



CANARY WHARF
ARTS+EVENTS



Looking Up

Helaine Blumenfeld OBE
at Canary Wharf

16 March – 18 September 2020

Lobby, One Canada Square,
Canary Wharf, London E14 5AB
and external locations at
Westferry Circus, Cabot Square,
Jubilee Park and Wood Wharf

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Looking Up

Helaine Blumenfeld OBE at Canary Wharf

Looking up at Helaine Blumenfeld's latest sculpture being craned into position in front of a newly erected residential building, 10 Park Drive at Wood Wharf was the sort of experience that inspired awe and excitement in equal measure. *Metamorphosis* 2019 - a monumental bronze specially commissioned for Canary Wharf Group - weighing over 6 tonnes, with a height approaching 4 metres on its base, hovered in the air before being placed lightly into position. The first Saturday morning in January 2020 was cold and cloudy, and once the correct orientation had been achieved, the sun shone on the mesmerisingly beautiful blue-green patina of its smooth surface of undulating layered forms rising from the sculpture's wide base, peaking gently.

Blumenfeld's *Metamorphosis*, together with her earlier sculpture *Fortuna* 2016, which is already sited in Jubilee Park, are the two permanent commissions that form part of the largest solo exhibition of sculpture to be shown at Canary Wharf. The exhibition is spread throughout several outdoor locations: Jubilee Park, Westferry Circus, Cabot Square and Wood Wharf, as well as a large selection of sculptures in different media inside the Lobby of One Canada Square.

The selection of sculptures reflects Blumenfeld's wide interest in materials and shows how she persuades the best out of each while maintaining her continually developing vision through intuition, touch and close scrutiny. She explores form initially through making models in clay. Her hands operate as her eyes, working intuitively first and later critically. The subject comes gradually, found through her hands and suggested by the basic form and supplementary, mindful working - drawing on memories from the past, new thoughts and emotions. Blumenfeld likes to feel that she has endless time to work, especially in her Italian studio in Pietrasanta where she can give one hundred percent of her time to working without domestic calls to distract her attention.

Metamorphosis 2019, bronze. Installed at Wood Wharf. Photo Sean Pollock



Fortuna 2016, bronze. Installed in Jubilee Park. Photo Henryk Hetflaisz

Should one of over twenty such small models satisfy her requirement - she is very, very self-critical - a larger piece is made and refined as a working model that may be further enlarged to a monumental scale, with still more refinements made before casting in bronze or carving in marble, stone or wood. The exhibition also features large terracotta pieces, worked by hand with great sensitivity to a fine surface.

When translating the plasticity of clay into the crispness of wood, the hardness and differing compositions of stones, and the interpretive qualities available when casting in bronze, Blumenfeld eases the nature of her chosen material into her subject matter with great finesse. After a long hiatus Blumenfeld has returned to working in wood, as she feels that the grain in wood accentuates the pure form of the sculpture.

Blumenfeld's work was initially based on the figure, leading towards abstraction and she always allows her intuition free rein in developing narrative, movement and a particular aura around her sculptures that she does not put into words. But beauty comes to mind when looking at her work, both through her choices of materials and the way she manages them. Today the figure may be discovered in some of her pieces, but the abstracted movement she reveals brings to mind drapery floating and trees blowing in the wind in a fusion of humanity and the natural world.

Helaine Blumenfeld began her career as an academic, gaining a PhD in Moral Philosophy from Columbia University, New York in 1964. She had already begun studying sculpture with Ossip Zadkine (1888-1967) at his invitation in his studio in rue d'Assas, Paris, now the Ossip Zadkine Museum. Zadkine was a hard taskmaster, insisting that Blumenfeld worked out for herself why the heads of two of the figure sculptures she had made had cracked at the neck and broken away. She has kept them as a salutary reminder in her studio in Grantchester near Cambridge, where she has lived with her family since 1970.

The sculptures exhibited in the Lobby of One Canada Square date from 1974 to 2019, the earliest piece being *Fantastico* 1974 carved in a blue-veined white marble that gives its name (Fantastico) to the title. The sculpture shows the curving dynamic and upward reaching form of composition that Blumenfeld has developed through the years with undeniable assurance. However, working with Travertine marble during the 1980s and '90s required a more robust response, since this highly textured material, with random holes caused by heat during its formation from sedimentary limestone, requires different handling from Statuario marble. She says, 'White marble is much stronger and harder than travertine. Statuario white marble is my preferred material, not only because it is capable of rendering very fine detail, but because of its translucency when carved very thin. Travertine is not translucent. It is very porous, softer and much easier to work. It has naturally occurring holes which can interrupt the line

and effect I am trying to create. I will use travertine for very particular works where I want to create a sense of time and drama.'

