

Frances Ruane writes about the work of Joseph Sloan, September 2000

MILLENNIUM SCULPTURE EXHIBITION
Kilcock Art Gallery, Autumn 2000

Foreword to catalogue:

It was nearly twenty years ago when I first encountered Joe Sloan's work in the form of a billowing polished bronze figure of a Conductor, a subject to which he now returns with vigour.

This exhibition is fascinating in that it digs deeper into the themes that preoccupied Sloan over the years, while also showing stretching outward into new territory.

The mythological subject of "Icarus" was a challenging one to take on as its popularity as a theme for artists makes it difficult to interpret with degree of freshness. Sloan's combination of cast bronze and constructed elements marks a technical departure for him but it also breaks new ground with its original interpretation of a familiar subject. For sculptors, the challenge of creating an airborne figure is daunting. (...) Sloan devised a brilliant sculptural solution so that the figure is variously flying and falling within an airy semi-transparent construction of slender vertical rods, which also hold the sun. Sloan was drawn to the subject partly because "it is impossible to escape the sun" (.....) fields of bamboo swaying in the wind suggested the solution of using vertical rods. The resulting sculptures are remarkable in their use of air, sound and movement, which Icarus appearing to float within the quivering rays of the sun.

Movement, whether real (as in the Icarus series where the rods vibrate) or implied, is ever present in Sloan's work. "Aphrodite Emerging", a delicious study of contrasts, echoes the movement and sound of the sea. In "Duet" one figure rotates so that the effect is dance-like, allowing a changing spatial relationship between the two figures. Dance immediately comes to mind with the aptly named "Two Joyful Figures II". Two fluid figures merge into one elegant rhapsodic form that seems about to take flight. It certainly is an upbeat piece that unabashedly conveys passion and optimism.

Music weaves in and out of so much of Sloan's work one can be in no doubt of his love for it. I mentioned how some works suggested dancers but there are also conductors and, of course, the "Chanteuse". The artist told me that, for him, music was "the sound of the human spirit". There can be no doubt that Sloan sees sculpture, like music, as a medium to express more intangible feelings that spring from the human soul. "Pastorale" depicts a woman playing a string instrument but her gentle form expresses peace, contentment and expressiveness. "Millennium Conductor" is charged with combative energy, wielding his baton like a sword.

Sometimes Sloan steps back and acts as commentator, as in "Figures at an Exhibition". The artist recently noted that exhibition-goers could sometimes be "more theatrical, more demonstrative, more ostentatious" than the artworks they are viewing. The boldly conceived "Clown Awaiting Further Instructions" raises questions about the individual versus the group, the radical versus the community, the genius versus mass culture – with the clown (or artist?) as an outsider in a world that values

normality. A visual tension reinforces this theme with the use of a precariously balanced looped arc that separates the protagonists.

Unlike many of us, who were untouched by the Millennium, the event stirred Joe Sloan to create something new. This sense of renewal and change is evident on many levels including the scale of the work, the use of materials and methods of construction, the layered surfaces and the freedom with which the human figure is interpreted. This “newness”, however, doesn’t erode the essential elements that are the core of his work – its lyricism and musicality, its rhythmic spirit, its respect for the human figure and its concern for the human condition.

Frances Ruane
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