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A Lot to Unpack: Portable Sculpture at the Henry Moore Institute

18 May to 29 August 2021

CHRISTIANE MATT

Portable Sculpture is the Henry Moore Institute's first group exhibition since museums could reopen their doors to visitors on May 17, 2021. The exhibition is accompanied by a number of online events, such as interviews between some of the participating artists and the exhibition's curator, Clare O'Dowd, which have been broadcast on the Henry Moore Institute's YouTube channel. This review, however, focuses exclusively on the physical show.

The exhibition is spread out over three of the Institute's exhibition galleries and features the work of fifteen artists. The show pushes the boundaries of the art-historical definition of

sculpture and defies assumptions about what sculpture is, or what it is meant to be. Sculpture in the narrow sense of the word is often associated with large-scale, permanent works made of materials such as marble, stone or bronze. The works featured in *Portable Sculpture* challenge these expectations, since many of them are small-scale works which can easily be disassembled and reassembled, stowed away and transported to different locations. They explore themes such as travel, migration, exile and displacement, all of which can be linked to current social and political crises and events across the globe, such as the refugee crisis, migration, gentrification and climate change.



Fig. 1. Ashley, Claire, Clown (*Laughing Stock*), 2020. Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 2. Baron, Hannelore, *Untitled (B81051)*, 1981, mixed media. Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. Photograph by the author.

Upon entry to the first room, Claire Ashley's *Clown (Laughing Stock)* (Fig.1) welcomes the visitor like an unruly but friendly otherworldly being. The enormous, colourful mass of Ashley's inflatable artwork is barely contained by the gallery space. In fact, the work threatens to explode the boundaries of the space with its large, amorphous body squished in between the gallery floor and its ceiling. The work sits somewhere at the intersection between sculpture and painting - much like its refusal to 'fit' into the gallery space, *Clown (Laughing Stock)* also refuses to be neatly categorised.

To the right of Ashley's work is a group of works by Louise Bourgeois, Marcel Duchamp and Hannelore Baron grouped together under the heading *Leaving Home*. All three artists emigrated to America at the beginning of the Second World War, each dealing with the effects of their emigration in different ways. Whereas Marcel Duchamp sought to create a miniature museum of his work with his *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-1941) series, Hannelore Baron and Louise Bourgeois grappled with their memories of their home countries in Europe through their work. Bourgeois emigrated to New York in 1938 with her husband, the American art historian Robert Goldwater, however her *Personages* series represents some of the people she left behind in France. Hannelore Baron's box constructions (Fig. 2) deal with her traumatic childhood in Germany and provide a mysterious and unsettling glimpse into the artist's memories and her world.

The second room brings together works by Alexander Calder, Mohamad Hafez, Andrea Zittel, Do Ho Suh and Liz Ensz under the heading *Building a World*. These works deal with the theme of displacement, but they also explore notions of world-building and offer ways in which to reimagine our current world. The three works by Syrian-American artist and

