

# SCULPTURE SALON

Christopher Hanrahan, Matt Hinkley,  
Peter Robinson, Todd Robinson, Koji Ryui  
Curated by James Gatt

16 January - 3 February, 2018

## Building buildings

*Sculpture Salon* takes its title, in part, from the Salon exhibitions of the 19th Century. The immediate, enduring image of entire walls covered en-masse by paintings has come to characterise the Salon's identity. Barely a few centimetres of space between them, elaborately framed paintings were arranged in a manner that forced the viewer to consider the relationships between works; academic, and stylistic relationships, but perhaps also something less obvious, something more. The deeper social implications here are political; the format of the Salon hang isn't simply building exhibitions, it's building culture. In a very real way, the exhibition *is* a building. A building, architect Juhani Pallasmaa defines, "initiates, directs and organises behaviour and movement. A building is not an end in itself; it frames, articulates, structures, gives significance, relates, separates and unites, facilitates and prohibits."<sup>1</sup> It's an interesting time in art history for thinking about the relationship between art and architecture, and more specifically, our experience of the spaces rendered as exhibitions. Though the terms 'curate' and 'architectural' were not used at the time to describe the manifestations or experiences of Salon exhibitions, they are useful in considering the model, and its prevailing utility, retrospectively. *Sculpture Salon* considers the legacy of the salon-style hang within the lexicons of two major art-historical successors: the White Cube and Contemporary Art (specifically, sculpture). The five artists included from Australia and New Zealand engage practices that address, explicitly or implicitly, contemporary sculpture paradigms, presenting works in *Sculpture Salon* that express contingent, fluid relationships manifest in their collusions with each other, the architecture and its occupants.

At first glance, *Sculpture Salon* appears the antithesis of the traditional Salon exhibition. Artworks dotted sparingly in near-empty space is hardly reminiscent of walls crowded with paintings. And yet, if we consider both exhibition models architecturally, the functions bestowed upon artworks collectively bear striking resemblance. Presupposing that the dense arrangements of paintings in the Salon hangs acted as walls in and of themselves, and that this careful orchestration (less 'curating' than 'decorating') becomes the building, we see the ways exhibition modes act to impact spatial dialogues, and influence our reception of artworks. The most obvious of architectural references in *Sculpture Salon* is **Peter Robinson's** large felt grid, aptly titled *Wall Divider (3x3)*. The striking magenta construct hangs delicately from the ceiling, its form enacting that of a wall, though behaving in quite the opposite way materially. The suggestion of a planar divider changes the architecture of the room temporarily. **Robinson's** work offers a pivotal introduction to the exhibition, acting paradoxically as an imposition that must be circumnavigated despite its skeletal, flimsy form. It is this very form - almost entirely hollow, with voids greater in volume than that of their linear felt articulations - which offers the first and most distinctive sight line through the exhibition. Similarly, the four other sculptures in *Sculpture Salon* lay bare the airy volume of the gallery space, revealing clear intersections between artworks that perform equally significant roles in the shaping and understanding of the exhibition, and the very nature of the artworks themselves. Like the Salon, *Sculpture Salon's* exhibition layout works against granting singularity to the artworks, directing attention to their convergences with each other. Pallasmaa offers this insight:

"Modern architectural theory and critique have a strong tendency to regard space as an immaterial object delineated by material surfaces, instead of understanding space in terms of dynamic interactions and interrelations."<sup>2</sup>

