



Jeff Lowe Space Builder

For six days in May, gallery-goers in central London will have a unique opportunity to see a collection of highly original recent work by the sculptor Jeff Lowe in an exhibition called *Building Space*, writes Eric Moody.

For those unfamiliar with Lowe's international career and perhaps being more familiar with the ubiquitous celebrity output of what Julian Stallabrass has called 'High Art Lite', we need to remind ourselves that Lowe comes from a less demonstrative, more traditional modern art culture of 'making and thinking' rather than 'illustration and entertainment'.

Visitors to The Gallery in Cork Street must expect to suspend the now usual way of reading images ('What does this image mean?'), habituated through advertising and visual entertainment, in order to fully appreciate the qualities and originality of Lowe's current work. A 'conversation' with the exhibited art objects, held in their own language, is required to realise this is a serious sculpture exhibition not an issue-based performance or an entertaining installation.

In the words of William Tucker, Jeff Lowe's sculpture and drawings speak the universal "language of sculpture", albeit with Lowe's unique cadence derived from his personal history, education and preoccupations as a maker in "the language of sculpture" these last thirty-five years. A rudimentary form of this art language and dialogue with potentially intractable material or 'stuff' is experienced whenever we attempt to craft a solution to a practical problem like putting up a shelf or cooking a meal. To succeed we need to know and use our media and tools appropriately. Jeff Lowe has turned this simple craft ethos into his sophisticated Fine Art Practice which exists, like 'pure' to 'applied' science (technology), symbiotically with his own Applied Art Practice as an architect, albeit with a highly refined sculptor's sensibility. His most ambitious architectural project to date is his new home and studio, Imperial Tower,

to be built in Forest Hill, South East London. A functional sculpture projected to rise some twenty metres above the gritty suburban landscape.

Jeff Lowe is an artist-researcher in and applied art designer of space, as the title of the forthcoming exhibition cleverly, if a little unusually, suggests. Surely we 'enclose' rather than 'build' space (?) but an encounter with the massed reality of his *Building Space* series demonstrates that Lowe is indeed literally building space by drawing in and through the space we inhabit with variously coated steel rods (with each coating providing a different visual dynamic to an apparently hesitant progress).

When I last wrote about Jeff Lowe's work in 2006 for his studio exhibition *12X12*, held in a vast factory space in South Bermondsey, he was focused on investigating the sheer bulk of heavily

engineered panelled structures in a variety of cast and fabricated materials. I noted then that "their surface is animated not only by subtle colour and tonal patina and the residual evidence of manufacture but by a grid or pattern, in relief or intaglio, which suggests another area to be experienced by the viewer". I went on to speculate about a departure "-- in order to establish their own existence in an independent relationship with the architecture which surrounds them and the very solid forms which brought them to our attention".

Over the intervening years (four already) this formal sculptural leave-taking has occurred with spectacular results. In curatorial terms, the transition from surface marking to full sculptural existence is well documented in the *Building Space* exhibition with 36 Panel Variations strategically placed in the gallery and marking, simultaneously,

opposite: *Six Lives*, 2006, Graphite & Resin 180cm x 120cm x 7cm and *Building a Picture No.2*, 2006, Cast Iron & Steel 277cm x 227cm x 52cm

below: *Red & Blue Cage*, 2009, Powder Coated Steel 150cm x 150cm x 165cm



below: *Taking Shape*, 2006, Wood, Graphite & Resin, 318cm x 396cm x 63.5 cm

an end of confinement and the beginning of liberation. On another occasion we might even speculate on radical changes in the artist's own life and certainly we have all experienced the economic and artistic excesses of the Noughties. At the beginning of second decade of the 21st century, we certainly need the renewal which Jeff Lowe's sculpture suggests.

The obvious power (and development potential) of this new phase in Jeff Lowe's work, for me best exemplified by *Red & Blue Cage* and others in the current *Cage Series*, also demonstrates Lowe's provenance as a sculptor. For those with the power of recollection (discouraged in contemporary culture), there are reminders in Lowe's work of that surge of creative energy in Sixties London which provided The New Generation in British sculpture; a generation nurtured by Anthony Caro and others at St. Martin's College of Art where Jeff Lowe was also a student, although of a younger generation.

Reading Ian Dunlop's introduction to *The New Generation* exhibition catalogue, held at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1965 under the enlightened patronage of Bryan Robertson as gallery director and the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation as sponsor, we begin to understand Jeff Lowe's position in the progress of British sculpture. Like the then new generation, Lowe has the ability to incorporate international developments while avoiding the sensational pitfalls of artistic celebrity or the creative vertigo of a towering plinth. Ironically, Jeff Lowe also differs from the alleged 'position' of The New

Generation as 'cool' and 'more conceptual' just as, with the benefit of hindsight, does the work of then included artists like William Tucker and Phillip King.

The exhibition *Building Space* reveals Jeff Lowe's true lineage. He is a legitimate son of the British branch of the international family of Modern Sculpture with its familial concern to search for meaning and expression through sympathetic and, therefore, appropriate exploitation of plastic media in space.

Jeff Lowe's Building Spaces: A Selection of Recent Sculpture and Drawings runs 3 - 8 May at The Gallery in Cork Street, London, W1S 3NG. Telephone: +44 (0) 208 699 5032. www.galleryincorkstreet.com www.jeff-lowe.com

Stallabrass, J, *High Art Lite, British Art in the 1990s*, Verso, London 1999

Tucker, W, *The Language of Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson, London 1977

Moody, E, *12x12 Jeff Lowe*, London 2006

Dunlop, I, *The New Generation: 1965*, Whitechapel Gallery, London 1965

