

Mark Dedrie, an artist in motion by Robin d'Arcy Shillcock

The first things you notice when confronted by work of Belgian sculptor Mark Dedrie (1962) are the stylized shapes and their highly polished finish.

Although working within the tradition in which colour is omitted in favour of form, his approach is not so much classical as literal as turning a refined distillation of visual reality into a sculptural statement. He transforms a world of colour and movement into a world of presences, of volumes and elegant lines, and manages weightlessness in heavy bronze. This results in tactile, visually attractive sculptures. There aren't too many sculptors who know how to stylize animal shapes well, and even fewer that seek the degree of refinement Dedrie is striving for. It results in soft and sensual surfaces that underline the exquisite grace of birds like ducks and long-legged waders. There are honestly merely a few I can name. François Pompon (France 1855-1933) worked on Rodin's marble sculptures before becoming one of the greatest animal sculptors of the modern era. His work instigated what I call the Movement of Form, comprising the sculptors who preferred to distance themselves from Animaliers like Barye and Fremiet who focused on the anecdotal Battle of the Titans: Gorilla abducts fair maiden (a Beauty and the Beast theme which eventually led to the making of King Kong), Panther devours snake etc. In the work of Adrian Sorrel (UK 1932) and Claude Lhoste (France 1929) we find a comparable exploration of fluidity of shape and line as may be found in Dedrie's work. The Frenchman however moves across a wider range of subjects, not so surprising when his age is considered. From the vast number of artists presented in the catalogues of the annual exhibition Birds in Art held for over twenty-five years at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, USA, I manage to sift a few whose work compares with that of Mark Dedrie. Emily Parلمان (USA 1927), Burt Brent (USA 1938), a plastic surgeon, comfortable in the domain of precision and smoothness; Charles Almond (USA 1938), Geoffrey Dashwood (UK 1947) and Ross Matteson (USA 1957). Matteson comes closest to Dedrie but the birds he executes are sharper, and less warm. In his search for the sensual shape and line Dedrie is nearer to sculptors working in wood, like Hank Tyler (USA 1944) and Dutchman Jaap Deelder (1952), who prefer polishing the surface to such a degree that the underlying grain underpins the sculpture. Fine artists never come dropping out of the blue sky. Dedrie too, is a product of various currents, impressions and influences. Some of these cannot be retraced, while others can only be suspected. Undoubtedly the years he spent at an art foundry worked upon him to great effect; these were the formative years. We are however, dealing with a self-made artist here, attempting to produce sculptures that show not only his abilities and vision but also convey his empathy for birds.

## Birds

Birds symbolize freedom, Dedrie tells us. It seems evident that in his recent works symbolism is disappearing. The symbolic, androgenic humanoid figures have been replaced by birds and other animals, immediately recognizable subject matter that requires searching for deeper meaning. And yet, in spite of all we know about birdlife, these creatures remain elusive and mysterious and, for 21st century man, enduring transmitters of symbolic meaning. And consider this: of all creatures in the animal kingdom birds are closest to the angels! Mark Dedrie looks at birds with empathy. He does more than just look. He studies the live bird as well as the mounted specimen, observing attitude and proportion; he also uses photographs in trying to obtain an insight into their nature. He reflects on their character, sees them in his dreams and imagination. All he can get on species like a mandarin duck or a curlew filters through the different layers of eye and brain, before he can begin to sculpt. Working in plastiline or wax to roughly life-size, he shapes every part of a bird's body with his hands and fingers, like in an endless caress. With each new project he immerses himself in misery as he tries to capture that which is so unattainable in these creatures, their purity and lightness of being. He believes that by greatly simplifying his subjects he can best convey their *état d'esprit*. Birds never really co-operate, either. Sure, each species has that typical outline that, when reproduced, says "owl" or "crow", but there is rather more to a bird than that —there's personality, the tell-tale posture and characteristic behaviour. To complicate things more, all projecting parts such as bills and legs tend stick out, causing problems in the design. Such small, jutting shapes tend to detract from and even rupture the sculpture's unity. Dedrie's pieces, in spite of the extremes of simplification he goes to, give us enough to recognize individual species, such as mandarin duck, curlew, little owl, beautiful perching kingfisher. And impressive swan. His swan has an overwhelming presence. The man that decided to buy it during the time Mark and I sauntered around the gallery has acquired an eye-catcher. It is a typical Dedrie and yet it is different. More exuberant, majestic. A tour de force, made with the intention to impress. According to Icelandic sagas swans flew to the moon after the breeding season; Dedrie's swan has magical, lunar quality. In his own way he represents the anatomy of a swan, but lets go of anatomical reality in the wings, possibly to avoid a stiff heraldic pose. In suggesting 'movement' in the wings he appears to have been inspired by photographs of flying birds, their wings blurred into unexpected shapes. Attempting to suggest movement in a bronze is often a difficult problem to solve. Dedrie approaches it from what may be called a modern angle, using all the means nowadays at

our disposition. The wings exceed the anatomically correct, appearing to bulge and catch the air as if at any moment they could carry this bird through three-dimensional space. This calls to mind the sculptures of flying birds by Lhoste, notably in his marble Pelican from 1966 and his bronze sculpture Bird from 1988. Because such motion cannot be captured by the human eye it is here the artist can make use of new sculptural possibilities. In the simplest possible way, so it appears, both artists offer us an impression, or, more than that, an imaginative image of these enigmatic creatures, always active at the periphery of our existence, always trying to evade our gaze.

