

Pushing the Boundaries: The Sculpture of Nick Ervinck

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Puncturing the landscape with their smooth yellow forms, Nick Ervinck's outdoor sculptures are like semi-liquid concretions that are splashed or poured into elegant configurations, at once spontaneous and monumental. Their organic shapes suggest small natural formations now writ large and made distinctly artificial with the use of bright yellow colouring. If in PRAHIARD the intertwining lines of the sculpture evoke something hard, like the skeletal remains of a worn-away seashell, in OLNETOP solid polyester resin is used to convey an explosive moment of watery impact, frozen in time. In these sculptures, a series of active tensions are brought into play: liquids versus solids; nature versus artifice; contingency versus permanence.

Ervinck's sculptural works pick up on a particularly interesting on-going dialogue about the nature of the medium itself. In Europe, modern sculpture has often been understood as an active process – deriving from the Latin term “sculpere” meaning “to carve, hew or cut”. The technique of carving, directly and indirectly with the assistance of a pointing machine, has also been regarded as a means, at once technical and metaphorical, of “revealing” what lies buried in the block of stone, wood or marble: an act of uncovering form beneath the surface and presenting inner essence or meaning, found within the pre-existent dimensions of the block and made of the same material from skin to core.

Henry Moore, one of Ervinck's avowed points of reference, was a well-known advocate of such an approach for much of his career. In his famous essay of 1937, entitled ‘The Sculptor Speaks’, he writes of the mission of the modern sculptor to strip form back to its basics: “Since the Gothic, European sculpture had become overgrown with moss, weeds – all sorts of surface excrescences which completely concealed shape”.¹ It was a popular position in the first half of the 20th century and one that stood against decoration (and the dying weight of 19th-century sculptural tradition), against the additive processes of modelling and against any unnecessary excess form. Simplicity and functionality, whether made or found, were everything to Moore and many others of his generation. Art and nature were still in dialogue but on 20th-century terms: the pebbles that he finds on the beach, all worn by the sea, thus have a direct relationship to his carved figures. They are also examples of self-generating sculptural forms, made by nature not by human hands, manifesting ‘vitality’ and evocative of larger forces beyond the artist, and into which the artist taps.

Ervinck is in an interesting position in relation to such debates. On the one hand, his work comes out of modern sculpture's preoccupation with essences, inner meaning, economic and streamlined sculptural expression and formal simplicity and, on the other, it shares the formal complexities, elaborate compositions and rhizome-like energies of late 19th-century sculpture and design. It combines decoration and functionality and collapses the interior into the exterior, with sculptures that are at once *all surface* and

all structure. This dynamic becomes apparent when he produces works that interact with architectural spaces: in the wallprint NIARGTZAG, the work *is* the building's surface, while in CIRBUATS, a project for a building complex in Ghent, a huge mass of yellow polyester engulfs the facade and encroaches onto the courtyard below.

Ervinck's work serves to remind us of the shared concerns and connections between these historically distinct sculptural approaches and of the biological and botanical imagination that across the 19th and 20th centuries (and onwards into the present) has had a huge and evolving impact on the concepts and forms of sculpture. Moore's sculpture, for example, bespeaks this impact. From the vitalist carving of the pre-1945 years to the later bronzes, we find emotional charges that were often similar. The British art writer David Sylvester reminds us of this when he uses the dichotomy of "Hard and Soft" to describe Henry Moore's later works in bronze in the 1950s and 1960s (works that have many formal similarities with some of Ervinck's large-scale outdoor pieces). He saw works like *Upright Motives* (1955–56) as showing "...violent contrasts of surface tension, with exceedingly taut, bone-hard passages moving into soft, resilient, fleshy passages, often very abruptly".² Connections abound between seemingly different approaches and works and it is in these interfaces that we find Ervinck's work. Carving, for example, has a close relationship to the *ecorche*, the flayed anatomical figure, as a means of stripping back the sculpture's "skin". In these anatomical models that were once a staple of artists' and sculptors' studios, there is a complex interplay of real and imagined surfaces and interiors: fragile skin and soft internal organs; the sculpture's hard 'shell' and the forms it harbours within, made of ivory, plaster or wax. The sculptural imagination that operates on these terms lends itself to both carving and modelling and to different kinds of anatomical, structural presentations.

Alongside this important art historical connectivity, Ervinck is also a sculptor who makes the most of new and contemporary technologies: he assembles a digital archive by cutting and pasting images he finds by surfing the internet and uses 3D printing to create his sculptural forms. "I didn't study chicken bones from my back garden like Henry Moore", he has remarked, somewhat mischievously. If for Moore's generation the found objects of the natural world provided a source of inspiration and a model of sculptural processes outside of the artist's control – stones, rocks, the spirals of shells, the gnarled forms of tree roots – for Ervinck, this kind of "automatic" sculptural production is achieved through the use of computer technologies that are able to construct objects the artist cannot make by hand. The computer is thus a crucial new tool in the contemporary sculptor's toolbox, although it is one which places the sculptor in a more distant, less directly 'hands-on' relation to the work – at one remove from its creation. In Ervinck's sculptures, the natural forms of the vegetal or mineral world are turned into unnatural hybrids, a process highlighted by the clearly artificial "foliage" in works like the "strawberry" AELBWARTS. In EMOBCOR, fake rocks and leaves set off a deformed "figure" which seems half flesh, half bone, its twisted forms far removed from the smooth biomorphism of its organic counterparts. If Ervinck draws inspiration from tree roots

and Chinese scholars' rocks, these are diverted into futuristic tangles, whose dynamic and gravity-defying volumes reveal their engagement with man-made technologies. EGNABO takes the form of a wildly leaning deconstructed "tree", all root and branch with no steadying central trunk. TSENABO is designed to hang suspended in a hospital entrance, an object inspired by natural wonder but also charged with the energy of human production values.

