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SOMERSET

Press Release

Elisabeth Frink Transformation

Hauser & Wirth Somerset

19 January – 7 May 2017

Opening: Wednesday 18 January, 6 – 8 pm



On view until 7 May 2017, Hauser & Wirth Somerset presents a major solo exhibition of sculpture by the late Elisabeth Frink. The exhibition 'Transformation' comprises a selection of Frink's distinctive bronzes produced in the 1950s and 1960s, alongside a series of drawings that highlight the artist's skill as a draughtsman. Outside in the grounds are some of Frink's most important sculptures from her later life, including the celebrated Riace Warriors.

Frink's art was directly influenced by her childhood and adolescent experiences. Growing up mainly in rural Suffolk, she enjoyed a countryside existence full of animals and birds, but set against the backdrop of war. Her father was a professional soldier who fought at Dunkirk. Frink was nine years old when the Second World War broke out. Living near an airfield, she often witnessed bombers fighting in the skies directly overhead, or returning to the base in flames. Later on in the war, while spending time in Devon, she narrowly avoided machine-gun fire from a German fighter plane. These events had a profound effect on her, as did her viewing of the first images released of the Nazi concentration camps.

The impact of these experiences influenced Frink's approach to her work and led to a life-long preoccupation with conflict, injustice and man's capacity for brutality. She had an interest in Celtic mythology, in particular how man expresses himself through myths and metaphors, notably in relation to war. Frink's range of subjects included men, animals and birds, exploring their shapes to convey tension, aggression and vulnerability.

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Frink worked unassisted, modelling with wet plaster onto an armature of metal rods and chicken wire, which she would then shape and chisel, sometimes adding more plaster and distressing it further, to create a pitted surface which would then be cast in bronze. It was a tactile method of working, which allowed for spontaneity, rapid corrections and the development of ideas, giving her work a raw immediacy.

On entering the Rhoades Gallery, the viewer is met with a series of abstract heads belonging to both man and beast. Frink consistently found inspiration in the head, regarding it as the centre of emotion and the seat of the soul. Her interest in animals lay in their relationship to man, believing that all life forms were equal; if mankind could see himself as equal to animals, then it would follow that there could be no injustice between men.



In Frink's early work, animal forms were given a powerful, often menacing, appearance, such as 'Bird' (1952), which, despite its diminutive size, appears intimidatory and defiant. Frink felt deeply the fragility of the postwar period, the looming Cold War and ongoing nuclear threat – all atrocities created by the human species – and expressed these feelings through her early images of birds. 'Vulture' (1952) has an ancient, fossilised quality, hunched over awaiting its prey; it represents many of the artist's deep held feelings about war and aggression. The warped body and twisted limbs of 'Dead Hen' (1957) conjure up images of the concentration camps that Frink must have viewed as a teenager.

The bird theme occupied Frink for many years; 'Harbinger Bird III' (1961) is a development from the earlier bird series and is constructed from more slab-like, solid forms reminiscent of armour. The birds adopt more explicit military references in the Standard series – vultures poised atop their perches, representing those who have been honoured in the armed forces for their part in the killing of other men.

The continuing preoccupation with flight is apparent in the Birdman series, which begins with the erect 'Birdman' (1960), a spindly, helmeted character, standing tall as if preparing to take off. The origin of this series came from Frink's interest in the 1956 attempt of Frenchman Leo Valentin to fly like a bird, using wooden wings. The image of this bird-like figure in the sky resonated with the artist and drew on her memories of planes tumbling from the sky.

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On the walls are a series of works on paper. These are not preparatory works for sculpture but are nonetheless related, as is apparent in 'Winged Beast' (1961), another predatory birdlike figure, this time in two dimensions. As with her sculpture, Frink explored a theme through many drawings before moving on to a new subject. Made at the same time is a series of drawings of animal heads, including 'Horse' (1958), like the sculptures they appear with, they are semi-abstract in nature, skull-like and often foreboding.

Moving through to the Bourgeois Gallery, Frink's works have undergone another transformation; the animals have morphed into men. The semi-abstract head of 'Soldier' (1963) guards the door, sentry-like. A trio of heads just beyond, appear brutish and intimidating, the heavy jaw and scarred face of 'Soldier's Head IV' a stark reminder of Frink's ongoing preoccupation with war and brutality.



