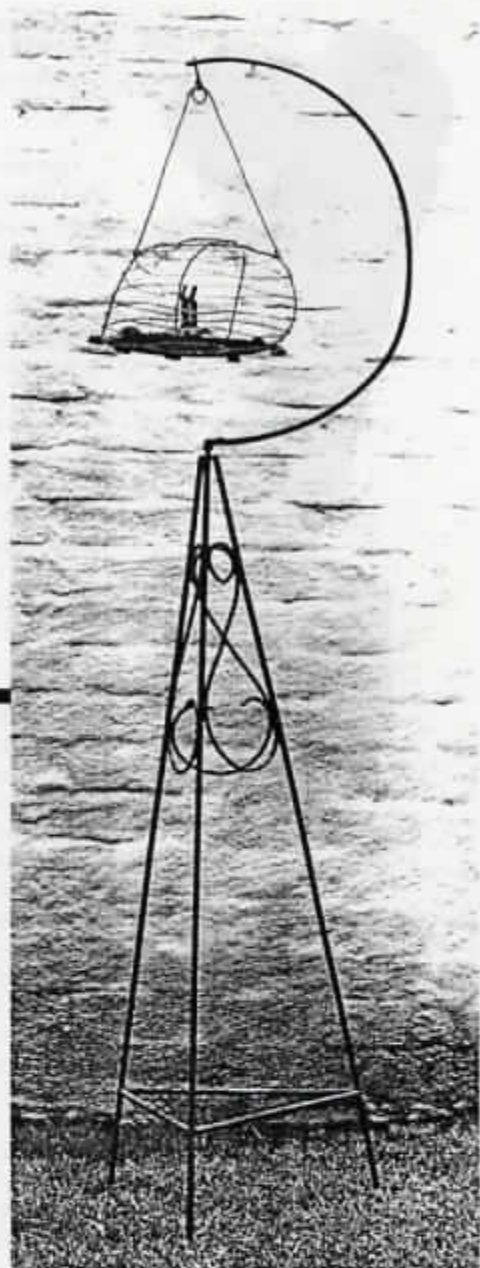


Gerry Dixon — the last parrot

Gillian Wright shares her insights into the multi-faceted sculptures recently on exhibition at Gallery Delta



This show excited enthusiastic critiques which, however, were characterised by the usual focus on the artist's "self-deprecating and wicked", "bizarre" and "contradictory" humour. In *The Last Parrot* one might assume that Dixon had made an image of himself as that small, raucous black bird, but it is an image of the image people have of him. (The floor of the cage is an old record of *Through the Looking Glass*.) Uncomfortable with his irony and unfamiliar creations, and not sure what to do with their laughter, people have tended to encase Dixon in various categories: eccentric, beatnik, ex-druggie, or individualist. Or he is consigned to a Dada or Surrealist box — safely into a time-warp — thus removing any requirement to take him seriously.

Parrots are kept in cages to amuse people but they belong in forests. They include weird, spine-chilling jungle noises in their repertoire of imitated speech which so enchants us. The witty idea in the title of each work, which seems to encapsulate what Dixon is saying, is what we hear the old parrot in the corner rasping out. We feel at home with its derisive tone, with its wise-cracks. I would contend that there are subtlety, music, deep levels of meaning to be slowly savoured after the initial crazy impact of each work has been sustained.

The parrot installation uses humdrum found objects, suspended in an upside-down hanging basket. "Hanging" and "basket" both resonate.

The ready-made stand bears an ironic label: "A Majestic Product" which is the brand name of a factory-made thing, ironically not given to the original work. The deliberately grotty workmanship of the parrot and cage floor is an image too of the low esteem in which Gerry Dixon is generally held, and possibly of the public perception of the weakness of the voice which pleads for compassion and ecological values in this era which is dominated increasingly by a purely economic world-view.

