

OFFER WATERMAN

17 St George Street, London W1S 1FJ

William Turnbull *New Worlds, Words, Signs*

29th September – 3rd November 2017



William Turnbull by Ida Kar

Offer Waterman is delighted to announce *New Worlds, Words, Signs*, a major survey of the work of William Turnbull dating from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. The gallery has represented Turnbull's estate since 2015 and this is its first comprehensive solo exhibition. Turnbull (1922-2012) was one of the most internationally significant British artists of the post-war period. Nicholas Serota when Director of the Tate, spoke of him as '*an exceptional artist, unusually gifted both as a painter and a sculptor*'. This exhibition which includes sculpture, painting and works on paper, explores this range and introduces some of Turnbull's most important recurring themes. It will feature a selection of major works from the estate complemented by works on loan from private collections, arranged over four floors of exhibition space.

New Worlds, Words, Signs begins in 1949, a year after Turnbull had left London and the Slade, and relocated to the more artistically experimental and exciting Paris, where he made contact with some of the giants of modernism, including Brancusi and Giacometti. The earliest work on view, *Hanging Sculpture* (1949), calls to mind the spidery linearity of Giacometti, as well as the mobiles of Alexander Calder and Lyn Chadwick. One of only three to have been cast from the original plaster version, it is an early example of Turnbull's interest in movement and balance, two themes which would continue throughout his career.

'I was very involved in the random movement.... I loved aquariums. Fish in tanks hanging in space and moving in shoals.... I became quite expert with a Diabolo. I was obsessed with things in a state of balance'[1]

The human head - in repose, upright or presented as a 'mask' - became an important theme in both Turnbull's paintings and sculptures in the mid-1950s. Two important bronzes, offered for sale for the first time, demonstrate this fascination; *Metamorphosis* (1955), a unique piece shown publically only once before, and *Head 1* (1955), previously shown at the Tate retrospective (1973) and Chatsworth (2013). Both were most likely created in the London studio Turnbull shared with Eduardo Paolozzi; these forms parallel Paolozzi's similarly scored and impressed bronzes but here are pushed to the limits of legibility. Speaking of this approach, Turnbull said, '*The sort of thing that interested me was - how little will suggest a head, how much load will the shape take and still read head, head as colony, head as landscape, head as mask, head as ideogram, head as sign*'.

The head motif appears in numerous paintings and drawings from the period, including two paintings from 1955, offered for sale for the first time, which come from an important series first exhibited at Turnbull's Tate retrospective. Referring specifically to this series, Turnbull commented that he had not wanted '*to transpose the head from three dimensional reality to a flat surface - but to imagine what a*

head would be if flat (squeezed between two pieces of glass like a micro-slide) and made of paint marks'.

The quality of seemingly haphazard and abbreviated mark making is also shown in the monumental *Walking Figures* (1955), never previously exhibited or offered for sale. This outstanding painting is the apotheosis of Turnbull's exploration of the walking figure, calling to mind Duchamp's masterpiece, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), here electrified by the scratchy energy of Turnbull's mark making, communicating directly onto the canvas the mechanics of human movement. Turnbull's vibrantly 'kinetic' mark making is demonstrated in numerous works on paper, including a group of newly discovered, and previously unexhibited works, found last year at the artist's former home in Camden Terrace.

Free standing and totemic female figures are another powerful source of inspiration. *Source* (1958) calls to mind timeless depictions of the 'goddess' from Cycladic to tribal art but is rendered here with even greater simplicity and economy of form. Bernard Cohen writing in 1973 [2] described *Source* as characterising '*many forms of containment and is a fetish for them all. From one side it becomes a leaf, seed pod, womb...and from the other a figure with hands, stomach and penis. ...It is what left when the female figure has been removed.*'

This kind of 'archaic modernism' is one of the defining aspects of Turnbull's work, demonstrated both in his choice of subjects and in his elemental approach to them. Antony Gormley neatly describes their enduring and compelling appeal, '*Turnbull is an extraordinary figure and a radical modernist. He recognised that sculpture is of its nature archaic and that it comes from a very atavistic region of human consciousness. There's an extraordinary tension in his work that acknowledges the artistic languages that evolved in the middle of the 20th century.*'

[1] William Turnbull, letter to the Tate Gallery 7 June 1967, in Richard Morphet, Commentary, Tate Gallery exhibition catalogue, 1973, p26

[2] Bernard Cohen, 'William Turnbull: Painter and Sculptor' *Studio International*, Vol.186, July – August 1973, p12

[3] Anthony Gormley 'New Worlds, Words, Signs'. Offer Waterman, exhibition catalogue, 2017.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, including previously unpublished excerpts from the artist's 1948 notebook and essays by Antony Gormley and Patrick Elliott, Chief Curator at the National Galleries of Scotland.

Gallery Opening Times:
Monday-Friday 10am – 6pm

FOR PRESS ENQUIRIES

Paget PR
Celia Bailey
celia@pagetpr.com | 0207 836 2703 | 07930 442 411

Notes to Editors:

Offer Waterman opened his first gallery in Chelsea, London in 1996. Now based in a five-storey Georgian building in the heart of Mayfair, the gallery has developed an international reputation for its exceptional 20th Century British art. The gallery's 2017 exhibition programme includes both contemporary artists and historical exhibitions; past projects have included Frank Auerbach, *Early Works* in 2012, David Hockney, *Early Drawings* in 2015 and Robert Rauschenberg, *Transfer Drawings* in 2016. Offer Waterman is a benefactor of numerous museums and arts organisations, most recently supporting the major David Hockney retrospective at Tate Britain.