What is the Meaning and Role of Harmony in Sculpture?

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One definition of harmony in art is 'unity in variety'.[1] 'The quality of forming a pleasing and consistent whole' says the Oxford English Dictionary.[2] Thus, in the visual arts harmony is created through combining and balancing differing visual and conceptual elements. Artwork that achieves harmony brings together phenomena to communicate a unique experience.

'Sculpture' describes a wide range of artworks that use three-dimensional space. Along with the wider category of 'art', definitions of sculpture have undergone great change. 'Even the idea of sculpture being quintessentially a three-dimensional art has been challenged, as its unique feature has become the way space is structured and organised.'[3] Sculptures may be experienced directly, or through images and descriptions to be recreated in the mind's eye. As part of modulating its effect, the sculptor harmonises the elements that go to make a sculpture. The impact on viewers will be affected by the sculptor's work and how it harmonises with the context in which it is seen, whether a gallery or the screen of a phone. The OED definition insists on the whole being 'pleasing and consistent' if it is to have harmony. The object may not in itself be pleasing. It may be challenging, or shocking or disturbing, but nonetheless have gone through a process of harmonisation as part of its making to allow its message to have an impact on the audience.

In my view an excellent contemporary example is provided by the sculptures of Cornelia Parker, which have been through a process of harmonisation in order to reach their ultimate forms. The materials, imagery and spaces are arranged so as to press home complex and meaningful experiences about vulnerability and time through extensive refinement. This refining process, or harmonisation, making the piece pleasing and consistent, is what makes it legible and accessible. This is evident in her piece *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View,* in which Parker reassembled the pieces of an exploded garden shed plus its contents by suspending them in space.[4]

Harmony takes a specific role in my own, more traditional, sculptural practice: I make domestic scale objects. When I make a sculpture I want people to look at it, and see something that engages their attention and keeps them looking, so as to receive the visual narrative that is the sculpture: I intend my work to be

pleasing and consistent. The language of sculpture is one of volume and plane, surface and imagery. If the piece is hard to look at, confusing, ugly, disjointed, without visual logic, the viewer will not generally dwell on it. Harmonising the elements that make up the sculpture creates a connection to the viewer's feelings, an engagement with the body of the sculpture and its meaning. The accents and dynamics will occur as planned, whilst the other parts will flow.

Definitions of harmony and beauty have changed over time. For a dip into some of the deeper analyses, one can do worse than read Jared S. Moore on the subject.[5] He writes of six, sometimes overlapping, kinds of harmony:

- Formal, or 'the pattern or arrangement of sensuous materials – colours, shapes, tones';[6]
- Ideal, as beauty and 'defined entirely in terms of [Platonic] Idea';[7]
- Expressive, meaning 'having significance, or as expressive of certain emotions, ideas and images';[8]
- Spiritual, as in responding to spiritual needs;
- Psychophysical, which may be expressed through empathy, or a 'feeling of oneness with the object';[9]
- Psychological, or a 'purely subjective harmony within the mind of the observer'.[10]

Although my experience is intuitive and practical, I find that it does align with Moore's own ideas in certain key respects. In his theory of 'expressive' beauty, Moore brings together three elements: the form of the artwork, the idea of the artwork and the observer of the artwork. He writes of 'the ease with which the stimuli from the object is assimilated into the neuronic patterns that already exist in the brain'.[11] To put it another way, the experience of seeing a sculpture is affected not only by its appearance or form, and the ideas that the artist has suggested, but also the mind of the viewer.

In conceiving of a piece and wanting to make it, I experience the form and the meaning *as one thing,* and it is that experience which I aim to share with the viewer. Every piece has its origins in my experience of the world, as well as a trajectory. That direction is not fully set when I begin. There is trial and error, and the unexpected is discovered, but my intention is that, as in Moore's words, 'the material object exactly embodies the idea'.[12] As Moore implies, the artist has to consider the mind of the viewer in the making process, if the sculpture is to carry its message to that mind. Seeing through the eyes of others is part of the job. The

effort of the artist to understand and manage the perceptions of viewers is indeed a key part of their role. An artist needs to understand at least in part, how people see, and their frame of reference, if they are to affect that vision. Does the artwork harmonise with existing 'truths' within the mind of its audience? If so it may be that this is the key to harmony being associated with the classical view, that harmony and beauty are the 'natural' result of truth, whilst falseness is 'naturally' ugly.