A sense of drama shows clearly in the Travertine sculptures exhibited here: *Seascape* 1983, *Souls* 1988, *Venus* 1993 and *Forest of the Gods* 1993-94, the latter featuring three unnamed figures. In a sense, this sculpture is left open to the addition of more figures. These gods reflect directly the notion of ancient sculptures damaged and worn through time. The drapery reveals the female form, a device used time and again in both Greek and Roman sculpture – one that Blumenfeld has refined through time, until in a number of her later pieces the drapes take over almost entirely. However, in *Venus* 1993, the figure is more complete, although the back and front of the sculpture reveals two faces: Venus, the Roman Goddess of love and sex, is also given the counter-characteristic of hatred and aggression.

Helaine Blumenfeld working in her studio on *Ascent* 2010. Photo Erio Forli



Tree of Life 2010, marble. Photo Ash Mills



Toward the Precipice 2019, marble. Photo Erio Forli



Forest of the Gods 1993-94, travertine marble

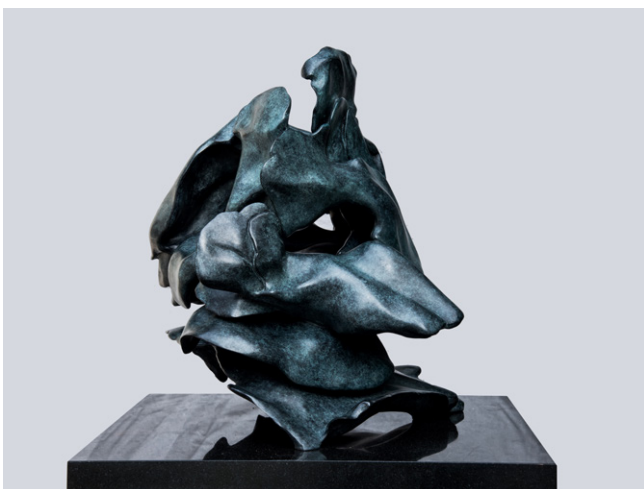


Another feature of some of Blumenfeld's sculptures is that they are made in a number of separate elements. *Seascape* 1983, formed of five elements that may be interchanged, reflects the movement of water and the changing dramas of the ocean, which can also be seen in the later *Rape of Europa* 1993-94. The folds and curling of waves have echoes elsewhere in nature and mythology. She says that these pieces offer options, bringing people and elements together. On exhibition in One Canada Square are a number of pieces made in two, three or four parts: *Souls* 1985, bronze; *Forest of the Gods* 1993-94, Travertine marble; *Shadow Figures* 1990, white marble; *Visionary Landscape* 2007, bronze; *The Space Within* 2010, bronze; *Taking Risks* 2016, terracotta; *Illusion* 2017, terracotta; and *Souls: Intimacy* 2019, wood; while *Illusion* 2018, bronze is shown in Cabot Square and the most recent monumental *Taking Risks* 2019, white marble is at Westferry Circus.

The white marble sculptures in the Lobby of One Canada Square are installed in a way that they receive maximum light from the south. *Shadow Figures* 1990, *Struggle* 2010, *Tree of Life* 2010 and *Toward the Precipice*, *Exodus III* and *Exodus IV*, all of 2019, testify to Blumenfeld's increasing skill in carving the finest of white marble. Gradations of translucency range from opacity to near transparency, all of which throw greater focus on form and surface.



Taking Risks 2016, terracotta. Exhibited at Ely Cathedral, 2018. Photo Ash Mills



Exodus IV 2018, bronze



Homage 2018, bronze

While subject matter for Helaine Blumenfeld has grown from the figure through natural forms and abstraction, as well as her musings on history, mythology, challenges that face humanity and the formal matters of materiality in making sculpture, a feeling of the figure remains largely present, if abstruse. She creates some of her subjects in more than one material. For example, although most of the 'Exodus' series are made in bronze, two of their number are carved in white Statuario marble. The smaller *Exodus: Metamorphosis* 2016 is also at the heart of the monumental *Metamorphosis* at Wood Wharf; both are bronze casts, but with different patinas. At the heart of her 'Exodus' series is the notion of all themes in her work coming together, reflecting, she says, the world's chaos. Blumenfeld says that *Illusion* could also have been part of the 'Exodus' series as a chaotic group of three, being chaotic in unity.

