

PAUL DE MONCHAUX
TEN COLUMNS

MEGAN PIPER

TEN COLUMNS

LILY LE BRUN

Attached to two white walls of Paul de Monchaux's garden studio are two shelves, positioned at the same height and at right angles to each other. One holds eight plaster sculptures, all nearly a foot high, standing in an evenly-spaced, well-behaved row. Each sculpture is slightly different, a variation on a theme of calculated curves, precise angles and clear straight lines. The other shelf carries its echo; the same eight sculptures carved in pale yellow wood, the final version of *Eight Studies for Male & Female Columns*.

Light falling from a skylight plays on the wooden sculptures in shallow shadows and encourages their warm tone. The plaster, meanwhile, appears to emanate its own cold light. It cannot quite disguise its fragility, its willing to dissipate back into shapeless powder. Yet formally, the sculptures are unaffected by the different materials. Strong design in each pulls the eye calmly into a contained loop; it is difficult to imagine any element being added to them or taken away. This sense of self-sufficiency supports de Monchaux's description of the *Studies for Male & Female Columns* as a "utopia", because they are resolved and complete. "It's surprising what a slippery concept that is," he says. "It is very difficult to get there."

The path to these poised recent sculptures unfurled over half a century ago from the life modelling room at the Slade. When de Monchaux enrolled there as a sculpture student in 1955, life study dominated the studios. Tess Jaray, a contemporary, has remembered him working "with a set of callipers, measuring with intense concentration the relationship between one part of the body to another." He was developing the "ability to see through things", de Monchaux explains. Because two-thirds of the body is invisible, visually depicting or describing an experience of a person requires memory and a real understanding of the unseen. "It has to seem to be there even if you can't see it," he says.

“You’re working away from an idea of everything lying on a picture plane with depth and colour, and working into a world of the imagination.”

De Monchaux has remained dedicated to underlying structures, which create the core around which improvisation can take place. He recalls a period in the early sixties of making abstract expressionist influenced sculptures, where the material – nearly always plaster – led the form. But it became dissatisfying and he returned to life study to recalibrate, strictly analysing an object through drawing and measuring, eventually learning it by heart. The process made him realise the importance of finding a scale that suited the tools used to create an artwork, such as the hands, and then mobilising it as a basic unit from which to expand.

This discovery has informed de Monchaux’s long fascination with architecture, which he sees as nearly synonymous with sculpture. The architectural historian Joseph Rykwert’s work on the classical orders has been particularly influential. His book *The Dancing Column* (1996), details how the proportions of ancient buildings were engineered and understood with the human body in mind. The sturdier Doric column was likened to the male body, for example, while the slender, more elegant profile of the Ionic column was thought of as feminine. De Monchaux believes that by developing a figurative form into a practical object, these early architects were essentially moving into abstraction. “I’m really interested in that transformation,” he says, “how things are travelling from one head to another, from one set of hands to another.” That empathy is present in his unobtrusive, readable work.

A crucial moment for de Monchaux came in the late 1970s when he made a piece without a subject – basing it entirely on geometry. He realised that what had interested him all this time was the “process, rather than the rendering of the subject.” Since then, he has treated geometry “almost like a found object”, compelled by the way it appears only once applied to something physical. He points out a gentle bow to the wood in one of the *Studies for Male & Female Columns*, the product of two other curves colliding. Its shape would be impossible to draw, he says, it must be made to be seen. He likens geometry to the keys on a piano, which are inert until they are played. His job is to find the tune and perform the music.

De Monchaux taught full-time at art schools for nearly three decades after leaving the Slade – at the Nigerian College of Arts, Goldsmiths College and finally Camberwell School of Art, where he was head of sculpture. Though the experience of teaching must have propelled a predilection for clarity, it was the series of public commissions following his retirement which most encouraged decisiveness. As he puts it, “If you make something 20 feet high it has to be very clear. It can’t be muddled.” In the constraints put in place by a commission he found surprising freedom; they provided, he says, “the grit in the oyster”. Using boundaries to his advantage has strengthened de Monchaux’s work, allowing it to negotiate different sites, themes and materials.

A life-time of learning can be felt in the resounding cohesion of these recent works. In *Volute V*, for instance, the sense of rhythmic movement created by the curving elements demonstrates the control the sculptor has over form and how it acts in space. This may be the result of experienced, rational practices of repetition, distillation and analysis, but it is also driven by a profound respect for the complexity of what those processes achieve. While the sculptures might be resolved, they are not closed off; they invite a communication that is difficult to word. As de Monchaux has said, “I believe that formal invention alone can generate emotional responses that have no names, perhaps the most enduring and powerful kind.” His work is faithful to that mystery.

Marco Vitruvius Pollio - the invention of the Ionic column

'...first they took an eighth of the column for its thickness, so that it should look more slender. They put the swell of the base underneath it, as if it were a sandal; at the capital they attached braided coils, hanging down like hair to the left and the right, and arranged rounded mouldings and garlands as tresses dressed over the forehead, while over the whole body they let the grooves fall as if they were the folds of a matronly robe.'

From *The Dancing Column* by Joseph Rykwert, 1996



Volute IV, 2013









Volute V, 2016









Eight Studies for Male & Female Columns, 2014/15









LIST OF WORKS

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Volute IV, 2013

Bronze, edition of 7

68 x 53 x 53 cm

26.7 x 20.8 x 20.8 inches

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Volute V, 2016

Bronze, edition of 7

68 x 72 x 72 cm

26.7 x 28.3 x 28.3 inches

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Studies for Male & Female Columns, 2014/15

Studies 1 - 4

Lime wood, unique edition

26 x 19 x 4.5 cm

10.2 x 7.4 x 1.7 inches

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Studies for Male & Female Columns, 2014/15

Studies 5 - 8

Lime wood, unique edition

26 x 19 x 4.5 cm

10.2 x 7.4 x 1.7 inches

PAUL DE MONCHAUX

Born in 1934 in Montreal. Lives and works in London.

EDUCATION

1955-1958 Slade School of Fine Art, London

1952-1954 Art Students League, New York

TEACHING

1965-86 Head of Sculpture and Head of Fine Art at Camberwell School of Art, London

1977-82 Chairman of the Faculty of Sculpture, The British School at Rome

1960-65 Lecturer in Sculpture at Goldsmith's College, London

1958-60 Lecturer in Sculpture at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, Nigeria

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2015 Making It, Longside Gallery, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Yorkshire

2015 Art 15, London

2012 United Enemies, The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds

2002-15 Included in ten editions of the Summer Exhibition, The Royal Academy, London

1992 The Furnished Landscape, Crafts Council Gallery, London

1990 Gateshead Garden Festival, Tyne and Wear

1986-89 Whitechapel Open, Whitechapel Gallery, London

1986 Stoke-on-Trent National Garden Festival, Staffordshire

1983 The Sculpture Show, Hayward and Serpentine Galleries, London

1979 Notices, Camden Arts Centre, London
Included in seven editions of The

1961-88 London Group exhibitions, London
(elected as member in 1961)

1960 John Moores, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

1960 18 Young Sculptors, Institute of Contemporary Art, London

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2016 Ten Columns, Megan Piper, London

2013 Fixing Memory, The Piper Gallery, London

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

The Contemporary Art Society, London

The Henry Moore Institute, Leeds

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TEN COLUMNS**

23 November 2016 - 13 January 2017

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