I would say that Dixon's theme, far from being a solipsistic romance with his own sense of humour, is about being in touch with our sensory nature and spirituality, and with our environment. His belonging both to traditional cultures and the post-modern is evident in his concepts, his use of artificial resins and modern machinery for instance, while respecting the ancient material, wood. It is there in the dedicated craftsmanship devoted to the work whose subjects reflect contemporary or prophetic thinking.

This arduous making of the special object which bears the aura of something set aside (as in 'holy' object or 'art' object) is politically incorrect in a milieu where the artist, like everyone else, is expected to obey market forces, mass production and identification with big brand names. On Borrowdale vlei is a billboard bearing the stunning mantra "Leadership Through Products" (in bad lettering). Development there has forced the Zion congregations in their lovely



(above and right) Gerry Dixon, *Brain Heart*, 1998, 25 x 9 x 14cm, wood

(below and right) Gerry Dixon, *The Last Slice*, 1998, 60 x 14 x 11cm, wood



garments to worship right by the road with blasts of filthy exhaust fumes in their faces. Some incense! Yes, "out here in the Harare suburbs / we're battling" as Dixon says in his *Last Parrot* poem. Daily, if you look and think, your heart breaks again.

Brain Heart is one of the most impressive sculptures. Arresting, macabre, ingenious, as if holy, and utterly beautiful. A gnarled hand of ebony driftwood emerges from a carefully botched hunk of wood, stained to look like old meat. It holds up half of a convoluted ancient-looking brain or heart-shaped knot of wood.

A section through the shape's centre reveals a heart-shaped plane, stained crimson and finely polished. The heart's secret is laid bare with the life-lines of the wood evident and an archipelago of small dark stains with darker edges towards the top. They grew there, within, like scars that never heal, imprints that are never erased. The sculpture tells you that it makes perfect sense for the brain to reveal itself as the heart, the seat of compassion. The back is a venerable brain, familiar, old as mankind, moist-looking, with a dark powdery roughness. There is glowing green moss on it — paint or vegetative? This organic mysteriousness, palpability, denies the dry rationalist's brain. The deep black hole between the two lobes at the crown breathes a gothic creepiness.

There is horror in the brain-heart cut in half, exposed, open. Ezekiel 11 v 19 (God speaking) gives an account of an equally grisly operation: "I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and I will give them a heart of flesh." Other translations say "an obedient heart". One that obeys the promptings of a truly intelligent 'open' brain perhaps? "Stony heart" we now might take as an image also of the legacy of the negative influences on Christendom which have insisted upon the cerebral attitude divorced from the emotional, instinctual and especially sexual. This rejection of heart-thought exerts a powerful and imperial influence in modern global economic practice. Projects based on false or partial suppositions are elaborated with sterile elegance and too often discarded is the humanitarian concern, regarded as emotive and therefore somehow contaminated.

The purity of *Brain Heart*'s vision might point to faith in love as the dynamic of truth, if we may accept the valentine symbol at face value. Heart is face in the work. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know." (John Keats: *Ode on a Grecian Urn*). 'On earth' is the relevant qualification, for all our knowledge depends on our senses. We know with our bodies. We respond to other bodies, animate or, as in sculpture, inanimate. Dixon's sculptures are an invitation to feast thought-wise, heart-wise and sense-wise.

The Last Slice is delicious in its matt pinkness and roundness. Its wrinkling bark edge delicately opposes the flatness of its planes and straight edge. The viewer melts with laughter. It is erotic in its evocation of that desire to be the one who gets to possess, devour, the last and most precious slice; political in its reference to the Third World as the last prize of economic imperialism.

