Close encounters of the three-dimensional kind:

an experiential biography of Michael Lyons' *Green Bronze IV* (1980)



Judith LeGrove (2010)

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Hesitating

Behind the poor crack at tabloid-titling lies a statement of intent. This is an object biography in the form of an encounter, or more precisely, a series of encounters: viewer encounters sculpture, viewer encounters sculptor, sculptor re-encounters (his own) sculpture. In this way, an attempt is made to navigate a methodological minefield, a landscape laid waste by the ever-replicating genre of object biography. Since Barthes, object-viewing is no longer an innocent pastime. Its predicament is compounded by Kopytoff's declaring of context – cultural, material, economic – to be intrinsic but variable; overlooked at one's peril. From Daston we are exhorted to 'listen' to the object, from Alberti (and the growing literature of museum studies) we are encouraged to study *people*: those responsible for the object's gathering, manipulation, presentation and interpretation within a collection.[1] Transfixed between Scylla and Charybdis (people/object – object/people?), the call for accountability becomes deafening. Whom do we follow in approaching our object? What are our motives? Is it possible even to hear the object's voice amid the surrounding clamour?

In a sense, nothing and everything is possible. Acknowledging the impossibility of regaining the 'innocent' eye, other routes may be found: ways of retrieving layers of meaning closest to the object, of presenting them in ways analogous to its methods of creation, of recovering voices and experiences dulled by the burden of theory. Recourse to the sculptor is a vital, if fortuitous link in this process. But, equally, the telling of these encounters may be shaped by their content: the acts of listening, watching, touching and thinking. Each is as vital to the creation of the object as to our experience and understanding of it. Through a multisensory approach – analogous to the multiple cameras of a film studio – we may both encounter the object in its three dimensions and reflect on its genesis. The technique of collage is evoked at all levels: materially, in the sculpture's origins in paper collage; creatively, in the intermeshing of Lyons' drawings, sculpture and poetry; poetically, in its melding of abstract form and subject matter.

Listening

Listening acutely, we encounter *Green Bronze IV* in its current habitat: the storeroom of the Leeds City Art Gallery. Carefully located amongst the other small, sculptural objects, it is lifted by gloved hands and placed reverentially on a clear surface for observation. Here the 'museum effect' is at its most potent: the object is isolated, offered up for contemplation.[2] But wait,

[1] Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91; Lorraine Daston, 'Speechless', in Daston (ed.), *Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 9–24; Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, 'Objects and the Museum', *Isis* 96/4 (2005), 559–71.
[2] Svetlana Alpers, 'The Museum as a Way of Seeing', in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 27.

other voices are audible. We might just pick out those accountable for the object's current presentation, its selector (a former Henry Moore Institute director), curator (responsible for inclusion in gallery displays), and unknown carers (dusting, monitoring, preserving). These and others condition how we encounter, experience and react to work within its display context; each contribute to the 'museum *affect*'.[3]

Green Bronze IV is small and unsteady, requiring careful placing to find its natural equilibrium. Its voice seems quieter here than among the other small sculptures ranged, shelf by shelf, in the artist's modelling studio. Does it miss its companions, *Green Bronzes I–III*? 'Missing' is of course inappropriate: unduly emotive and anthropomorphic. But we might reasonably ask what is missing – what do *we* miss? – by not viewing in the site of creation, among works produced contemporaneously. Turning to the work's creator, we again listen acutely. The context is not auspicious: Lyons, recuperating from serious illness, is also subdued, although eager to talk.[4] We strain to sieve the artist's words from the collage of background noise.



left: Michael Lyons, *Green Bronze IV* (1980), photographed in the store of Leeds City Art Gallery, 28 May 2010
right: acquisition label

[3] For Samuel Alberti's knowing pun on Alpers' 'museum effect', see Alberti, 'The Museum Affect: Visiting Collections of Anatomy and Natural History', in Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman (eds), *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-century Sites and Experiences* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 371–403.

[4] The interviews that form the basis of this essay took place in York District Hospital, May–June 2010.



Michael Lyons in his modelling studio

Watching

> "I've started, so I'll finish" I once joked – I have no option.
> Aboard the Carousel which will not stop, the music raucous
> and the pace monotonous. Cymbals clash and drums being to roll.[5]

In the modelling studio, tools are laid out, waiting: knife, scalpel, candle, wax. The tables are littered with fragments of work or ideas-in-progress. Everywhere are signs of activity. Shelves are neatly lined with small bronzes, desks with further waxes, scale models and cardboard constructions, a defunct refrigerator hoards further uncast waxes. The space is familiar from hours spent documenting the small sculptures, visits to see new work, or simply passing through to the larger sculpture studio beyond. If not inhospitable, it is a sobering place: the biting cold an insidious reminder of the river's proximity.

