

ROBERT MARSDEN + MARIA VAN KESTEREN

6 April to 14 May 2016

Interiors and exteriors; scale, material, form and space.

Maria van Kesteren is both an artist and a designer in a way that seems enviably Dutch. For almost fifty years she has run her own workshop in Hilversum, making objects in turned wood, and she has designed for a wider range of materials. A retrospective exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1995 showed the whole span of her work. Since 1983 she has designed glass for the Royal Leerdam factory, and worked with a factory in Czechoslovakia. She has designed ceramics since 1987, vessels and funerary urns for factories such as Koninklijke Tichelaar Makkum. Some designs have brought wood and glass together, and she made wooden bracelets shown at 'Galerie Ra' in Amsterdam in the 80s. Currently she is involved with Hermès, turning large models, 36 cm in diameter, for production series in other materials.

Van Kesteren is an exception in the field of woodturning. As she said in a lecture: 'The exterior features of the material attract a lot of people, because it is tempting to think that a spectacular piece of wood needs hardly anything added. The reality is the contrary: the state of the surface distracts from the form'. She stands out because form is what matters, far more than tools or different trees. She chooses native woods, usually lime, European elm, and sycamore, for their workable substance and not their appearance. She wants a neutral kind of wood, and currently the final surface of the object is painted with several thin layers of acrylic. In the past she has also used bleach or stain to override the woodiness.

The process of woodturning is absolutely one of subtraction, the removal of surface to reach the imagined form, a surgical and decisive business. The inner form need not echo the outside shape, and Van Kesteren has made much of the chance to make an unexpected interior. All are offering some function as a box, bowl, or dish, though many have been titled in series of a certain 'object' or 'form'. She has stretched her vision of form over decades of exploring concentric ripples and surprising angles, interior and exterior difference, the visible and the touchable. She says 'the box gives one freedom to express: to create a tension between open and closed, between in and out, between spontaneity and reserve, between openness and disguise.' I would say that noise, the soft 'clack' of a wooden lid going back on the box, is a bonus too.

The dozen works in this exhibition are of two types. Both groups are tactile and mysterious, apparently simple, hiding their depths. There are flat weighty bowls, in grey, black or silver, and also box forms, cylindrical or rippled. Perhaps the ripple is her specialism. Titles of series in the past have included Rising Forms, or more unusually Veiled Forms or Muffled Forms, describing the softness of particular repeating curves she has created. Van Kesteren is severe about material and passionate about form, in a sustained minimalist language, and so has much in common with Robert Marsden.

For many years Maria van Kesteren was, as well as Holland's most celebrated wood-turner, the co-director of a pioneering gallery called Galerie Kapelhuis, in Amersfoort, which closed in 1992. The exchange of ideas between British and Dutch artists and designers, explored over many years in the gallery, was a remarkable connection in the modernist/postmodern decades in the crafts. In 1988, as it happened, Robert Marsden and Maria van Kesteren shared another exhibition, in that gallery, that also included me. I have a record of all the pieces shown, the leaflet, the price lists in guilder (no euros until 2002) and some terrible colour photos I took of the exhibition.

The Kapelhuis had a few different locations in its last few years, after they lost the lease of the original chapel. This venue, still in Amersfoort, was on two floors, in a modern building. On the upper floor, a bit like a loft, we showed the work on large square plinths neatly covered in cardboard, and downstairs on grey painted trapezoid plinths that tapered in towards the floor. The plinths were mostly large and mixed the work of two of us, but rarely all three. Some of Robert's sculptures were shown singly on upright plinths, and one triple plinth held a large group of Maria's grey painted bowls.

Robert's work was made of self-coloured metal, copper, brass, or nickel-silver, and various patinations, and some had a waxed finish. Maria's wood was painted either grey or a creamy white. It was very apparent that formal clarity and essence, proper modernism, was the preoccupation of both. What my pots brought to the show was a more awkward free-form geometry, some brighter colour painted on surfaces, unsystematic linear patterns. All of us were concerned with how forms and surfaces related to each other.

Both Robert and Maria worked in series, exploring the permutations of formal interest that engaged them at the time. Robert's pieces of 1988 were part of a series *Lines and Curves*. Made in triangular section, they were serpentine forms, with titles based on geometry and structure, like *Cut Rhombic Curve* or *Tight Curves Cut Once*. They sprang and twisted, sinuously balanced arcs in space. Some, like *Black Upright Curve* can be seen on his current website¹. As the series developed into the early 1990s, the tiles got more poetic, *A Line without Recourse*, or *A Line Just Leaning Backwards*.

A series of small block structures made in brass in 1992 were like parts of a labyrinth, architectonic, with a square-section and bolted joints. They predicted the much greater scale that Marsden has engaged with, when he can, since that year. *Block Eleven* in that series is like a model of what was to come. In 1993 *Block Thirteen – A Step In The Right Direction*, is the title that celebrated the achievement of a large object/environment you could walk around and walk into, photographed in an inner city plaza.

Now Marsden and Van Kesteren are showing together again in Marsden Woo, 28 years later. Thinking back to the 1988 exhibition, Maria's more recent work does extend her vocabulary but is still of domestic scale, grey or black painted surfaces with new versions of rippling curves and perfect planes. But Robert's work is now in different territory. He is showing one large rectilinear structure that fills the front section of the gallery. It is not the largest installation he has made, but then the new Shoreditch Marsden Woo has neither the ceiling height nor the floor area of the former gallery in Clerkenwell. There, in his exhibition *Stark Reality of 2009*, he installed six or more large sheet steel sculptural forms that channelled your movements with rectilinear ducts and passages, that filled the gallery and dwarfed the height of a person. The old gallery was in itself a dramatic space, with theatrical exits into smaller rooms at either side of the back wall. This was the first time Robert's work had invoked such interaction, meandering among his forms on a grand scale. In the gallery essay for that exhibition Tanya Harrod pointed to his combination of obstinate aspiration and underpinning expertise, writing 'a Marsden sculpture is completely self-determining and sovereign while at the same time presenting us with immensely skilled artisanal work of the kind that has increasingly been stripped out of industrial labour. Tellingly he once described himself as an "abstract light engineer".'

Marsden is using this new sculpture to try out the architecture of the Shoreditch gallery, it is precisely and playfully designed to challenge the limits. *Neither Here Nor There* (a characteristically wry and word-playing title) is a single form that interlaces on itself, made to relate exactly to the available space. It has a rusted surface and the sheets of steel are bolted onto a wooden substructure, like a pre-fab. Because of the ceiling height and the width of the gallery the passages in the interlacing form are not high or wide enough to walk through, though they look inviting. Children will be tempted. Marsden has created a new game with scale, a dramatic conceit; like an elephant in the room, perhaps, but one that people will want to talk about.

Alison Britton April 2016

i <http://www.robertmarsden.net>