The cake image appears also in *Duck Off with Slice*, but here it is made less appetising. It looks ersatz, but loaded with goodies. The figure, which is quick in its outline especially, is apprehended in the act of cunning theft, illicit possession. Its eyes are worthless cents — vision is blinded by money. 'Cents' puns on 'sense'. The work becomes for the viewer an internalised image which is recalled in situations where individuals we know are sudden in their greed while instant in subterfuge. The humour gratifies, calms the sense of outrage. This false creature's surface is carefully bedaubed, masking the inner grain which in other works acts as a revelation of inner quality. Yet one identifies with the trickster, feeling a perverse affection for him — he makes off with the prize anyhow, he is the winner.



(below) Gerry Dixon,
Duck Off With Slice, 1998,
120 x 36 x 32cm, mixed media

(right) Gerry Dixon, *Escalator*,
1998, approx 400 x 65 x 57cm,
wood, resin, cement

Both these works contain discourse about how we receive, interact with, consume art; while directing critical attention to the slice or section device, which exposes the inner growth patterns of the wood and which lets the beholder into the unity of living stuff within the design and form of the work.

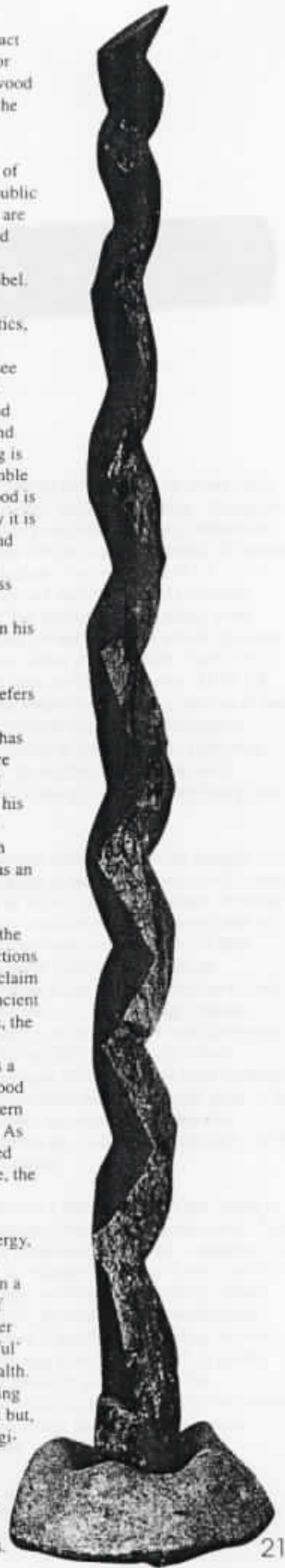
Dixon is often called a Dadaist. The Dada artists adopted a cult of the irrational (better termed anti-rationalist) in order to disrupt public complacency and acceptance of traditional values. I think there are elements of this in his work but his respect for craftsmanship and technique, use of particularly Christian cultural symbols and reference to ancient and classical images and values deny this label.

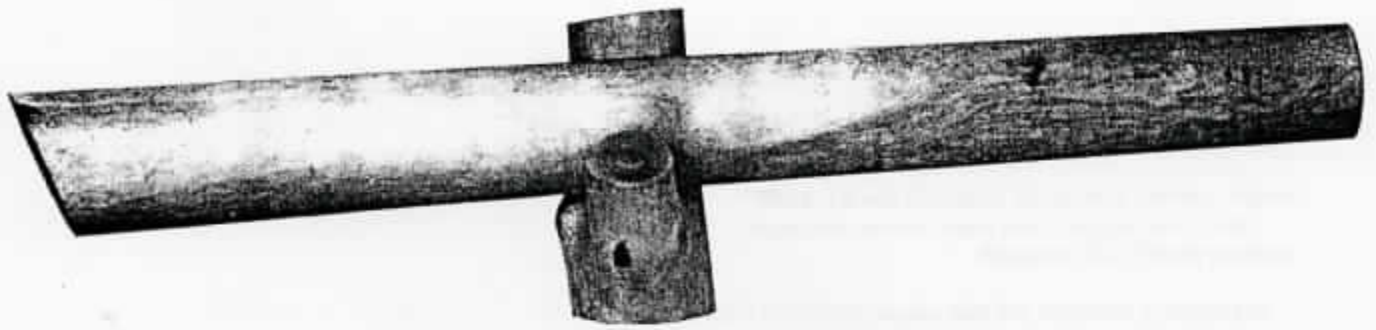
Dixon shares with Duchamp an intellectual approach, shock tactics, fondness for the pun. The pun extended to physical form fuses disparate ideas, unleashing mental and spiritual energy. Also I see his use of the section as a development or variant of Duchamp's exploitation of the window ('fenestration') as the mechanism and metaphor of seeing and reflecting. Dixon slices right through and into the object which he has invested with life, so that our seeing is often accompanied by terror — when the wood is made to resemble flesh our seeing seems to depend on a violent act. When the wood is 'wood' it is a door of perception within a wooden form. Usually it is the section which owns the finest attention to surface staining and polishing. It releases the inner secret, gratifies us with special knowledge. In personal relationships allowing another to witness one's private feelings demands the acceptance of vulnerability (woundableness). References to this potential wounding recur in his images of weaponry and cut or maimed flesh.