To be able to share my conception of the *one thing*, the thought/form that I want to make, I have to break it down, and become aware of the form and thought, the visible physical object it will become and the meaning that is intrinsic to the planned piece. It is akin to a translation, a disassembling of the concept that I will then rebuild. Curves and angles, textures and colours, gestures and imagery are all elements that have to be harmonised. This is a process and does not happen all at once, and sometimes not at all.

As I conceive an idea for a new sculpture and begin to make it, I trust the piece will become a successfully completed unified whole, as it is gradually built. In the end, I intend, to quote Moore again, that 'Form and significance are not separable parts of an aesthetic object but inseparable aspects'.[13] The precise outcome is not certain, but grows, guided by the desire to share a certain vision, a partly hidden truth. The making process includes playing with options of form, scale and surface. Do I seek harmony? Not as an end in itself but it is a means, a tool to modulate the diverse elements and make the sculpture do its work.

As the practice of sculpture has changed, so have ideas of beauty and harmony. Arthur Woods writes succinctly 'In a good work of art, all of its elements are interrelated for a coherent unity-content and form fused into its overall message or meaning. Such images, exploiting the expressive qualities of form, go beyond mere representation of fact and can communicate a wide range of subtle and powerful feelings'.[14]

Dance is an aesthetic experience and one that can lead to exalted states of delight. Like other physical and performance arts, dance is an expressive activity. It can be seen as Vasudha Narayanan said as 'an articulation of the deeper nature of things and as connected with the other streams of life'.[15] My sculpture is an embodiment of the whole experience of dance, including the feeling, mood and music, reinterpreted in ceramic form.

I have made a series of sculptures of tango dancers, evoking in abstract form various aspects of the dance. I initially named them after cities where I have danced or evoke something about dance. One example is 'Sienna' (Figure 1), another is 'Utrecht' (Figure 2). My aim in making 'Utrecht' was to express

Figure 1: 'Sienna'. Original sculpture by Sophie Howard.

Figure 2: 'Utrecht'. Original sculpture by Sophie Howard.

an experience; seen, heard and danced, through the medium of the sculpture. Dancers move, and this kind of sculpture, at least, does not. 'Utrecht' is a hand built ceramic form, inspired by a particular step in Argentine tango, which I have been learning and dancing for many years. A couple are engaged in a swift but controlled action: this is a move I have seen and experienced as a dancer, so I can physically imagine this tiny moment which is one of a flow of postures. Knowing the way it feels helps to guide me in the making of the form.

I make tango sculptures in clay and fire them, often glazing. The results are three-dimensional forms that communicate the experience of the dance. I build in the moods and rhythms of the music, the connection and motion of the bodies, and include too the dancers' intention. To make the sculpture communicate all the things I want, I must consider many parts of the experience, and bring them together in a form that makes sense to the viewer. Elements to be included are the tempo and mood of the music, the interpretation that the two dancers might add in that particular moment and the weight, balance and co-ordination of the pair as they move together in the moment of movement, as well as any other narrative that I want to include.

Tango requires deep communication between the dancers, demanding harmonisation in the sense that they must align themselves, finding common, shifting ground within the music. Julie Taylor sees tango arising from a deeply disharmonious environment, becoming a therapy that is itself harmonious. She writes that 'dancers cling together in the uniquely intimate tango embrace', reconciling dramatic 'tense disharmonies', and citing one maestro who said 'it's the bodies talking together on their own', reconciling dramatic 'tense disharmonies'.[16] For me, tango is a strong and expressive improvisation à deux, a changing physical conversation between two people, even though the coordination between the partners is often impossible to see. The couple make shapes that move and change apparently without planning, and although one person leads and one follows, each can be fully expressive in responding to the tenderness and power in the complex layers of the music. I seek to embody moments of tango music and dance in my sculpture: dance and sculpture are both addictive.