Souls 1985 also has versions in Travertine marble (*Souls* 1988) and in wood (*Souls: Intimacy* 2019), all representing a subject holding Blumenfeld's interest for more than twenty years. Compositional links also occur across subject matter: *Toward the Precipice* 2019 and *Meridiana* 2018, carved in white marble, share a backward thrusting form and the sense of a figure in contrapposto.

A larger version of *Meridiana* 2016 is displayed at Westferry Circus, with three other monumental marble carvings. *Spirit of Life* 2007, the earliest of these, a commission Blumenfeld won for a medical centre for cancer patients in America, exhibits a protective feeling although it is about 'opening up'. She says that everyone saw something spiritual in it – aspiration, hope and change. Of the three later pieces, *Mysteries* 2011 depicts an angel, and while she was working on it



Mysteries 2011, marble



Illusion 2018, bronze

Blumenfeld became more and more aware of the figure – which on one side is full of tension, while on the other has a more figurative aspect. *Meridiana* 2016 and *Taking Risks* 2019, show Blumenfeld's growing confidence in carving large forms. Each of the three elements of *Taking Risks* is made from the same block of marble. The relationships of each element could be altered, while retaining the sense of the pull of gravity. All of these marble sculptures are made in her Pietrasanta studio from marble from the same quarry used by Michelangelo (1475-1564) for his five-metre high masterpiece *David* 1501-04. These large carvings testify to Blumenfeld's rigour and trust in her singular vision.

The monumental bronzes displayed in Jubilee Park, in Cabot Square and at Wood Wharf, together with others in One Canada Square, demonstrate Blumenfeld's exacting attention to the way in which patina and form complement each other. She employs a range of 'finishes' from highly polished bronze, through greens, to grey and blue. Her use of blue is unusual for bronze, but is seen used effectively in *Metamorphosis* 2019 (Wood Wharf), *Ascent* 2010 (Jubilee Park) and *Hommage* 2018 (One Canada Square). Both colour and the degree of 'polish' used on the surfaces of the bronze sculptures enhance form and emphasise movement and highlight line. *Fortuna* 2016, installed in Jubilee Park in September 2016, has a glowing, golden

patina, fitting for this celebratory sculpture that alludes to luck and good fortune, evoking the Roman Goddess of Fortune (Fortuna). *Ascent* features male and female figures, the male giving support so that the female can fly. The theme of *Flight* 2010, also in Jubilee Park, recurs in the later *Flight* 2019, carved in wood with a delicacy that seems close to impossibility, shown in the Lobby of One Canada Square. Both versions fully capture upward movement, together with dynamic energy.

Completing the range of materials that Blumenfeld uses in her sculpture are three examples of works in terracotta, each following themes expressed in other media: *Taking Risks* 2016, *Illusion* 2017, both three-part sculptures, and *Intimacy* 2019, a single figure whose form is shown through drapery.

During the course of writing about Helaine Blumenfeld's sculpture and thinking about her recurring themes, I found myself researching the 'Tree of Life', three versions of which are in the exhibition: *Tree of Life: Transformation* 2003 bronze, *Tree of Life* 2010, marble and *Tree of Life: Encounter* 2018, bronze. The 'Tree of Life' is in fact the Baobab tree. Although the Baobab is not a direct reference in her work, many of the characteristics attributed to it are, I find, in line with concepts that filter through Blumenfeld's work: to unfold, to grow and to be strong.

Helaine Blumenfeld works in the hope that her sculpture offers us a way of looking anew and thinking of unity, proportion, movement and harmony. Her aim is that we should look up to enjoy the reality of art in an overly digitally obsessed world. To view sculpture in the open air, galleries and other interior spaces, offers us possibilities for direct enjoyment and understanding that is not possible when seen on a screen.

Ann Elliott 2020

Flight 2019, wood





Taking Risks 2019, marble

Helaine Blumenfeld was born in New York in 1942. She studied Moral Philosophy at Columbia University, graduating with a PhD in 1964. She studied sculpture with Ossip Zadkine in Paris and 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. She has had numerous commissions for art in the public realm and is represented in both private and public collections.

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

Blumenfeld was the first woman to win Il Premio Pietrasanta e la Versilia nel Mondo Sculpture Prize in 2007. She was made 'Woman of Achievement' by Women of the Year in 2010, and awarded an Honorary OBE for services to the arts in 2011. Helaine Blumenfeld is represented by the Hignell Gallery, London.

For more information visit helaineblumenfeld.com and hignellgallery.com

VIEW THE EXHIBITION ONLINE

During this time of social distancing please click below to view the exhibition at Canary Wharf online

EXHIBITION

We extend our thanks to the private collectors who have loaned work to the exhibition, 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.

Photographs courtesy of the Artist unless otherwise credited.