However, Dixon's similarity to Duchamp is limited. Duchamp refers principally to critical intellectual ideas in rather dehumanised impersonal forms; his treatment of sexuality and gender issues has incisive wit and devastating objectivity. Dixon's humour is more humane and more like Claes Oldenburg's in its sense of fun and gusto. His artistic and social intentions have been so shaped by his engagement with the ideas of Josef Beuys that he should be classified — if classification helps understanding of him — with Beuys rather than back with the Dadaists, even though Beuys has an affinity with them.

Escalator is the focal work. It is monumental, almost reaching the ceiling, mesmerising with its repeated polished red cut-flesh sections juxtaposed with the roughness of triangles of grey bark that proclaim this zig-zagging pillar to have been a tree. The triangle is the ancient symbol for the Godhead and also for man, and woman. Edge on, the sculpture is a dancing snake, an ascending vigorous chevron of deeply incised, rough grey and black bark. That chevron recalls a fundamental pattern in African decoration. Inertness of dead wood is mocked, questioned by the snake's rapid movement. (In Eastern symbolism the snake is an image of psychic or cosmic energy.) As the crimson planes announce the figure's humanity, so the grised bark recalls old, wrinkled, scarred skin. Shock sets in: sacrifice, the transgression of the body suggests itself.

From the front the pillar asserts itself as a phallic image. Its energy, though mutilated, appalls and amazes. Dixon denies the phallic imagery. He says *Escalator's* subject is the Stock Market. So in a sense it is a monument to the power of money. Dixon speaks of money as a modern system of world-wide oppression — no other coercive system is needed, so total is its efficacy. All 'meaningful' growth is now measured in terms of expansion of economic wealth. Had the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange index shot through the ceiling the day of the show, *Escalator* would have appeared triumphant but, in the current context of national economic woe, its mood is tragicomic. However, an escalator conveys multitudes onward and upward, so this justifies an assertion that an especially male generative function is being alluded to; likewise its pillar-shape and carnality. Its generative aspect is a metaphor for art and progress while other metaphors are conveying further meanings.





Male creative energy is worshipped in the form of the God Shiva in Hindu temples, represented by a pillar.

At the base of the pillar is black mucky resin, such as drips and collects at the base of certain wild trees. For me this grounds the work in a Zimbabwean context, as does the bark, the chevron and its edge-on humanness. Living here and creating here is best. Africans aren't 'other' and, by the same token, no peoples are 'other'. (This notion of otherness is obvious in much First World utterance no matter how 'correct'.) Classification of races and cultures disintegrates. One lives between cultures and especially one is forced to examine the effect of violent imposition of one culture upon another in daily life, from within, because in one's mind, body and emotion these effects are suffered. So a removed, clinical, objective approach doesn't work. It's good to be one of the strangers at the gates of the fortress constructed of Western culture particularly. One denies the 'Third World' cage by being fully alive and aware within it, especially by presenting this life and consciousness in the physicality of art works which disturb, which can't be ignored, and yet which express cultural and intellectual vibrancy.