The space in *Sculpture Salon* is unified. Not simply because it bears a single exhibition title or theme, but because the works that occupy it act collaboratively. The boundaries between works blur, dissolving progressively between each other. Independent zones for individual artworks are eschewed. Just as paintings in the Salon were arranged side-by-side-by-side, the sculptures in *Sculpture Salon* are arranged in orchestrated proximities, offering sight lines that superimpose multiple works. The thinness of the sculptures that appears as a thread (pun intended) throughout the exhibition leads our attention progressively away from material to the void to the next artwork. Indeed there is much more empty space than material. **Christopher Hanrahan's** *Standard Model (heavy sleeper)* presents this contrast most evidently. The wider body of works that were exhibited alongside it in 2013 at Sarah Cottier Gallery, referenced the personal architecture of furniture, offering skeletal brass forms, or drawings in space, that were suggestive of domestic objects, revoked of their functional duties; a chair that could not be sat upon, or a screen that offered no modesty. Slight in their material makeup, the sculptures reveal the temptation to seek representation, to complete the forms, 'colouring between the lines' until empty spaces are visualised, materialised. Object and space co-exist inseparably, just as in minimalist artist Fred Sandback's delicate yarn formations. Sandback speaks perceptively about this:

"Early on, though, I left the model of such discrete sculptural volumes for a sculpture which became less of a thing-in-itself, more of a diffuse interface between the myself, my environment and others peopling that environment built of thin lines that left enough room to move through and around. Still sculpture, though less dense, with an ambivalence between exterior and interior. A drawing that is habitable."<sup>3</sup>

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From many vantage points in the exhibition, the sculptures appear flattened, like a drawing, simultaneously revealing and disrupting each others' forms, visually converging and parting as the viewer moves through the space. If indeed *Sculpture Salon* is a drawing, or series of drawings, in space, then it is certainly an abstract one. Unlike the figurative content of paintings in 19th century Salon exhibitions, the sculptures in *Sculpture Salon* are entirely abstract; exercises in formal nuance. A basic, if not fundamental function of art comes to mind: the rendering of space as flat image and vice-versa. The painter contemplates the vastness of a landscape and depicts it on a surface that is incomparably flat. The sculptor imagines or sketches a form before translating it, manifesting it three dimensionally. The nexus of image and space, of 2D and 3D, is one Art is (and we are) always navigating. Pallasmaa also writes of this calibration between image and spatial awareness:

“Basic architectural experiences have a verb form rather than being nouns... of the act of entering, and not simply the visual design of the door; of looking in or out through a window, rather than the window itself as a material object; or of occupying the sphere of warmth, rather than the fireplace as an object of visual design.”<sup>4</sup>

After all, what is an exhibition essentially, if not an architectural experience?

In identifying with the exhibition as an architectural experience, the works in *Sculpture Salon* draw our attention to the significant, intangible force at play: gravity. The downward pressure is felt and expressed lucidly by the precarious or imprecise forms of all of the sculptures. **Koji Ryui's** two-part sculpture, *Mutual Obligation (Class Act)*, is very near human in scale, and presents a balancing act synonymous with the body's centre of gravity. The pole acts in a seemingly defying manner to support the timber component atop, which is twice its weight and many times wider. The cubic form is pinned gently against the wall by the pressure of the diagonal pole support. What's more, the timber surface of the pole has been chipped away, further compromising its structural integrity. **Hanrahan's** *Standard Model (heavy sleeper)* leans against the wall also, waiting there. The simple, linear brass form sags at the top edge, evading the perfect rectangle. It almost mimics the form of a single void in **Peter Robinson's** felt grid, which comprises a series of horizontal droops complying with the directional pull of four vertical lines fallen to the floor. Here we see the dichotomy between metal and felt reconciled. The wire in **Matt Hinkley's** *Untitled* appears to illustrate the pigmented sphere's orbital descent from the ceiling to its position mid-air. **Todd Robinson's** work gives a figurative quality to an otherwise inanimate length of timber that seems to have buckled (or be buckling) under unseen pressure. It is a surreal image that affords timber the malleable properties of some other material such as aluminium or paper. Closely positioned to **Ryui's, Robinson's** smaller sculpture, though also made of timber, presents opposing functions and different possibilities of the material. All of the sculptures are supported by a constant and precise balancing of form, weight, materiality, positioning. Pallasmaa speaks of the great importance of gravity in architecture:

“The sense of gravity is the essence of all architectonic structures, and great architecture makes us aware of gravity and earth. Architecture strengthens the experience of the vertical dimension of the world. At the same time as making us aware of the depth of the earth, it makes us dream of levitation and flight.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps like great architecture, great sculpture also makes us aware of gravity.

