



CANARY WHARF
ARTS+EVENTS



Looking Up

Helaine Blumenfeld OBE
at Canary Wharf

Estate Wide
Canary Wharf
London
E14 5AB

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Looking Up

Helaine Blumenfeld OBE at Canary Wharf

This exhibition, the largest accorded to one artist in the open spaces of the Canary Wharf Estate, celebrates the monumental sculptures of Helaine Blumenfeld OBE. The focus is on the accessibility of her work, its intrigue and her ability to evoke beauty, calm and pleasure through form, line, composition, tone, intricacy and subtle colour. Blumenfeld has said, 'Beauty is the reason that public art exists. My objective has been to create things of the spirit, which will add another dimension to the daily lives of people that experience them. The most successful sculptures create a sense of place. There is a feeling of civic ownership for the work. People interact with it and the sculpture adds life and personality to the landscape.'

The title for the exhibition, *Looking Up*, was chosen by Blumenfeld as she feels strongly, particularly given the challenges facing us today, that people need to stop and take time to observe and engage with the world around them. At Canary Wharf, the element of chance encounter with these powerful works in white marble and bronze can be transformative. Seeing the purity of her exquisitely carved monumental *Spirit of Life* 2007, *Mysteries* 2011, *Meridiana* 2016 and *Taking Risks* 2019 in Westferry Circus against the summer greens of mature trees or their open structure in winter, the blues and clouds of the sky, or the neutral colours of the buildings gives multiple ways of encountering the forms. The bronze sculptures, of course, provide further visual challenges. While some elements are related to the carvings as part of Blumenfeld's sculptural language, the dark hues and contrasting highlights of bronze, used by sculptors and artisans for millennia, offer yet more to the viewer.

Blumenfeld's work, initially based on the figure, leads towards abstraction. She allows her intuition free rein in developing narrative, movement to create an aura around her sculptures that she does not put into words. Spirituality comes to mind when looking at her work,

Illusion 2018, bronze, Cabot Square. Photo Peter Matthews



Spirit of Life 2007, marble, Westferry Circus. Photo Peter Matthews

both through her choices of materials and the way she manages them. Today the figure may be discovered in some of the recent pieces here, with subtlety in the abstracted movement bringing to mind floating drapery and trees blowing in the wind in a fusion of humanity and the natural world.

'Beauty has the same base as truth in philosophy. What is the truth? The conformity of our judgements with that of others. What is a beautiful imitation? The conformity of the image with the thing,' wrote Denis Diderot (1713-84), the French philosopher, novelist, playwright and critic, on beauty in art, (*Entretiens sur la fils naturel*, pt. 3. 1757).

Blumenfeld affirms that 'Beauty and spirituality are the responses needed today to address the challenges of this world. We can affirm the value of life in the beauty we create. In the presence of something beautiful we are enlivened; we feel energized and gain a renewed sense of well-being and harmony.'

With four monumental Carrara Marble sculptures in the exhibition, sited along Westferry Circus, approaching from Cabot Square, the first encounter is with *Meridiana* 2016. This simple, abstract form, expressing the motion of an upward curving figure, is carved with the utmost precision in order to achieve the strength to keep the piece upright and refinement that shows the lightness of the stance.

Mysteries 2011 is a sculpture of contrasts. From one view, it suggests an angelic figure through swirling drapes. From another, it suggests conflicting forms. The pale grey veins throughout the stone add to its sense of movement.

The open nature of *Spirit of Life* 2007 is akin to a flower unfurling towards the sun, its linear carving describes the apparent movement with clarity. Nothing is hidden here, the sculpture discloses the artists' love and understanding of natural form. Perhaps more than any other sculpture in this exhibition, the viewer is enticed to 'look up' from the mundane to the world of spirit.

Taking Risks 2019, a three-part sculpture of great complexity, is one of the latest pieces carved in Blumenfeld's studio in Pietrasanta, Tuscany. The town has a long tradition of providing facilities for artists, growing in importance since the 15th Century when Michelangelo was the first sculptor to recognize the beauty of the local stone – marble from the nearby quarry in Carrara. Blumenfeld has said "Taking Risks is about the precariousness of human existence." This exhibition is the first occasion that this piece has been shown in an urban setting.

Moving on to Cabot Square, *Illusion* 2018, a three-part sculpture cast in bronze, greets the viewer who walks from Westferry Circus. The slightly elevated view causes us to look up towards it against the towering architecture of One Canada Square. The sculpture rises to meet this environment. It secures the eye through its upward thrust while being grounded by the complex interaction of its separate elements. *Illusion* more than any of the sculptures here, invites the viewer to interact with it, to enter within and between its separate parts.

Jubilee Park is the permanent home to *Fortuna* 2016, the first of Blumenfeld's sculptures to be acquired by the Canary Wharf Group. For the exhibition it is joined by bronzes, *Venus* 1993 and *Ascent* 2010.

It is not surprising that references to the Classical world appear in Blumenfeld's work with materials used since the first three-dimensional images were made by the human hand. *Venus* was a Roman Goddess for whom the Romans adapted the myths



Fortuna 2016, bronze, Jubilee Park. Photo; Peter Matthews

and iconography of her Greek counterpart, Aphrodite, who was associated with love, beauty, pleasure, passion and procreation. *Venus* is the closest depiction of the human figure in the exhibition, showing two sides of the woman, the seductress and the warrior. At this time, Blumenfeld was considering mythology as a key element in her work.