If all the physical detail of the dancers was included in 'Utrecht', there would be too much to look at. Those details, of shoes, of hair, of clothing, would distract from the essential forms that the sculpture aims to manifest. 'Utrecht' shows just a moment but includes a sense of the moment before and the ones to come. The aspects I want the viewer to see and feel are specific: how the bodies press together but move around each other. How the dancers are both unified and

Figure 3: 'Before'. Original sculpture by Sophie Howard.

separate. How their dynamic movement and weight has turned them into one form that holds together as it responds to the music.

As well as the abstract dance sculptures of which 'Utrecht' is one, I also make more 'realistic' ones, which include details such as hair, clothing, shoes and faces. One, is just called 'Before' (Figure 3) and requires some effort by the viewer to think 'before what?' My answer, if needed, is that the whole thing is a memory: the dancers remember a time 'before' when they danced, in a nostalgic way. Perhaps ' before' they got together as a couple, implying that this moment was significant in their attraction. Another example is 'Heloise' (Figure 4). My description of the pieces as 'realistic' and 'abstract' is not precise, but more of a shorthand. The 'realistic' ones are more accurately 'sketched three-dimensional studies'. The

Figure 4: 'Heloise'. Original sculpture by Sophie Howard.

'abstract' ones are more accurately 'semi-abstract'. Through making the studies, I explore the subject thoroughly. In the studies, I learn a lot about the interlocking shapes of the bodies, the emphasis and flow of the forms and what is essential. This process allows me to discover what is most exciting, dynamic and dramatic in the particular moment of tango. To make a more abstract design based on a study, I start a new piece in which I define, refine, combine and edit forms and angles, weight and surface, which I describe as a process of harmonisation.

How does this harmonisation process work in practice? In the study I see repeating angles, surfaces and shapes that seem similar, curves and joins and textures that recur. The shapes that fit with the thrust and dynamism I want are brought to the fore in the new piece. In building abstract pieces I allow the shapes I have chosen to take over, making a curve repeat on different parts of the sculpture. I minimise some variations in the forms and accentuate angles so that only the essence of the figures' posture is visible after this process of refinement. The working study from which I develop the abstract sculpture may have separate colours for clothing and hair. In the more abstract piece of

dance sculpture, colour and texture can be exploited across the whole form to be expressive of music and mood. Colour may, as part of the process take over with a swirl of blue and white or fragments of gold. The elements that have been harmonised allow the complex form to carry as much information as possible to the viewer's eye and mind, without interruption. If there is too much information to take in, unity is lost and the eye tires, the viewer loses track of the experience. Harmony is a tool to streamline the visual information embodied in the sculpture so the viewer can experience its impact.

A part of the making process can include a journey through the uninspiring sinking sands of over-harmonisation in which every dynamic is smoothed away. There is usually a way out. But can there be too much harmony? Does the boiling down of the visual soup ultimately result in a burnt pan? To resolve and quieten every difference ends with dull sculpture, a simple geometric form, or empty space. Raw unresolvedness also has a place in sculpture. The boiling down should leave me with perfect crystals, ideally, rather than sludge. In the case of tango sculptures, harmonising of body forms, music and movement should not render them so smooth that they disappear, but allow the impression to be received, the dynamic to be felt.

Some ideas for sculptures seem to leap to mind fully formed, and it is the satisfactory crafting of the object that is my only task, but usually the conversation with the clay is more complex. I do visual research, looking at other work, photos, videos, and reading around ideas. However, the most complex conversation and examination of ideas so often leads one back to the basics: What will this thing be? How should it look? What will it make a person feel?

If all the elements are working together, a sculpture can be achieved in which the appearance, feeling and ideas become one. To achieve this, there is a role for harmonising. The aim will be to expose a form/idea in a way that allows it to be better experienced by its viewers. Harmony is an issue when it comes to locations for sculpture, as there is always a context. When making a piece I consider how it looks from all angles, what it means and how viewers can engage with it. I make house trained sculpture, intended to be spied from all angles, and adaptable to setting. Ideally, mine don't fall over, won't damage their surroundings or viewers, and will blend into diverse settings.