But of course the studio is always encountered 'stilled', never in action. Asking Lyons about the process of creation, the physical aspect so rarely witnessed, unexpectedly he begins by analogy:

> the maquettes are like improvisations: that way of just heating up a knife – you
> can either do it by using a soldering iron, or as I do by heating the knife – but it is

[5] These, and the following quotations are from Lyons' poem *The Carousel* (1996), first published in Tim Sharp (ed.), *Poetic Art* (Peterborough: Arrival Press, 1997).

> very improvisational, like music … like jazz in particular. So you can put it together and then you can knock it down and you can re-put it together[6]

If we sense a rhythm to the process, this is reinforced as Lyons expands. The spontaneity of creation is realised through its performative aspect: the nimbleness of the sculptor manipulating materials, just as the musician might manipulate rhythm, harmony, timbre in response to improvisational stimulus. Early on when discussing *Green Bronze IV*, Lyons commented, 'Hands and eye coordination are very important in these small works and the physical stance of the body.'[7] The context, of course, was Lyons' present condition – prompting reflection on the physical demands of sculpture.

> sometimes I sit down to make those maquettes, but often I stand on the hard floor for a long period of time … those sculptures rely very much on sureness of touch.[8]

In the modelling studio, the table and plinths are high, for working standing. Imagining the sculptor at work, circling the model, rearranging, rebalancing, brings to mind recent calligraphic drawings from the artist's series of China-inspired works. In these, drawn on the flat, there is also a palpable sense of rhythm, movement, energy: of ideas fluidly emerging and taking form.



Michael Lyons, *Drawing,* Chinese ink on Xuan paper (2009)

[6] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).
[7] Lyons, mobile phone text (5 May 2010).
[8] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).

We talk, too, about scale in the small sculptures, the relationship between hand, eye and body. *Green Bronze IV* relates to the hand in its proportions – some six inches in height and span – but, equally, Lyons often produces sculpture on a monumental scale. From an exhibition by Bjørn Nørgaard in Copenhagen, I remembered Nørgaard's comment that sculpture is always experienced in physical terms – thinking not only with the brain, but also with the entire body.[9] Did Lyons agree?

> Yes … especially where sculptures are bigger you appreciate them with the whole body. And quite interestingly in the Henry Moore catalogue it talks about how – particularly at a certain stage – all Moore sculptures seem to be breathing; they relate to the way the body goes up and down.[10] But even those little sculptures relate to the body, particularly to the hand. David Smith didn't like people touching – he said sculptures weren't for touching, they were for looking at. He said you touch with the eyes. I think if people like to touch [the small sculptures] and feel them, that's OK – that's quite a good thing. So it's not just through the eyes, it's through the whole body, and different parts of the body, that you begin to appreciate them.[11]

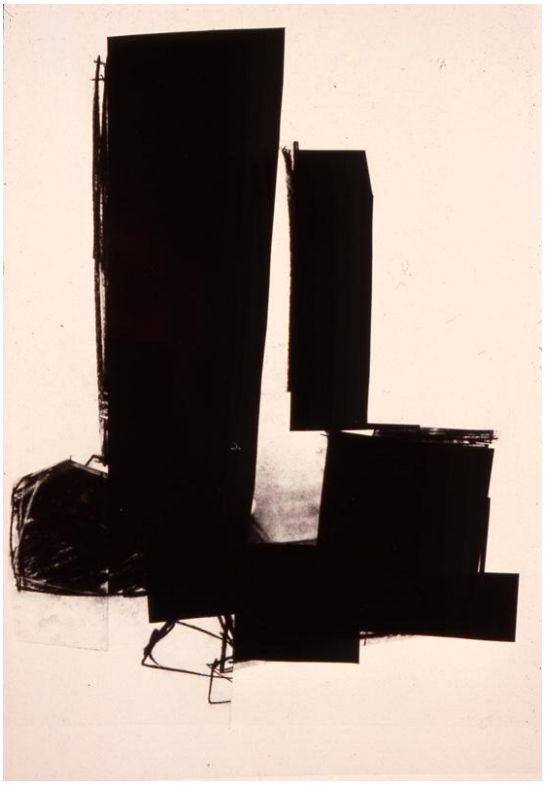
Lyons' comments open many lines of thought. In particular, we shall return to the idea of sculptures breathing or coming to life: not in the sense of Pygmalion, rather in the sense of creative seeds waiting for the right conditions to germinate. For the time being, though, we continue to watch the physical process more closely, to study the sculptor at work with his materials.