A work which investigates an aspect of cultural imposition is *Bat-on*. The title plays with 'baton', 'bat on' as in 'play on' and a bat on something: the object has no purpose without its being wielded. A small work, it is composed of a long cylinder cradled, balanced, in a sawn-off fork of limb and branchlets. Its simplicity and naive-seeming whittled finish give it a harmless hobby-object personality. It is unvarnished (the unvarnished truth?). The wood is pale and gleaming. It might refer to coition — if the cylinder is regarded as phallic, its cradle as a rudimentary pelvis and thighs. *Bat-on-hand* is more obvious. To beat someone? To hit a ball? An aura of gentleness, of lightness-of-being surrounds it. How is it so nice and unthreatening, allowing images of innocent love-making, games and correction freely to inhabit it?

But the baton is the prize symbol of police brutality, of force. Still it looks natural, naïf. This work challenges our ideas of what is natural. 'Natural = Good' is questioned. When I asked the artist about *Bat-on* he spoke about the brutality behind the establishment of all civilisations, elucidating the irony of a brutal image represented in a delicate, neat figure, playful in its trick of balance. We may see it as a metaphor for the colonialist way of life — the cricket bat which symbolises this gentleman's pleasure, and his ruthlessness.

This ironic use of the 'natural' deserves further comment. A local critic recently scoffed at the work of a well-known artist here: "He uses every trick in the book!" Well, so did Picasso. Dixon is no

amateur at this — he lives by artifice and invention in giving form and beauty to his ideas. Art. Artful. Artifice. Cunning. Stratagem. Technical mastery. Any dictionary explains. This sentimentalism about naturalness — as if artists were the original zombies of Mother Nature — deserves appraisal at least. One may read in it a desperation to escape the falsity and superficiality of consumer culture, of sterile rationalism. But intelligence, ingenuity, even virtuosity are required to fashion art and life-styles which represent honestly true modern humanness, rather than would-be 'naive' art instinctively made as intellect flees in blinkered deceit. *Duck Off with Slice* refers here also. The natural in shapes (eg sections of tree trunks), grains, bark textures, stripped heartwood, is subject to Dixon's carefully deliberated choice of context within each work, but is celebrated, accentuated. It satisfies because it is itself, incorporated into the form and in dialogue with the governing idea, but not imitated.

Gone Sailing seems to offer escape from irony and the struggle with social and cultural ills, inviting one to sail away alone, simple, away from clamour, complexity. The sail is a skewed trihedron of wood/flesh whose window-planes are beautiful in their ribbony grain and especially colour. It declares itself to be wood still, by its light brown edge, but 'moves' as a wave. The triangle is thrice represented in the sail, that symbol of the human/divine, so the sail may be read as an image of the self. It is fixed straight into the water. The base of the trihedron is not there — it's been eaten away by rot or the waves' action. The solidity of the body is thus questioned. This sculpture manages to contain those huge symbols: the boat representing the voyage of the human soul; the wind — the spirit of God; the water — womb and regeneration, but also annihilation and the Deluge within its smallness, the smallness of the individual person within the Cosmos.

The self-portrait, *I Saw*, has Dixon's identity in work and works as subject. Past tense: I saw (Vision); Present continuous tense: I saw (Labour); I saw as in "I am a wood saw/ I cut wood, a carpenter", or I, in my work, am perceived as "eyesore" and also "I am giver of wisdom in wise-sayings". These are five of the meanings which reside in this sliver of beautifully grained two-tone wood (light inside) with its quivering toothed edge which is given by the tree's growth. Behind, the labouring sage's back is stripped. It is now smooth but bears the scars of shoots of growth in conical excrescences. In naming and form, the piece speaks of dimensions of time and their effect on knowledge and labour; the present activity depends on past vision.