### Studio magic

Less is more is clearly the thought underlying Mark Dedrie's approach. Easier said than done. To produce convincing, stylized sculptures of animals requires a long preliminary process of exploration, taking hard decisions, gaining experience the hard way. Because his pieces are so carefully crafted they are worth touching besides appreciation from a distance, to feel what the artist felt is what a sculptor friend long ago taught me. (Once, in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, in following his example I felt many of the sculptures in the exhibit until we both were stopped by furious guards —and nearly thrown out of the museum. One of the reasons I enjoy visiting Middelheim sculpture park near Antwerp; here you can run your hands over any sculpture, including that favourite of mine, Pompon's polar bear, without getting pounced upon.) Sculptures of Dedrie, like Stone Owl, the consort of Pallas Athena Greek deity of wisdom and the arts, like the slender, long-billed curlew and the streamlined kingfisher which seems ready to dive into some hidden stream, beg to be touched. In his ongoing quest for essence, Dedrie appears to boil down every part of his subject to a highly simplified shape, without losing the spark of life in the gracefully pearly-soft bronze shell. This results from his insistence on craftsmanship, in the use of the materials and tools he works with. A lot depends on how well he warms and flattens the wax, on how precise he is in shaping the mould and smoothing the subsequent wax model. In the pouring of the red-hot molten bronze the model is lost — *cire perdue* — but arises anew from the molten mass like a phoenix. His sculptures look as good from a distance as they do from close up. Close inspection reveals the pearly 'skin'. The challenge is to apply the patina, caused by a chemical reaction brought about with fire, in such a way that it is interesting without becoming gaudy. (And so far removed from faeces-coloured patinas which Dutch sculptors seem to prefer.)

A close up look also shows this remarkable lack of details. An eye, for instance, known to make a sculpture come alive, Dedrie may suggest with a shallow depression, or a plane in a slightly different direction. The sculptor is concerned with the synthesis of large shapes, not facts. It is in the eyes of the beholder that a dent become an eye, thus giving life to the piece. Lightness and elegance he achieves by calculating minimal points of attachment. The sculpture's equilibrium needs to be considered early on in the process. It is a small feat of engineering and combined with the attractive, mottled patina helps to achieve lightness, even airiness, in what is essentially a heavy and rigid material, and finally strengthens the tactile quality of his sculptures.

The clarity and lightness of the sculptures make it easy to forget what went before. The production of sculptures in bronze or stainless steel is a lengthy, time-consuming and expensive occupation. (Could that explain the lack of interest for sculpture at fine art academies in the Netherlands?) Working in bronze is as it always has been, an age-old manual and strenuous craft. To get where Dedrie wants to be in art, at that exact point where, subtlety and harmony is in perfect balance, requires a great effort, and a great investment of time in the study of particulars of which little remains visible in the final work. His aim: to get more by showing less. Less is more.

## An artist in motion

You can never tell with artists. It makes them what they are, interesting creatures. They can suddenly change their style, or follow some new passion.

Five years ago Mark Dedrie began sculpting birds, and he stayed on that path. Symbolism and seclusion and charming anecdote are slowly making way for a more powerful form of representation. Not unilateral, in that he documents a species observed, but multifaceted because of his aspirations to achieve a fine balance between extremes, between representation and abstraction. If we see how his work has developed during the last five years, how shapes have opened up, a little like a chick creeping out of its egg and nest, and takes in the world. His sculptures have changed from retiring, inward-flowing shapes to works that embrace space. One day they may begin to breathe. Deep within the brain, hidden from prying eyes, is where everything begins, in a sinuous process called creation that is more mysterious than alchemy. I wish I could lift the artist's cranium to try and see which ideas simmer in the grey matter. What does he see? Each new sculpture sharply defined the way he wants it to become, or the way it might become? Is it a fleeting shadow? Can he see different possibilities side by side? Unfortunately, it cannot be done. I'll have to satisfy myself with the ideas conveyed to solid metal. During my interview he expresses an urge to learn, to develop and renew himself. Says he wants to take a step closer towards naturalism. "I consider adding a single detail." He pauses, then says: "One little detail symbolizes all the details that make up the complete bird and which I suppress." He still has distances to cover. Refinements to apply. No artist, perhaps no man can develop without such aspirations. No growth means coming to a standstill. In his eyes a far horizon glimmers. He says, "I want to advance. Go forward. I'm going to go forward." In reaching for complicated problems he needs to solve Mark Dedrie is spreading his wings to catch the wind, his eyes on a crest we cannot see. Taking into account his sense of design and esthetics, I am curious to know what will be. That means that this book, and the exhibition it celebrates, is an in-between stop. A benchmark. The artist marks what he has so far reached, but intends to go on. Such a retrospective exhibition is an achievement. It is also a moment of reflection, a moment to catch your breath after five years of hard work. It is also moment of truth. Because it is where the artist says: "Here I stand. Look, this is me."