A pair of killers 'Assassins II' (1963) stand opposite, their faces obscured behind armour and masks. Fused together, the pair have lost their individual identities and are forced to take on the role of the assassin. Their spindly legs a reminder that they are sensate beings, vulnerable, yet capable of killing in cold blood and responsible for their own actions. Next to them a possible victim, 'Falling Man' (1961), tumbles to earth. The works on paper explore further this theme of weightlessness and falling.

In the late 1960s whilst living in France, Frink began work on a series of sinister oversized male busts known as the Goggle Heads, their eyes concealed behind polished goggles. The heads appear smooth and impermeable, representing their strength and lack of humanity – a shift from the artist's earlier highly textured works. This series was inspired by a prominent figure in the news at that time: General Oufkir, a captain of the French army of Morocco, who allegedly arranged the 'disappearance' of left-wing politician Mehdi Ben Barka. Oufkir, who always appeared in dark glasses, was feared by many dissident groups and seen as extraordinarily close to power. Frink's Goggle Heads show the very worst side of mankind: power hungry, murderous and inhumane.

Visible through the windows of the gallery in the Cloister Courtyard are the menacing figures of the 'Riace' men, inspired by the discovery in 1972 of two full-size ancient Greek bronzes, found under the sea off the coast of Italy. Frink viewed the original Riace Warriors on display in Florence and was struck

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by their sinister appearance. The introduction of colour and the painted faces can be traced to Frink's visit to Australia and an interest in aboriginal art. Throughout her career Frink returned time and again to the male nude – she stated many times that she had no interest in portraying women. For Frink the male nude was the ultimate vehicle for expressing a range of emotions, most notably the contrast of strength and vulnerability and the complexity of man's nature.

Also on display in the courtyard are 'Desert Quartet III' (1989) and 'Desert Quartet IV' (1989) from a series of four oversized heads inspired by a visit to the Tunisian desert.

About the Artist

Born in 1930 in Suffolk, England, Elisabeth Frink is regarded as one of the major sculptors of the 20th century. She studied at the Guildford School of Art (1946 – 1949) and with Bernard Meadows at the Chelsea School of Art (1949 – 1953). She enjoyed early success with her first major exhibition at the Beaux Art Gallery, London, in 1952 and later that year her work 'Bird' 1952 was purchased by Tate Gallery. In 1957 she was awarded two major public commissions; 'Boar' for Harlow New Town and 'Blind Beggar and Dog' for Bethnal Green housing scheme. Many commissions were to follow including 'Eagle Lectern' for Coventry Cathedral in 1962; 'Eagle' installed at the Kennedy memorial in Dallas Texas in 1964; 'Risen Christ' commissioned in 1964 for Our Lady of the Wayside, Solihul; and 'Horse and Rider' commissioned for Dover Street, London in 1974. She had exhibitions in both New York City and Los Angeles in 1959. From 1967 to 1970 she lived in France, which is where she embarked on her renowned Goggle Heads. Elisabeth Frink was an active member of Amnesty International and identified strongly with Human Rights issues. In 1969 she was awarded a CBE. She was elected to the Royal Academy in 1977, made Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1982, and named Companion of Honour in 1992. She moved to Dorset in 1976 where she lived and worked, continuing to receive many commissions and taking part in numerous exhibitions until her death in 1993.

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Elisabeth Frink
Goggled Head I
1969
Bronze
61 x 63 x 52 cm / 24 x 24 3/4 x 20 1/2 in
Photo: Dominic Brown

Frink with Birdman, c 1960
Photo: Douglas Glass

Elisabeth Frink
Harbinger Bird III
1961
Bronze
44 x 34 x 20 cm / 17 3/8 x 13 3/8 x 7 7/8 in
Photo: Dominic Brown

Hauser & Wirth Somerset

Durslade Farm, Dropping Lane
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Gallery hours:
Tuesday – Sunday
10 am – 5 pm (March – October)
10 am – 4 pm (November – February)

Elisabeth Frink
Mirage
1967
Bronze
90.8 x 71 x 22 cm / 33 3/4 x 28 x 8 5/8 in
Photo: Dominic Brown

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Elisabeth Frink
Head
1967
Bronze
54 x 43 x 33 cm / 21 1/4 x 16 7/8 x 13 in
Photo: Dominic Brown

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