Many of Dixon's sculptures speak of the continuing work of facilitating vision through labour and spiritual warfare: saw, blade, adze, the tools; cleaver and dagger, the weapons in this show.

(left) Gerry Dixon, *Bat-on*, 1998
10.5 x 45 x 12cm, wood

(below) Gerry Dixon, *Cuts Both Ways*, 1998,
115 x 89 x 50cm, wood and metal

*"There is a war that opens the doors of Heaven, Arjuna!
Happy the warrior whose fate is to fight such a war."
Bhagavad Gita (Hindu scripture)*

This text resonated, for me, with this exhibition's themes and devices. Happiness in jest, felicity of colour and rhythm belong to these artefacts of spiritual warfare and its rewards. The fight is to get through to the truth, to see the One in duality, even in multiplicity. The pun, like the Buddhist koan, can untie meaning: the work contains, and yet sets free, immanence and understanding. In the state of Zen meaning floats.

The hunting mind, moving and cutting into place beyond the sculpture, is represented by a wooden blade supported on guitar-string-like thick wires in *Cuts Both Ways*. It is fun to play with, to set in motion. The graceful arcs of its bending soften the straight lines of the upright and horizontal components, its swinging like a dancing quest. *Cuts Both Ways* refers to the pun, to metaphor, to mental cutting into and between opposing ideas, to movement into positive and negative space in vertical and horizontal directions. This last action is achieved by the shape of the blade which resolves itself into a vertical edge on the left which cuts up and down and a horizontal one on the right which cuts from the viewer's touch into the volume of space before her. It speaks also of a double effect: the sculptor's effect on the object and thus on the spectator, and the spectator's engagement with the sculpture and thus on the surrounding space.

This work has an affinity with the *Brain Heart*, that two-in-one impressive image of the mind held aloft, above an organic-looking and imperfect base which, I think, represents the human body in its imperfection, bearing the scars of suffering. The base of *Cuts Both Ways*, a section of a hole of a tree, has, in an orifice, the gross, grey, dead remains of a broken-off branch. Above this is the joy in balance, tension and controlled movement — set in motion when we engage in play.

Weapon imagery appears in *Still Point Still* and *Killing Crocodiles*. The still point lacks dimension because it lacks movement. *Still Point Still* has a continuing dimension in time. The work itself is composed of ebony driftwood which coalesces into a poised glittering black dagger, terrifying in its potential intent. Here the human will is focused against possible spiritual or personal attack. This curved blade makes me think of the desperate wickedness in every human heart which Jeremiah spoke of in prophetic utterance: the violence in all hearts which Jean Vanier became aware of through his experience of the rage within the severely handicapped. The willingness to fight an heroic, creative battle for Good and chilling evil inhabit the same image, the same substance.

Killing Crocodiles is a fine beautifully crafted piece. 'Crocodiles' are represented by a square half-cube with rounded corners, lying as a base for the upright blade which cleaves into it. At the line of incision red resin, like blood, oozes. The blue-stained blade arches with grace, power and dignity. Repeated parabolas of grain-lines articulate themselves up the front of it. Lines radiate evenly from the point of impact on one side at the base; on the other side are deep