Touching

> Burn, cut deeper into this hidden psyche, walk from room
> to cavernous room, but do not lose the thread that guides you.[12]

Lyons' poetry realises in another dimension the source, or essence, of his drawings and sculpture. The thread guiding them is continuous, the arts, 'separate yet intertwined'.[13] But the poetry's imagery is physical too: a cacophonous collage of pictures from experience, history, imagination. Memories of industrial Bilston collide with Dante, idols from distant lands with the lions of Dudley Zoo. Within the separate media of Lyons' art, the process of cutting is central: a physical, uniting strand. The strong black-on-white outlines of paper collages relate to the silhouettes of the cut steel sculptures, to the cardboard constructions, and again to the early small sculptures cut from sheet wax.

[9] Bjørn Nørgaard, 'Re-modelling the world', exhibition brochure for Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen (2010), [3].
[10] 'Henry Moore', catalogue (ed. Chris Stephens) produced to accompany the exhibition at Tate Britain, 24 February–8 August 2010.
[11] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).
[12] Lyons, *The Carousel* (see footnote 4).
[13] Lyons, *The Carousel*.



Michael Lyons, *Collage,* collage and charcoal on paper (1981)

When Lyons began to make the small sculptures in the early 1980s it was as a reaction to scale and materials. In the large steel works, traces of the processes of cutting with the oxyacetylene torch remain in the finished sculpture; working with clay and wax it was possible to regain the 'actual hand imprint' of the creative process. Many of the early small sculptures, such as *Green Bronze IV*, are three-dimensional kindred of the paper collages: not point-to-point translations, since the activity of modelling replaces the activity of drawing. Working with wax, physical planes were juxtaposed, retaining the reliance on silhouette, but creating formal counterpoints of varying complexity. Alongside such linearity developed more malleable, organic forms: sculptures with volume, texture. The two approaches coexisted, a product of the speed at which it was possible to turn around ideas on a small scale.

The genesis of the small sculptures at this period is due to numerous factors, creative and circumstantial. As stated, around 1980 Lyons became interested in working on a smaller scale. Contemporaneously, while teaching at Manchester Polytechnic, he saw bronze cast in the department's foundry and become attracted by the process.[14] The considerable technical expertise within the foundry made it possible to fix permanently the complex assemblages, joints and narrow bridges of the waxes, freezing their liminal fragility. Lyons cast over a hundred small sculptures while at Manchester. But what of the material – bronze? Post-Moore it was for many years considered passé, although, concurrently with Lyons, Caro, Richard Rome and other younger sculptors had also begun to re-explore it. I was curious to know what associations, what attractions the metal held for Lyons.

[14] Manchester Polytechnic's foundry had become remarkably dynamic and inventive at this period, under the direction of John Nicholls.

Guardedly, Lyons begins by suggesting that bronze is 'very much softer and more feminine than steel, which is hard and masculine'. But this characterisation seems of passing interest. What does interest Lyons is the physical property of the material: its malleability, its capacity to replicate the detail of the modelled form. Lyons has made a particular study of Rodin's bronzes and is acutely aware both of their technical mastery and of their presence in the aesthetic history of the material. He alludes to this history with a deft sketch of Benvenuto Cellini, hurling furniture into the furnace to keep it blazing. The historical aspect of casting is important, but so too was the social aspect of the foundry, the communal gathering, drinking of beer, sharing of knowledge – 'you can't do it by yourself, you need people'.[15]

Closing the door on this scene, we return to contemplate the sculpture itself, its surfaces, patination. Within the corpus of Lyons' small bronzes, there are clans defined by colour: brown, green, black and unpatinated. *Green Bronze IV* is a blackish green, the colour more vivid on rougher areas and near the joints. What determined this choice? Lyons explains that some of the more verdant greens 'are got by peeing on them … a time-honoured way of getting a really deep and beautiful green'; the brown ones from ammonium sulphide, and the black ones (which wouldn't patinate properly) heated up then stippled with black boot polish.[16] The actual colour is as much by accident or trial and error; rubbing down, heating and reapplying until the right finish is found. Green is a favourite, as are gradations from green to brown. The patination and texture are critical to the character of the bronzes: Lyons is keen to avoid too pristine, too clean an effect. We return again to the importance of the 'hand', the trace of the artist's hand in his work, and I am reminded of Rodin's trick of leaving fingerprints on his plaster models, fugitive remnants to be immortalised on casting in bronze. The trace of the hand in Lyons' small sculptures is less overt but equally powerful.