The great subtlety, even simplicity in the configuration of *Ascent* 2010 shows the human figure in a similarly curved and reaching thrust found within the later marble *Meridiana* located in Westferry Circus. Although slightly more apparent, here the figure remains a vehicle for the overall energy of the sculpture. Blumenfeld has said about *Ascent*, 'It can be seen as my most autobiographical work. In its union of two figures, we see a theme that I have often gone back to: by balancing intimacy with independence, we can create a unit of two people which has strength as well as tenderness.'

Fortuna is the goddess of fortune and the personification of luck in Roman religion. She is frequently depicted in the Wheel of Fortune – the circle of the four stages of life. Here *Fortuna* evokes the energy of human endeavour and openness as in the marble *Spirit of Life*. Within the folds of complex rhythmic structures are textured details that are not explained, but which take our imaginations further. Is there more beneath the skin? Regarding historic references in Blumenfeld's work, it seems to me that she moves forward with the enrichment of a backward glance.

Moving on to Wood Wharf, where *Metamorphosis*, Blumenfeld's second monumental commission for the Canary Wharf Group, brings a climactic end to the exhibition. In this sculpture, references are not figurative, but more a testament to the times in which we live – transmutation and change. The sculpture grows in four stages, each abstract complex form enfolding the former as they rise. The model for this sculpture, also cast in bronze, is visually more robust, illustrating that between



Illusion 2018, bronze, Cabot Square. Photo Peter Matthews



Metamorphosis 2019, bronze, Wood Wharf. Photo: Alex Nichols

the model and monumental version, changes have to be made to accommodate our best relationship with the scale. (Photographed here, but not part of the exhibition, the *Model for Metamorphosis* 2016 is not on view to the general public).

'*Metamorphosis*,' concludes Blumenfeld, 'can be seen as a call to action, putting forward a message not only of comfort and hope, but the powerful idea that through unity and transformation we can rise up together. This is how we can come out of this moment in time through community, shared values, and acknowledging that we are all human.'

Considering the breadth of the exhibition, the likenesses and dissimilarities within and between the sculptures, the binding theme is the artist's pursuit of the mysteries of life through beauty. Helaine Blumenfeld embraces beauty. For her, 'Beauty is a combination of qualities; harmony, proportion, symmetry and unity that affect not only the viewer's senses, but their sense of well-being both in body and in spirit.'

Ann Elliott 2021

Meridiana 2016, marble, Westferry Circus. Photo: Peter Matthews



Ascent 2010, bronze, Jubilee Park. Photo: Peter Matthews

Helaine Blumenfeld OBE grew up in New York and graduated from the University of Michigan. She studied Moral Philosophy at Columbia University, receiving a PhD in 1964. She married her husband Yorick in 1963 and moved to Paris where she studied sculpture with Ossip Zadkine. She had her first solo exhibition in 1966 in Palais Palfy, Vienna. There follows an impressively long list of exhibitions in Britain, Europe, Scandinavia, China, Korea, Singapore and the United States. Most notable recent exhibitions include: Ely Cathedral, Pilane Sculpture Park, Huygens' Hofwijck Museum in the Netherlands and the largest show of her work to date at Canary Wharf (2020).

Best known for her monumental public commissions, Blumenfeld is passionate about bringing sculpture into the public domain, creating works that have become integral to the cultural landscape of the UK. Most notably, *Tempesta* overlooking Hyde Park in London, installed in 2012 as well as *Fortuna* (2016) and *Metamorphosis* (2019) in Canary Wharf and *Tree of Life: Encounter* installed at the Woolf Institute (Cambridge) in 2018. Blumenfeld's work represents some of the most definitive examples of public sculpture in the UK.

Blumenfeld spends her time working in her studios in Pietrasanta (Italy) and in Grantchester, on the outskirts of Cambridge.

Venus 1993, bronze, Jubilee Park Photo: Peter Matthews





Taking Risks 2019, marble, Westferry Circus. Photo: Nunzio Prenna

Blumenfeld is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Sculptors and has served on its council and as its Vice President. In 2007, she was the first woman to win the International Sculpture prize *Il Premio Pietrasanta e la Versilia nel Mondo*. Blumenfeld was awarded an Honorary OBE for services to the arts in 2011. She is the subject of the recent Sky Arts film *Hard Beauty: The Sculpture of Helaine Blumenfeld*. Three monographs have been written about her work.

Helaine Blumenfeld OBE is represented by the Hignell Gallery.

For more information visit helaineblumenfeld.com and hignellgallery.com

Exhibition Tour

Saturday 14th August 3.00 pm to 5.00 pm

Curator Ann Elliott tours the exhibition with Helaine Blumenfeld

Free but please contact Canary Wharf Public Art Office to reserve a place on 07580 993 193 or email publicart@canarywharf.com

We extend our thanks to Abby Hignell for her generous support of the exhibition and to Helaine Blumenfeld for her unstinting and generous involvement. Canary Wharf Group would like to thank Mtec and J A Mackenzie for their support and sponsorship of the exhibition.

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