(above) Gerry Dixon, *Past, Present and Future*, 1997, 42 x 27 x 19cm, wood

(right) Gerry Dixon, *Ipsa Dixit (The Owl)*, 1998, 24 x 27 x 17cm, wood

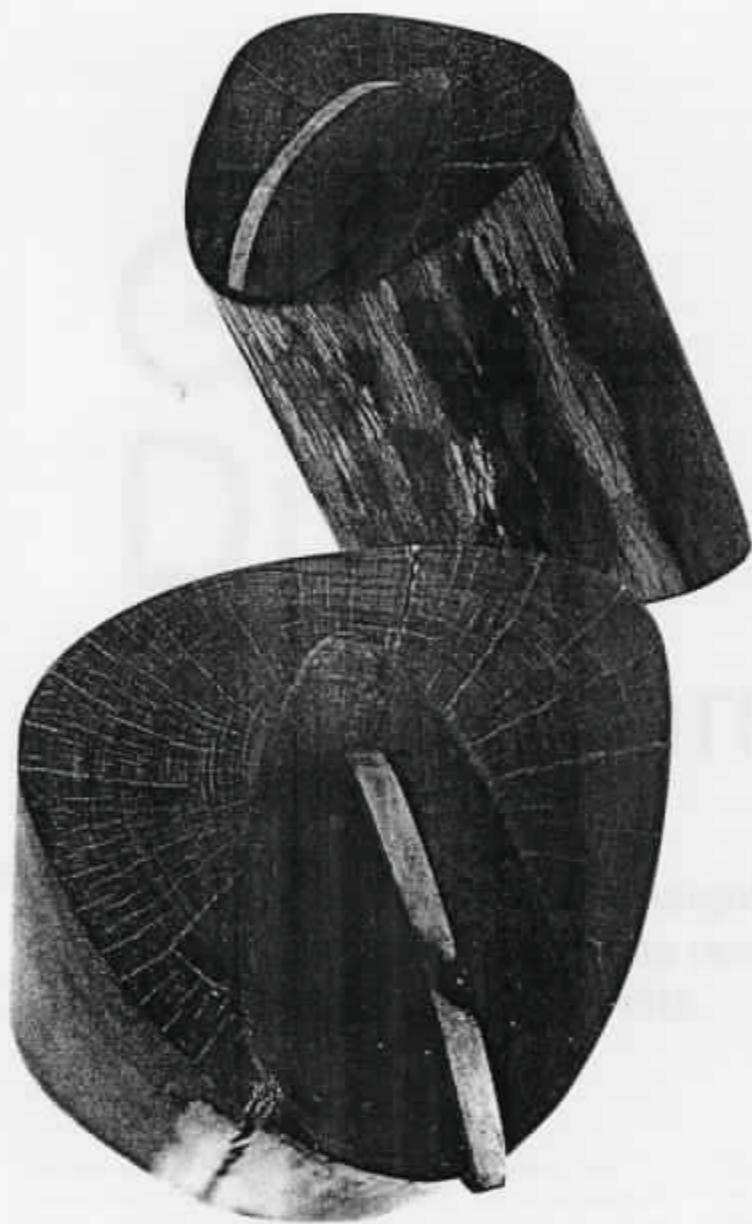
chaotic lines of force. They too are grain-lines. The piece of wood must have suggested the cleaver to the artist, so the idea grew initially from the organic, gathering further significance.

The 'crocodile'/base is exquisitely stained river-slime green and highly polished. The satisfaction the sculpture gave me was muddled by guilt about the extinction of crocs and ecological depravity. The artist patiently explained that the crocodiles are not literal; that the base, a simplified form finely made, was sufficient to suggest this, but worry befogged the studying mind. These are the 'Crocodiles of Reality' which we have to fight as we set out on life, and which can devour the weak. Having vanquished them, having forged a vision of a way through, we make the return journey — I suppose in that little sail boat.

Another theme of Dixon's is balance, used ironically in *Bat-On*, but in different ways in *Past, Present and Future*. The past exists here in a fine pillar of fossilised wood. This image suggests past civilisations, moral uprightness, strength, phallus-as-art, all of which has turned to stone. Present is absent, but is present as the action of balance. Teetering on the edge of the fossil is the future, a simplified form of a woman. She is reduced to three points: torso-diminishing-to-head, and two sharply tapering legs held apart. She conceives the future from the present's ghostly action. Her form also suggests an antelope's skull. Is the future pregnant with the death of animal life? Or is the basic structure of organic life (represented by the skull) dependent on intelligent action in the present moment? The representation of the present as a principle that is life-giving, occurring between opposing realities while palpably absent is especially satisfying. Future appears orientated towards flight.