Baudelaire had strong opinions about how sculpture affected architecture and natural settings. He was not a fan and complained in his 'Salon de 1846 ' entitled 'Why Sculpture is Boring' that sculpture was 'crude and direct like nature' and 'vague and elusive owing to the many sides that can be seen at the same

time'.[17] This startling objection has been taken as a starting point for detailed discussions about exactly what sculpture can 'do' in various contexts. Theory and discussion on how sculpture can and should be viewed have implications for architects, designers and sculptors themselves. Arnold Cusmariu offers a highly detailed analysis of the aesthetics of sculpture that 'gives the third dimension a new aesthetic paradigm ... and creates extraordinary artworks'.[18]

In the physical world, sculptures are seen in a myriad of temporary and permanent settings. Pieces are often designed for the site they occupy. There are works that are both architectural and sculptural at the same time, such as the pyramids of Egypt. There is, as Art Brenner says 'a strong historical affinity between sculptor and architect stemming from their common origins as craftsmen of wood and stone".[19] He goes on to point out that 'Records from Romanesque and Gothic periods tend to confirm that they were often one and the same'.[20] Exploring the relationship that a sculpture has with its setting, we soon find that the two need to harmonise if they are to enhance a place, with the dynamics of one complementing the characteristics of the other. If a sculpture is made for a particular setting or type of place, both place and sculpture will be simultaneously enlivened. As Brenner points out, art plays a crucial, almost shamanic role of connecting people to their environment. Even a sculpture designed for temporary settings has to fit well into its surroundings to be seen at its best. Context is not everything, but even a movable sculpture benefits through proper placement.

Harmony has a role as an integral element of the experience of sculpture as it smooths the way, making space for the eye and mind to engage with a piece, be the form simple or the idea complex. As a concept, harmony has meaning independently of its practical role. There is a view, previously mentioned, that harmony and beauty are the 'natural' result of truth, whilst falseness is 'naturally' ugly.

Certainly, when things 'look wrong' or 'don't work' in the making of a sculpture it is a sign that something is amiss. The sculptor has to search for the truth of their intention and find a better way to share it.

Discussions on the making, viewing and placing of sculpture raise questions to consider when making new work. In the practical space of making, it is always useful to ask questions. Theoretical questions do help as a way to interrogate my own practice when the way ahead is foggy. My questions as a maker are mostly practical ones that seek to solve problems about why a work in progress does not yet do what I want it to. My answers are physical and involve changes to forms, surfaces and imagery. Fresh eyes and the interrogation of my own motivations

and abilities lead to clarity. Making sculpture is not a purely intellectual exercise, but a practice without which I would be unable to engage with a world which is at once dissonant, harmonious and dynamic. Harmony quietens the babble of conflicting energies and allows clear communication.

Notes

1. Jared S. Moore,. 'Beauty as Harmony', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 2, no. 7 (1942): pp. 40, 42.
2. 'Harmony', *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/harmony [Accessed 25 May 2019].
3. Anna Moszynska, *Sculpture Now* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2013), p. 7.
4. The Tate,'The Story of Cold Dark Matter', https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/parker-cold-dark-matter-an-exploded-view-to6949/story-cold-dark-matter [Accessed 25 May 2019].
5. Moore, 'Beauty', p. 50.
6. Moore, 'Beauty', p.41.
7. Moore, 'Beauty', p. 42.
8. Moore, 'Beauty', p. 41.
9. Moore, 'Beauty', p. 46.
10. Moore, 'Beauty, p. 43.
11. Moore, 'Beauty', p. 46.
12. Moore, 'Beauty', p. 45.
13. Moore, 'Beauty', p. 44.
14. Arthur Woods, 'The "Cosmic Dancer": Sculpture and the Absence of Gravity', *Leonardo*, vol. 26, no. 4 (1993): pp. 297-301.
15. Vasudha Narayanan,. '2002 Presidential Address: Embodied Cosmologies: Sights of Piety, Sites of Power', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 71, no. 3 (2003): pp. 495-520.
16. Julie Taylor, 'Death Dressed As a Dancer: The Grotesque, Violence, and the Argentine Tango', *TDR (1988-)*, vol. 57, no. 3 (2013): pp. 117-31, (pp. 117, 121, 124).
17. Arnold Cusmariu, 'Baudelaire's Critique of Sculpture', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2015): pp. 96, 119.
18. Cusmariu, 'Baudelaire's Critique of Sculpture', p. 119.
19. Art Brenner, 'Concerning Sculpture and Architecture', *Leonardo*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1971): pp. 99-100.
20. Brenner, 'Concerning Sculpture and Architecture', p.100.