



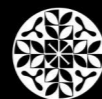
Front:
ROBERT HAGUE
What father knew, 2018, (detail)
Stainless steel, paint, courtesy of the artist

Back:
ROBERT HAGUE
What father knew, 2018,
fibreglass resin, courtesy of the artist

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30.03 – 12.05

Casula Powerhouse
Arts Centre

Anatomies

“*Anatomies* surveys Hague’s key works since 2013 and charts the emergence of the human form, as well as a progression toward tactile surfaces, the sculptures now commonly featuring welded lines, divots and scratches.”

Robert Hague

ANATOMIES: MATERIALS AND METAPHORS

For more than a decade Robert Hague eliminated the human figure in his work. Either in literal form, or even in an abstracted suggestion, Hague's sculpture stuck close to the minimalist approach of his two main influences, the sculptors Sir Anthony Caro in the UK, and the American David Smith. Hague's own sculptures were formally commanding works, geometric and large in scale, but their meanings were more opaque, aesthetically exacting but also inscrutable.

Anatomies surveys Hague's key works since 2013 and charts the emergence of the human form, as well as a progression toward tactile surfaces, the sculptures now commonly featuring welded lines, divots and scratches. But along with this evolution in form, the meaning of Hague's art has also become more complex: the artist is interested in the themes of trauma and breaks – social, cultural and artistic – and thus the work in this exhibition is perhaps not only more explicable, but along with a more conceptual approach, the artist has let in a host of potential readings.

Hague was born in 1967 in Rotorua in New Zealand. His father had a great passion for art but chose instead the safer path of regular employment rather than becoming an artist. Hague's education coincided with the resurgence of Maori culture and at school the future artist learned the basics of Maori language, and was acutely aware of the country's postcolonial history and attendant cultural conflicts. Immigrating to Australia in the 1980s, Hague was immediately struck by the denial of Indigenous culture here. The experience of his family, and education, in New Zealand, and then his life in a new country, have proven to be pivotal moments for the development of Hague's worldview.

The themes in Hague's work are evident in one of the key pieces in the show, *What Father Knew*, in two iterations, one in stainless steel [2018], the other in fiberglass resin [2019]. In classical mythology, Icarus flew skywards, only to have his artificial wings melt as he flew closer to the Sun, and then to plunge to his death. One might consider the moral of the story to be about pride and hubris, but it might also be considered a story of parental neglect. In the steel sculpture's suggestion of broken wings, and the torso spinning above it in space, a relationship between father and son is caught in a perpetual moment of falling. Formally, there's a play between abstraction and figuration, as if the work captures a key moment in Hague's evolution as an artist.

Earlier work attests to this interest in an obscured figuration. Major pieces such as *The Messenger* [2015] and the *Mona Lisa Curse* series [2014-19] offer up a ghostly presence, where we get the sense of severed heads and skulls beneath what appears to be soft fabric, but which is of course Carrara marble and steel. Hague's sculptures reference executions and dismemberment, and the contradictions of a society obsessed by the visual effects of social media, but which at the same time is literally looking away from the horrors of the world. Hague's approach is to create a material metaphor, where the depicted thing is as much an understanding on the part of the viewer as any specific technique or subject used by the artist.

Hague's ongoing collaboration with artist Damien Shen continues these themes and approaches. In 2016 when Hague won the Blake Prize residency at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Shen won that year's emerging artist award, and meeting at the opening of the prize they soon found they had much in common, from a shared artistic sensibility to similar family dynamics, as well as an interest in social justice.

Where We Meet [2019] is a major of body of work, across a variety of media including sculpture, tintype photography, video, sound and installation. The uniting interest is investigating what constitutes identity, from Hague's Anglo-Scottish-Irish background to Shen's Ngarrindjeri and Chinese heritage, by applying a range of methods of recording and depicting similarities and differences of the artist's bodies. This includes X-ray images, DNA testing, casts of both artist's heads and other examples of what has been historically used to categorise racial difference. The shadow of a racially divisive application of science hangs over the work, both in the recording methodology, but also in the faux-museum presentation. The overwhelming sensation of *Where We Meet* is a kind of dread, of when an apparently objective view renders not identity, but the basic materials of bodies, that can be categorized and then discarded as needed. Its historical resonance is acute.

Hague's series of lithographs are a reminder of the artist's far ranging technical abilities, as well as a keen interest in art, both as a contemporary social grouping, but also as a contested history. The plates' decorative elements echo various 19th century English ceramics decoration featuring faux Oriental scenes, with tree and leaf patterns. Hague includes in each plate a mixture of historical and contemporary art references, from artists Frederick McCubbin, Albert Namatjira, and Tom Roberts, to minimalist sculptures, Ned Kelly, Pussy Riot and Australian-Chinese artist Guo Jian. The works are satirical assemblages of free association, and meaningful connections, in what amounts to a broken history glued back together using the Japanese *kintsukuroi* technique [literally, golden repair]. That this repair is an illustrative illusion, albeit one using gilt, once more replays the idea of the object as metaphor.

The artist is also unafraid to depict himself in his own work. Hague's self-portrait, an oil on linen painting, refers to Nathaniel Dance's portrait of Captain James Cook. Where the famed navigator is equally reviled and celebrated, depending on which culture you adhere to, Hague has planted himself in the middle of the picture, pointing to a map marked MINE and YOURS. Around his neck is an emergency life jacket. Hague takes on the roles of imperial explorer, immigrant artist and stateless refugee.

The themes of Hague's recent work come together in this image – an imperfect, partly broken but valiantly repaired image, one that is both commanding of your attention but also ambiguous. Here is the artist and his image. Make of it what you will.

DR. ANDREW FROST

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