The use of computer technology can give Ervinck's work an immaculate, 'just arrived' look. At times his sculptural language conjures up specific natural specimens, particularly the tree-like petrified forms of coral. In the past, coral's interest to collectors and scholars lay in its ambiguous status: variously classified as mineral, plant and animal, it defied attempts to categorise and contain it.³ Connected in mythological terms with the Gorgon Medusa – the blood from her severed head turning seaweed bright red and hardened – red coral in particular was used in decorative sculptures to create uncanny hybrids of human and vegetal form. Abraham Jamnitzer's *Daphne as a Drinking Vessel* (end of the 16th century) is a striking evocation of the interplay of solidity, hollow form and liquid as well as the transformation of one state into another. Ervinck's coral-like pieces, such as YAROTOBS and YAROTUBE, point to this process of metamorphosis, and to the role of plant forms and forces in his work. Veins are like tendrils forming thickets of overgrowth around a head in AGRIEBORZ while in EITAZOR the floral patterns of wallpaper acquire their own dynamism and presence.

The vegetal motifs of *art nouveau*, alternately life-affirming and deeply disturbing in their abandon, are expressly invoked in Ervinck's streetlamp NARZTALPOKS. The interplay between the realms of the human, the animal and the botanical, pointing back to mythical transformations which threaten to overwhelm and unsettle the distinctive autonomy of the human body, also recalls the hybrid forms of *fin-de-siècle* sculpture. The plaster *Mask* of c.1897 by the Belgian symbolist Fernand Khnopff shows a winged face surrounded by a floral wreath which is beginning to encroach upon its features, apparently trapped and immobilised by its decorative "frame". Charles van der Stappen's *Secretive Sphinx* (1897) is another good example of such an approach. It combines ivory and silver alloy to create a figure wearing an armour of solidified organic forms.

European sculpture in the orbit of symbolism is often characterised by, and striking for, its use of unusual materials and for its inclusion of colour. Ervinck is drawn to vibrant combinations of blue and yellow (NIKEYSWODA, GARFINOSWODA) which disturb the cohesion of sculptural form, suggesting parts could be dismantled like anatomical models.

If NIKEYSWODA exists in a dialogue with the work of the modern British sculptor Bernard Meadows, who was a former assistant to Moore and a lifelong friend, a sculpture like Meadows' *Black Crab* (1951–52) pulls together the excessive formations of the natural world into one unified form through its use of bronze, simultaneously playing on the relationships between the hard but hollow carapace of the crab and the solidity of the resilient, if hollow bronze. Ervinck's configurations are more provisional and sketch-like, their

technical processes deliberately posing a challenge to distinctions between the real and the virtual. Ervinck also paints many of his sculptures yellow, a colour that has little relationship to either natural forms or the human body. Symbolically, yellow is linked with the sun and with the solar realm, emphasising the immaterial, weightless qualities of his work.

Ervinck's sculptures often refer to the human body with a kind of uneasy viscerality, defying gravity at the same time as they dazzle with an excess of bodily growth and form. In *SNIBURTAD*, a work inspired by the rendering of women's flesh in paintings by Rubens, soft masses burst out through the interlacings of white vein-like meshes, creating monstrous, oozing blobs arrested mid-formation. If the biomorphic sculptures of Hans Arp were to turn malignant, this is what they might look like. The forceful swellings of buds and breasts are here replaced by excessive organs, strangely deflated and flaccid as opposed to filled with life, turning into liquid or ectoplasmic emanations.

Ervinck's visions are both of the future and the past. Heads made of thickets of artery-like threads seem like futuristic techno-bodies, where internal workings have turned tough and solid like the connective wires of a robot's joints. But they also recall 17th-century anatomical diagrams, such as those of Amé Bourdon, where the peeled-back skin reveals the fan-like spreads of muscles, or the network of veins and arteries dividing and splitting like so many tributaries and rivulets: an internal landscape as alien and strange as any future corporeal vision.

Although strikingly digital in concept and execution, the virtuoso nature of Ervinck's works brings to mind the natural specimens, selected for the mystery of their apparent artistry, that awed collectors of the 'cabinets of curiosity' in the 16th and 17th centuries and onwards. Such objects were also a means of harnessing the forces of chance, which for modern sculptors provided a powerful metaphor for brooding subconscious forces at play in artistic activity, informing the thrust and swell of sculptural configurations. Ervinck too is drawn to the unpredictability of his digital processes, relishing the accidents his techniques can throw up. From thousands of digital sketches he can find one that appeals, just like the beachcomber alighting upon the one interesting stone among the many variations washed up on the sand. Moving in and between the tensions and ambiguities of bodily and natural forms, Ervinck's sculptures expand and challenge what sculpture should be and what it should become.

1. Henry Moore, 'The Sculptor Speaks' (1937), in Philip James (ed.), *Henry Moore on Sculpture*, London: Macdonald, 1966, p. 64.
2. David Sylvester, 'Hard and Soft' (1968), in Jon Wood *et al*, *Modern Sculpture Reader*, Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2007, p. 41.
3. See Marion Endt-Jones (ed.), *Coral: Something Rich and Strange*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013.