Ipsa Dixit is the name of an owl simply fashioned from a leaning section of tree-trunk. Grain-lines radiate from a pear-shaped depression in the owl's 'face' in which a little ellipse is balanced. In the event of a careless brush-off, the ellipse — the beak — falls off. You have to replace it so that it can 'speak'. The inference is that the wise owl, the artist, has a voice which has a precarious existence which depends on its balance within the body/personality of himself/his work and also upon exterior responses.

Dixon speaks of the "moment of origin of 'I', the threshold where we experience ourselves as spirit." I see the edges of these sculptures as metaphors for this threshold experience, the moment between containment and freedom. The edge is always given assiduous attention. Edge is where the work impacts on its outside space, its context, which it influences, so that the limits of negative space can be seen to dance along its margins, rippling, jumping.



gliding. This defining but simultaneously freeing linear moment fascinates, evoking that leaping articulate line where hills meet sky, which defies reproduction on canvas or paper. He achieves it by placing organically made textures where they can produce these effects.

There is need for artists like Dixon to inform our attitudes and thus societal decisions. He redefines the spiritual, expands our understanding of it, leads us with wit and aesthetic delight to fresh insights. Interaction with his work can help us to extend our own concepts of the beautiful in the individual, in nature and in society. His continuing work inspires us to guard our cultural wealth, in addition to ecological wealth, as a major resource.

forthcoming events and exhibitions

Bushman Art and Time Lapse, an exhibition of photographs created with innovative methods by **Verena Kraft** and **Kurt Petz** from Munich, Germany, will be on show at Gallery Delta during August. Following this and subject to confirmation, will be *The Last Works of Luis Meque* (1966-1998). In September **Daryl Nero** will exhibit recent work and in October **Thakor Patel** and **Hilary Kashiri** will both hold one man shows.

During August and September, work from Zimbabwe featuring **Ishmael Wilfred**, **Doreen Sibanda**, **Chiko Chazunguza**, **Vote Thebe**, **Joseph Muzondo** and **Craig Wylie** will be on show in Aschaffenburg, Germany, in an exhibition entitled *Coming of Age*.

The National Gallery in Harare will be closed in July for the judging of Heritage. During August there will be two one-man shows, the first by sculptor **Joseph Muzondo**; the second recent paintings by **George Churu**. September sees an exhibition of graphics from Israel, the national ceramics exhibition and a solo show by **Eino Nangako**. In October the NGZ will again be closed, this time for the hanging of the Heritage Exhibition.

The National Gallery in Bulawayo will feature a solo show of recent work by **Nicole Gutsa** in August. Following this, in September for three months, will be a large contemporary sculpture exhibition from Britain, courtesy of the British Council. Amongst the artists whose work will be included are **Anthony Caro**, **William Turnbull**, **Barry Flanagan**, **Barbara Hepworth** and **Edward Paolozzi** — a chance for Zimbabwean sculptors to see internationally highly-regarded work. This exhibition will travel to Harare next year.

Pierre Gallery is showing a selection of works by the artists attached to the gallery including **Zephania Tshuma**, **Chaminuka Zvinavashe**, **Christiane Stolhofer**, **Thomas Zinyeka**. Opening on 8 October will be an exhibition of the latest paintings and prints by **Chiko Chazunguza**.

Cool Runnings, the Caribbean food people, are now offering refreshments and light lunches at Mutupo Gallery.

The Zimbabwe Association of Art Critics meets at 5.30 pm every last Monday of the month at the Bookcafé as well as holding other events. Anyone interested in joining the discussions and developments is most welcome. Phone Harare 861195 for information.

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