

Nick Hornby

Churner and Churner

As the five-century arc of its title would suggest, Nick Hornby's exhibition at Churner and Churner, 'Sculpture, 1504–2013,' made no bones about its ambition, even by means of a few, discreet works. Cast in marble resin composite and rippling like taut, cream-coloured muscle, its central sculpture, *The Present Is Just a Point* (2013), swelled to fill the gallery space with a prodigious V-shaped vector, unfurling upward from the eponymous point of its title. Seemingly precarious in its perch upon that sharp roost, the sculpture drew support from both a large supporting rock and an internal aluminium rod. If the work's marmoreal solemnity and prodigious scale call to mind some ancient monument, its form – by turns geometric and undulating, calcified and biomorphic – conjures up a decidedly modern presence. Soaring, sleek and aerodynamic, it resonates with some of Luca Buvoli's sculptural vectors in resin, which play upon the early 20th century futurist obsession with flight.

The Present Is Just a Point, however, conceals at its top the decidedly un-futurist form of Michelangelo's *David* (1501–04), whose profile is traced by the lines issuing from the piece's pointed base, sanded and polished to subtle gradations. The likeness appears only gradually, overshadowed upon first glance by the sculpture's brash, outsized abstraction. The lumpy, unformed slab supporting the sculpture likewise recalls the rough-hewn texture of Michelangelo's *Slave* sculptures – though, in light of the title's '1504' book-end, it is *David* whose precedent looms most urgently. Hornby's initial idea for the work was sparked by a visit to London's Victoria and Albert Museum, with its extensive collection of plaster casts, ranging from Trajan's column to Renaissance and Baroque masterpieces. Anything but a further cast, the work invokes the tradition of plaster modelling only to warp its expectations.

The exhibition was completed by a few other notable pieces, including the bronze sculpture, *My Nose Grows Now* (2013) suspended in the centre of a box-like steel frame. A human profile appears here flattened, distended and grooved into an almost anamorphic vision; from certain angles it resembles an architectural entablature, while from others it seems like something glimpsed streaking by in a blur. Both the cage and the figure's prodigious nose stir up Alberto Giacometti's precedent, though not to the extent of snuffing out Hornby's originality. The contrast between the frame's static propriety and a human likeness warped (by speed? by lyrical license?) into near-abstract form is arresting in its own right.

Striking, too, were the series of large, digital photographic prints, *Back Towards Flat* (2013), which take as their raw material Henri Matisse's suite of bronze reliefs called *The Back* (1909–30). The original bronze series depicts a woman as seen from behind, and simplifies an expressive contrapposto to an increasingly squat trunk of a body, cleaved by a plunging braid. Hornby's images have further pared back Matisse's figure to near-abstract form, shorn even of a head, and reduced – in the final frame – to a bisected torso, perched still upon its shallow ledge. The similarity to Matisse's original bronzes provides an alibi for Hornby's posthumous intervention, one that takes the master's example seriously. Several of Hornby's sculptural works from recent years bring literary allusion into three dimensions, whether the bronze *The Horizon Comes* (*Ted Hughes*) (2011) or *Vanity working on a weak head produces every sort of mischief* (*Jane Austen*) (2011). This recent body of work seems more predominantly concerned with a rigorous approach to subtractive form, and a play between corporeal figuration and genoetric abstraction. The results so far have been outstanding.

Ara H. Merjian

About this review

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Nick Hornby, *The Present Is Just a Point*, 2013, marble resin, composite and aluminium, 2.6 × 2 × 1.2 m

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