Although aesthetically reductive, the sculptures in *Sculpture Salon* are deceptive in their seeming likeness to Minimalism, instead they suggest something other. In the words of **Peter Robinson**, they are “opposed to monumentality.” Imperfect (rudimentary, even) geometries replace the precision of Minimalist sculpture. Presumably intractable materials and forms droop, sag, buckle. The corroding corners of **Hanrahan's** brass sculpture celebrate impermanence, and accept the weathering of time - time itself inextricably linked to experiences and measurements of space. Adverse to traditional rubrics of late modernism, such as the precision of machine fabrication and negating of the artist's hand, there is evidence in *Sculpture Salon* of labour, craft; the felt comprising **Peter Robinson's** grid; the crude welding apparent in the joins of **Hanrahan's** sculpture; the chipped-away surface of the timber pole in **Ryui's** *Mutual Obligation (Class Act)*. It might even be said that the activity or responsiveness (real or fictional) of the sculptures in *Sculpture Salon* makes them appear anthropomorphic. Such is certainly the case in **Todd Robinson's** *Wringing Core (I am letting go completely)*, which is suggestive of a bent knee or elbow. The title for **Robinson's** work, “letting go,” and also Hanrahan's “heavy sleeper,” references the act of relinquishing control and an acceptance of fallibility. Pallasmaa goes as far as suggesting that there is a curious humanity in all artworks, “A work of art functions as another person, with whom one unconsciously converses.”<sup>6</sup> **Peter Robinson** comments that he enjoys working with felt for its insulating properties. To insulate is to protect from loss (of heat or sound). It's a profound sentiment pointing to both his poetic use of materials, and the omnipresence of invisible, spatial phenomena such as heat and sound. Similarly, **Todd Robinson**, a former fashion designer, approaches sculpting with an acute sense of the body and of the formal properties of cloth; how it folds, drapes, absorbs, dries, its memory, woven thread makeup, and so on. Henry Moore illuminates the practice of sculpting as bodily identification:

“This is what the sculptor must do. He must strive continually to think of, and use, form in its full spatial completeness... he identifies himself with with its centre of gravity, its mass, its weight; he realises its volume, and the space that the shape displaces in the air.”<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Donald Judd or Fred Sandback's sculptural manifestations, the sculptures in *Sculpture Salon* have undeniable personality ('sculpturnality', perhaps?). Their curious forms evoke a range of emotional possibilities; are they anxious or excited? Hopeful or pathetic? Confident or cautious? Certainly, part of their charm is not knowing exactly. We want to get to know these reticent forms. Singularly, they present obvious art-historical allusions; one might recall the works of Robert Morris, Josef Beuys, Carl Andre or Donald Judd. But the self-reflexive monumentality evident in the work of such predecessors, and its distinction