Thinking

> and deeper still the force
> of history beneath the surface of the memory, reveals the Sphinx and Aztec Temple.
> Unseen and unknown craftsmen shipping stone by barge along the river
> make manifest the idols of a far off land, another century.[17]

Finally we turn inwards from the sculpture's surface to its core. Most of the small bronzes are identified simply by colour and sequence, as with *Green Bronze IV*. But for some, further associations have become manifest through their relationship to a larger work. We might take *Small Black Bronze XV* (1982) for instance. In 2004 Lyons selected this bronze as a source for *Gateway: New Beginnings*, made three metres high, from stainless steel, at the 13th International Symposium of Stainless Steel Sculpture, Tultepec, Mexico. In so doing, the sculpture acquired both a title and a way for the viewer to approach the work. This process of

[15] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).
[16] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).
[17] Lyons, *The Carousel* (see footnote 4).





left: Michael Lyons, *Small Black Bronze XVI* (1982); *right*: Michael Lyons, *Gateway: New Beginnings* (2004)

translation, or development, reveals a further important function of the small sculptures. Not only are they ideas in themselves, cast in bronze and arranged within the modelling studio, they constitute a constantly visible, three-dimensional sketchbook to be drawn upon. At the outset, we debated at length the terminology for these small works. I had been conscious of Lyons' use of the term 'model', with its implicit relation to something larger, but after reflection Lyons rejected both 'model' (easier to understand for laypeople) and 'maquette' (used by older artists) in favour of 'small sculptures'.

> I suppose the difficult thing is that both maquette and model imply that you just scale something up. Well obviously sometimes I do scale things up, and the small sculpture functions almost exactly like a model. But it's really a three-dimensional idea that can then go in different directions – it's the spark of the idea, really.[18]

Which returns us to the idea of the sculptures biding their time. While in many cases Lyons may feel no need to develop the bronzes further, in others he will. But they may wait for a long time – ten, fifteen years, maybe more – before (in the artist's words) 'they come to life'.[19]

[18] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).
[19] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).



Michael Lyons' modelling studio, *circa* 1996

If (again in the artist's words) the modelling studio is both 'a sketchbook' and 'a place where ideas are formed',[20] are these small bronzes not then commensurately precious to the artist? Pragmatically, Lyons admits to mixed feelings about parting with them. In a sense they represent artist's proofs. Although they could be editioned, due to time and cost this has never been done, so any work of this type sold is irreplaceable. Lyons' misgivings relate principally to the sketchbook status of the sculptures and their capacity for development rather than replication or mere enlargement. When a work is enlarged it becomes something different, 'it takes on its own life on a larger scale'.[21]

But this raises interesting questions. In the sculpture's original state does it contain the germ of the idea made overt in the title of a larger work? Or rather, would an external visual or poetic or stimulus have prompted the original sculpture? This is a complex issue, requiring thought. Throughout discussions Lyons has cautiously referred to the origins of *Green Bronze IV* as related to war, perhaps a gun carriage. He is unwilling to press the association, however, without again seeing a drawing he recalls as relating to the work: the idea, he feels, is there, although digested into the object. Fascinated, I question further. What might a viewer gain from knowing the sculpture's original association, if its creator struggles to retrieve this from its finished form? Again Lyons pauses.

[20] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).
[21] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).

> When I look at other people's work I always find it very interesting to know where the sculpture came from – and that doesn't detract from the fact that you can just look at a sculpture and get whatever it is you can get out of it. But even on a simple level it's interesting to know what I was looking at and thinking about at the time. If you go back to those drawings we were looking at, mechanical things, on those very thin sheets of paper[22] – they come into it, but they don't necessarily *rigorously* come into it. They might just be drawn from.[23]

Warming to the subject, Lyons begins to sketch on a paper napkin.

> There's another sculpture. Well, I'll tell you what that is: I think you'd put a log in that, a big log. I'm pretty sure it was on the back of a lorry which was in Grizedale Forest, in a kind of clearing.[24]
>
> So, one might start with the material, or the idea. With Grizedale it was shadows. It might be like a carriage, or a landscape; or there might be a general idea in my head which will just emerge as I'm working.[25]





left: Michael Lyons, *Black Bronze VII: for Grizedale* (1984); *right*: Michael Lyons, *Song of the Sea* (2004)
The small bronze is the work referred to by Lyons, above, later used as source material for *Song of the Sea*.

