

A Different Top Nine: *Nine-hundred Words on Nine Favourite Artworks*

by Kathryn Allan



Hand II, pencil on paper, 1949

Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975)

Photo: K.Allan, The Hepworth Wakefield, 2023

In the Hepworth Wakefield – that northern chapel of sculpture, roof skyward in three-dimensional praise, in praise of three dimensions – is a little drawing of a left hand, the graphite sweep of its crease a palm's road. *Where will this creative life take me if I hold out my makings to the world?* it asks. A pencil's palmistry: Yorkshire-London-Italy-Cornwall-Greece-New York. I shall hold out my stone and alabaster, my wood and marble, my bronze and slate. I shall hold out these materials in this little pulp image, my desideratum in dermatology, Yorkshire and back again.



Next I and II, mixed media, 1990s

Roger Cecil (1942-2015)

Photo: K.Allan, Y Gaer, 2021

'I hope the books inspire you and your work.' They do, they will: his strata – paint, plaster, ink, blacking, tape, as though Tàpies has read his pages – are, through Welsh glass, a hand held across time. Cecil poured his quiet self of that quiet Abertillery street onto – *into* – his surfaces. Tar-black, earth-red, yellows and blues vibrant in their primacy, clues scratched, symbols suspended in prismatic layers, the richness of his edge – don't miss his visual verges. Of the 100 copies made, I purchase number 37: a prime, unique in its reproduction. His books will inspire me – now, always.



Flowers, oil on canvas, c.1962

Joan Eardley (1921-1963)

Photo: K.Allan, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 2021

The year after you paint this work, you will be dead.

In Scotland's National Gallery of Modern Art, there hangs a little oil painting that I think is a most understated expression of friendship: a shrubby bouquet of flowers, gathered hastily, painted quicker. Your friends brought flowers to your studio when you couldn't pick your own, and – inside – you turned petal into paint, caught, in spite of your illness, flora in your characteristic facture. And the irony: you were painting the dying – the sagging chrysanthemum momentary in its bright-burning gold, the blush of the downcast rose soon to be haw.

Portrait of a Prisoner of War, 1943

Terry Frost (1915-2003)

Photo: K.Allan, The Royal Welsh Regimental Museum, 2021

Does the curve of the helix foretell of his semicircles?

One must crane one's neck to see the humble portrait in The Royal Welsh Regimental Museum in Brecon. And on doing so another, slightly strained, neck is found: that of Corporal David Glyndwr James of 1st Battalion The Welsh Regiment. The artist? Terry Frost – that 20th century giant of joyous, chromatic abstraction. Both were POWs in Stalag 383 in Bavaria when Frost made this work in 1943. And it was in captivity that Frost met artist Adrian Heath, setting him on his path to becoming an artist. Portraiture as genesis.





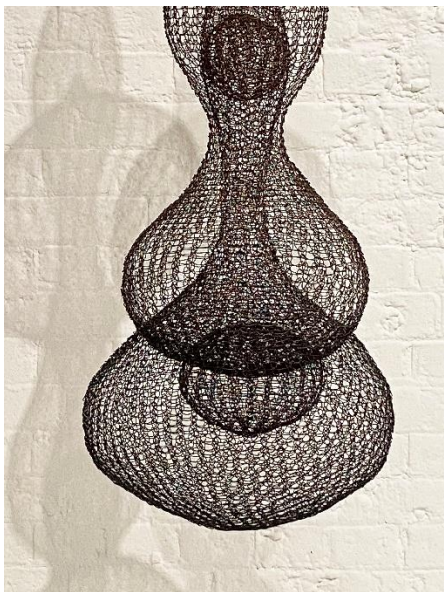
Bowl, porcelain, 1990

Lucie Rie (1902-1995)

Photo: K.Allan, MIMA, 2023

The retrospective art object is potent, carrier of much for its maker. It is at once full stop on a creative life (*Here I end*) and exclamation mark (*What a life!*) I think of it, too, as a question mark: *Were you listening? What did I say?*

Rie's little pink *Bowl* is all of these. Made when she was 88, it is one of her last works: a beautiful finality marking the end of her elegant, haptic offerings, surface-rich, eye and hand – hers, ours – inseparable. But what did she say? *Materials matter! Beauty to the death! Creativity until the end!*



Untitled (detail), S.155, Hanging Seven-Lobed, Multilayered Interlocking Continuous Form with a Sphere Suspended in the Top and Fifth Lobes, wire, c.1958

Ruth Asawa (1926-2013)

Photo: K.Allan, Modern Art Oxford, 2022

I have a friend who says galleries are cathedrals. She's right.

It was a solitary ascent, eyes skyward, from the dark of Modern Art Oxford's ground floor to its astral first floor gallery. It was alone that I found myself able to worship in Asawa's space, save for a seated attendant in a faraway corner. My eyes filled with Asawa's lobes – hers wire, mine water – and in that moment of shared prayer, I turned away

from the attendant, worried that he would be able to see through me to my internal spheres, those inside suspensions we hide with our multilayers.



***Buon*, paint and collage on board, c.1960**

Alberto Burri (1915-1995)

Photo: K.Allan, Kettle's Yard, 2019

Alberto Burri met Sandra Blow in 1947, thus by the time he made *Buon* he had known her. It is the temporal connection that I love here: that the material of one artist's work can hold other artists within it, the *poly* of Burri's

polymaterialism containing more than his mixed media. My encounter with *Buon* at Kettle's Yard is hence a meeting with them both – Burri and Blow – and in this tiny work I find all that I love about her: abstraction and experiment, art made from fragments, delight in surface and texture, painterly gesture, material abandon. Such material abandon!



***Figure Lying on its Side, Version III*, bronze, 1957**

Kenneth Armitage (1915-1995)

Photo: K.Allan, Ferens Art Gallery, 2021

It's 2021 and I'm in need of refuge – somewhere I can for a few minutes rest, and rest the weight of my professional responsibilities, which are heavy and far-removed from painting and sculpture. I hide in a gallery, and in Kenneth Armitage's *Figure Lying on its Side* I find a bronze cushion. I

feel as sideways as this metal human, discovering in her pandemic-tired pose an empathetic gesture: *I've been floored by this too*, she says. Art is compassionate. I rest for a moment, try to inhale as much as her inflated belly holds air. *You will stand upright again*.

***The Jubilee Hat*, oil on canvas, 1887**

Frank Wright Bourdillon (1851-1924)

<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-jubilee-hat-13978> at Penlee House Gallery & Museum

The Bourdillon comes last: it is the favourite of my favourites. It is a child and adult: it is a nephew and his aunt. It is the young enrapt by the making of older hands: it is a nephew and his aunt. It is the overlapping of two fleeting lives on this spinning planet: it is him and me. He'll grow taller than me, and a day shall come – and in the blink of a few year's crossover it will not be long – when I look up at him.

This painting holds and it aches, suspends time and propels it.