 2000, that I started to look at his art in more depth and then began writing about it.

In a new book on the artist, *Ken Smith*, with the main text by me, and eloquent photographs of the sculptures by Steve Russell, the sculpture expert Tom Flynn writes: "It's rare indeed to come across an almost entirely self-taught artist whose sculpture ranks alongside some of the finest works by



Victims of Conflict (1994)

more celebrated practitioners. It is his integrity, that truth to his own nature, that enables him to continue adding to a body of work of very significant range and quality.”

Smith’s taut, often curvilinear sculptures explore archetypal human states and relationships with raw, yet subtle vibrancy. Subjects include sinuous, primordial bonds between lovers; the experience of both individuals and family groups flourishing in peace, and fractured and traumatised by war and conflict; the jaggedly dislocated existence of soldiers who appear inseparable from their brutal carapace of weaponry and gadgetry; the anguished (but not hopeless) plight of persecuted dissidents and refugees, such as a Syrian woman (in a headscarf and, disquietingly, with no mouth) portrayed in an intricate carving, ‘Woman with No Voice’; the austere, yet richly self-sustaining existence of folk existing close to the earth, epitomised by Smith’s sculpture of a water carrier in benign equipoise; and the transcendent inner freedom of people whose abstracted forms seem to soar with thrilling bird-like or aeronautical grace.

After leaving school at 15, Smith did various manual jobs (as a bricklayer, factory worker and coalman) for a few years before embarking on an apprenticeship as a carpenter and joiner, where he learned what he later called “respect for tools, respect for materials”. At the age of 20 he entered a Franciscan friary in Somerset, where he stayed for two years and his interest in literature and sculpture was encouraged; he studied then part-time at a nearby art college, where, he says, “My tutor never taught me anything because she thought it best that I teach myself. She knew from the first I had something – so she never interfered.”

He studied art at Walthamstow College of Art from 1967 to 1968, entering two of his sculptures into the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, where, to his great surprise, they were accepted and sold. In 1971, he wrote to Henry Moore, enclosing snapshots of some of his sculptures; Moore replied encouragingly: “I have looked at the photographs and find them promising and interesting.”

Smith says his prime motivation for sculpting is “the physicality of it: it’s holding the chisel and going into the stone and finding where the grain is, and then working with the stone. Henry Moore did say to me I was true to my materials, [that] I was using stone but wasn’t trying to make the stone appear like sheets, loaves of bread or locks of hair. Rather I was making it look like organic forms from the earth itself. So I was true to the way I worked with my materials.”

Moore wrote to Smith again in 1971, suggesting that he approach the Slade School of Art in London, which Smith did – presenting examples of his work, accompanied by a sealed letter from Moore to the then Professor of Sculpture, the leading British sculptor Reg Butler. Butler showed Smith around the Slade studios, offering him there and then a place to study. Smith declined. “I didn’t feel I was good enough to go there then. And realising how high up the Slade was in the hierarchy of education, I just didn’t have the confidence,” he recalls.

From 1972 to 1975 he studied at Bristol School of Art, spending “my days studying etching and lithography, and only started sculpting in the evenings in the studio when the teachers were no longer present. One day the eminent sculptor Willi Soukop came down from London and said,



Woman with No Voice (2014)

His work touches on themes that are both current and perennial

‘You’re accepted [for] the Royal Academy Schools to study sculpture, if you like, but you’d be wasting your time and mine too.’ I had found my handwriting as a sculptor by then, and Soukop recommended I become a postman, get up early and work on my sculptures in the afternoon. He felt I didn’t need anybody to teach me now. He was right.”

Smith has always been drawn to archaic African and Oceanic sculptures and the modernist sculpture of Archipenko, Gaudier-Brzeska and Epstein. He was pleased to see books on these at Bristol – but he chose not to over-immense himself in them, so as to preserve his innate, pristine vision.

After studying at Bristol, he went on to train in social work and spent 24 highly challenging years as a social worker near Bath. “In many ways this was very difficult work,” he says. “I am pleased that I was able to help a good number of children. I worked hard at sculpture in the evenings and at weekends then; time was so precious. It was so therapeutic. For me, sculpture and childcare go hand in hand; it has all fed into my work.

“I’m a very earthy person. I do like my allotment. I do like growing onions, for example, and looking more closely at things as I get older: Nature and the earth and the structure of things.”



Philip Vann writes widely on the arts. His book *Ken Smith* is published by Messum’s.