[22] The drawings referred to were of mechanical objects, sketched when Lyons was at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (*ca.* 1969–70). Discussing the subject further, Lyons drew a parallel with David Smith's *Zig IV*, a highly abstract sculpture constructed from shifting planes, but with its origin in the image of an anti-aircraft gun. For Lyons, knowing this reference adds a different understanding to Smith's sculpture. Lyons, interview (16 June 2010).
[23] Lyons, interview (28 May 2010).
[24] Lyons, interview (28 May 2010).
[25] Lyons, interview (18 May 2010).

Standing back from the content of Lyons' answers, we can diagnose two motivating traits, both revealing in relation to his sculpture. Curiosity, evident in his interest in other artists' creative processes, can be seen to drive the acquisitive, layered or collage-like temperament of Lyons' art, drawing on impressions from landscape or other cultures experienced profoundly through travel, exhibitions, books. But, at the same time, considerable generosity is evident in the willingness to share his own creative processes; such generosity underpinning the vital communicative aspect of his work. We discuss at length the difference between Lyons' monumental public sculpture and the intimate, small bronzes.

> Other things come into play if you're making what might be termed a piece of public sculpture. Even if people say, 'Well, I don't give a bugger what people think about it', I don't think it's like that – because you have to take into account site and history and place, and there will be people looking at the sculpture, and there may be things in it they want to pick up on. So making public sculpture is very different. In a sense those [small sculptures] are like drawings, like private things. But I don't mind letting people into that world. And I think it helps them to be able to look at the models, to be able to see how my mind works and how the whole process takes place. … But they *are* very private things: like a piece of poetry or like anything I might do. It isn't just a question of large scale either, I don't think – it's a question of the intimacy of the making.[26]

I remember a group of the small sculptures titled *Riverrun*, one of the last we spoke about while photographing in the modelling studio. These, at the time, seemed particularly important, close to the surface of Lyons' preoccupations. Did they have any connection with Joyce,[27] or were they primarily associated with landscape? Despite liking Joyce, Lyons confirms that the source was the river, flowing opposite his house in Cawood.

> You can't see the river now. When we first went to live there you could look out of the window and see it running by. And of course when the river's high, you can see it runs very fast nearly up to the banks, to the trees. So it's Joyce's title, but it's also a title I quite like. I don't feel as though I've appropriated it.[28] I once did a really big drawing of the water, then I cut it up – it looked a bit mannered, as though I'd overworked it. So I cut it up and turned it into four drawings [laughs]. But I'd like to make some of them. I'd like to look at the river again. I don't mean just go home and look at the river, I'd quite like to use that as a source again.[29]

Lyons pauses for a long while, lost in thought. When he continues, it is to expand on the sculpture's relation to its original stimulus.

[26] Lyons, interview (28 May 2010).
[27] 'Riverrun' is the first word of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939).
[28] Lyons later elaborated, 'Joyce's title fits with the idea, it adds to the understanding of my work. It's the same when I write poetry; I like the mixture of words and forms which strike each other off'. Lyons, interview (16 June 2010).
[29] Lyons, interview (28 May 2010).

> I was thinking – in general in the sculpture, and in particular with *Riverrun*, there's certainly a basis in landscape, but this emerges when I start to make the sculpture. Because it refers to landscape doesn't make it a good sculpture: it's only when the formal aspects and the outside references begin to work together that it exudes a particular poetry. All these things have been in my head for a long time, and they turn up in the sculpture – they just feed into it. All the trees, river, experiences, all sorts. And I'd like to develop some big sculptures from these ideas. But that's going to be a long way away.[30]

Reflecting

Returning, somewhat chastened, to *Green Bronze IV* in its store-room habitat – has this series of encounters not coloured our perception indelibly? The small sculpture now seems doubly dislocated, not just as an artwork removed from its site of creation, but as a potential source of future work severed from its creator. But equally, it is now in a context where it may be studied – *will* be studied – by artists, scholars and sculpture-lovers. It may be shown in the future (as Lyons hopes) alongside other of his works, or the works of others, to illuminate wider currents of sculptural practice. The possibilities are open-ended.

I would like to acknowledge the generosity of Michael Lyons in providing the interviews that form the basis of this essay, and also to thank Sophie Raikes for providing access to *Green Bronze IV*. All extracts from the writings, poetry and interviews of Michael Lyons are © the artist. The photographs in this essay are not to be further reproduced without permission from the artist.

[30] Lyons, interview (28 May 2010).