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as art object separate from, or at least different to, the body's experience of architecture, seems to have been dispensed with in *Sculpture Salon*. Instead, the sculptures act far more gently and fluidly to reference their forms, origins, production, and the space around them. Liberated of immovability, or from imposing fixtures or supports, the light-weight works in *Sculpture Salon* co-exist with their architectural environment, rather than being dependent upon it. The infrastructure, or geography, of the exhibition is defined not by walls, but rather the artworks and positioning of these artworks themselves. It is possible to imagine many reconfigurations of *Sculpture Salon*. The sculptures are easily manoeuvred in light of their manageable weights and sizes (Koji Ryui and Peter Robinson's more sizeable sculptures are collapsible), and express their great volumetric reach through form, articulating space rather than dictating it. These placements are light-handed, appearing somewhat incidental. **Peter Robinson's** solo exhibition at Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland in early 2017 titled *After Party* created a very similar feeling. **Robinson's** characteristic arrangement (more like a sculptural take-over) transformed the gallery space into a precarious environment. The architecture had succumbed, forcibly though whimsically, to **Robinson's** precise mess. The title of the exhibition gave the sense that the arrangement of its constituent parts was possibly the result of curious preceding events, the nature of which we may only speculate. *Sculpture Salon* poses a similar environment - one that is active, and remembers. In his artworks and writings that commenced in the 1960s, Lee Ufan argued that "the core problem of modernity was an inequality between subject and object" and began working towards theories that suggested "an aesthetic encounter capable of disrupting the modernist impulse to reduce the material world to manipulable objects."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the sculptures in *Sculpture Salon* are far less obedient, far less finite. It is our "encounter" *with* them and their "encounters" *with* each other, rather than spectacle of them or each other, that destabilises, displaces, and thus changes what we think we know about these things. It is the intersections, the shared space, that acts to renew them. In concert with one another, like an orchestra, the sculptures in *Sculpture Salon* are greater than the sum of their parts; their architectural attributes providing the acoustics of spatial relationships that we encounter. Pallasmaa (again):

"A building is encountered; it is approached, confronted, related to one's body, moved through, utilised as a condition for other things."<sup>9</sup>

Also working in Japan in the 1960s and 70s, as Ufan did, Jiro Takamatsu made artworks that aimed to reconcile the distinction between art and life. His net sculptures and famous shadow paintings especially, present significant art-historical links to many of the ideas in *Sculpture Salon*. Speaking directly to the notion that life itself is spent living in architecture, Takamatsu's practice posits the great significance of encounters with space, and the relationships forged within it ("condition for other things"); material and immaterial.

In his artistic manifesto in 1918, German architect Bruno Taut declared that "[In the future] there will be no boundaries between the crafts, sculpture, and painting, all will be one: Architecture."<sup>10</sup> His sentiment is tied to that of many architectural historians and theorists, such as Matthew Walker who believes "To some extent, architecture might be seen as a master discipline; as one art form that all the others have to comply to."<sup>11</sup> While it is undeniable that architecture provides the envelope, it is the art objects and their exhibition potentials that have the power to transform a building into place. Considering their inherently spatial properties, and the collaboration of these properties, the sculptures in *Sculpture Salon* approach a simultaneously mimetic and transformative relationship with the space they occupy; space layered by its function as exhibition, its role as gallery, and its architectural duty as building. In the greatest sense of a building - as space that facilitates and organises, conducts behaviours and builds culture - *Sculpture Salon* might perhaps, like the artworks included, be read not simply in singularity as an exhibition, but also as an architecture; as a building unto itself.

1 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses', Wiley, 2014, p 68.

2 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses', Wiley, 2014, p 68.

3 Roman Kossak, and Philip Ording, 'Simplicity: Ideals of Practice in Mathematics and the Arts', Springer International Publishing, 2017, p 43.

4 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses', Wiley, 2014, p 68.

5 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses', Wiley, 2014, p 72.

6 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses', Wiley, 2014, p 69.

7 Henry Moore, 'The Sculptor Speaks', in Philip James (ed), Henry Moore on Sculpture, MacDonald (London), 1966, p 62.

8 Paul Roquet, (2007/9), 'Reencountering Lee Ufan', Octopus: A Visual Studies Journal, 3, pp85-86.

9 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses', Wiley, 2014, p 68.

10 Source of original German text: Bruno Taut, Ein Architektur Programm, Berlin: Arbeitsrat für Kunst, 1919.

11 Matthew Walker, 'Space: Approaches to Architecture', Audio blog post, University of Oxford, 2014.

Peter Robinson appears courtesy of Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland.

Todd Robinson appears courtesy of Galerie pompom, Sydney.

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