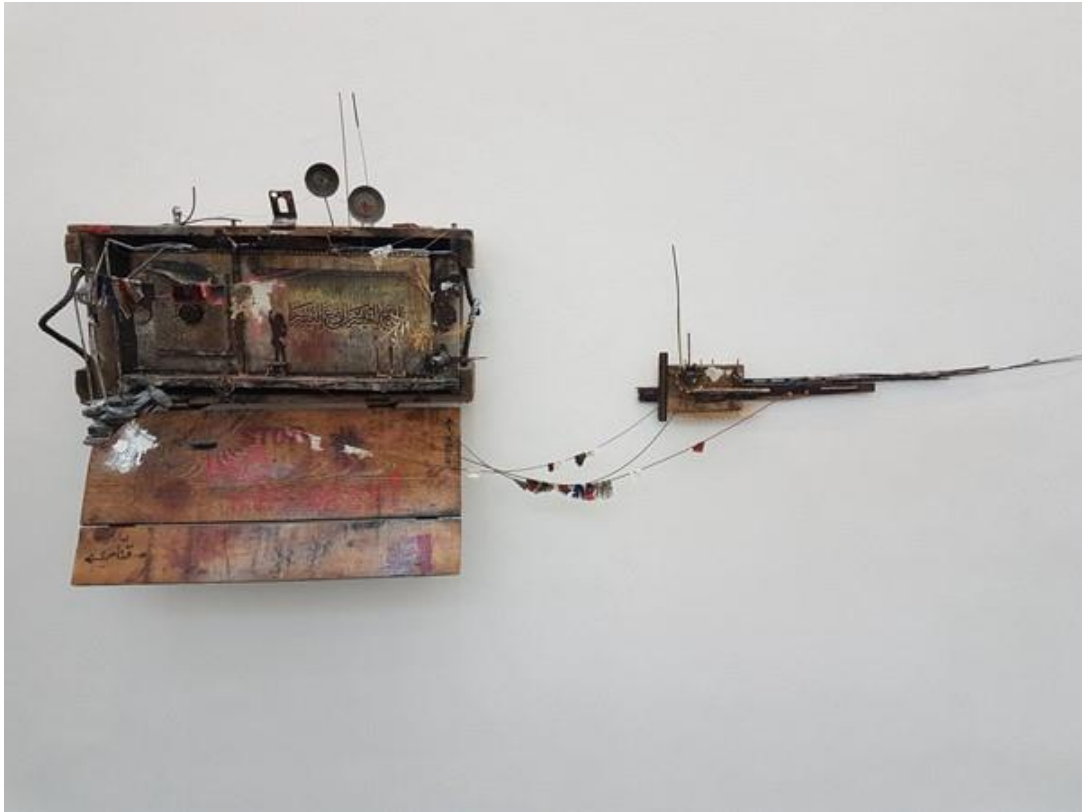


Fig. 3. Hafez, Mohamad, *Untitled (Munitions Case)*, 2018, mixed media. Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. Photograph by the author.

architect Mohamad Hafez, which are mounted to the gallery wall, are by far the most powerful pieces of the exhibition. His *Untitled (Munitions Case)* (Fig. 3) offers a sobering insight into the aftermath of the war in Syria by creating the image of a deserted streetscape with torn clothes precariously dangling off of multiple thin wires which represent washing lines. Red graffiti letters tell the viewer “Stop” and “No refugees!”, and an upward arrow on the lid of the munitions case alerts the viewer of a sniper. Though vastly different in their imagery and purpose, Hafez’s streetscapes in suitcases recall Marcel Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* series from the first room. Again, these works blur the distinction between painting and sculpture: whilst they are mounted to the wall like paintings, their three-dimensionality suggests that they are more than just paintings. Perhaps they can be more adequately classified as dioramas, which by their very nature defy classification.

Do Ho Suh’s *Hub, Wielandstr. 18, 12159 Berlin* (Figs. 4, 4.1) is another highlight of the show. Visitors can enter the delicate fabric sculpture, or rather, structure, if they leave their bags at the door. From the outside, the structure, though translucent, appears to have some degree of solidity, however, upon stepping inside, it dissolves into a dreamlike, misty blue haze. Particularly striking about Suh’s sculpture are its minute details, such as the delicately embroidered door, window handles and radiator. Representing places and buildings where the artist has lived in the past, Suh’s work negotiates the relationships between architecture, memory and the home. The work seems to ask its beholder: is home a place, a building? Or rather, is it a memory of a particular place?



Fig. 4. Suh, Do Ho, Hub, Wielandstr. 18, 12159 Berlin, 2015, polyester fabric, stainless steel. Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 4.1. Suh, Do Ho, Hub, Wielandstr. 18, 12159 Berlin, 2015, polyester fabric, stainless steel. Henry Moore Institute, Leeds. Photograph by the author.

The third and final room brings together works by Walead Beshty, Barry Flanagan, Veronica Ryan and Romuald Hazoumè, which are grouped together under the heading *Made in Transit*. The works pose questions about travel and the movement of people, resources and objects through systems and across the world. Particularly interesting is Walead Beshty's readymade glass sculpture, titled *Fedex Kraft Box* (2011). The work was made to the exact dimensions of Fedex's copyrighted shipping box and was then sent across the world by mail, getting damaged in the process. Beshty's work contests notions of authorship and it explores the movement of objects through time and space, as well as the movement of objects across national and international borders. It also raises questions about the systems of labour and exchange which sustain the global economy.

It is particularly poignant that *Portable Sculpture* is taking place during the global Covid-19 pandemic, which has in many ways transformed the world as we know it. During the last year we have seen the global economy grind to an almost complete halt, and the movement of humans across borders has been severely disrupted, putting an abrupt end to the itinerant lifestyles of many artists. Simultaneously, the world has been shaken by traumatic events such as the murder of George Floyd and the violent insurrection at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021. It seems fitting that at this current historical moment, we should reconsider preconceived notions and definitions of sculpture.

***Portable Sculpture* was on display at the Henry Moore Institute from 18 May to 29 August 2021 and was curated by Clare O'Dowd.**