

Greer Twiss

b.1937

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Greer Twiss has an uncanny ability to transform the most heavy and cumbersome of materials into whimsical and witty sculptural forms. Since the 1960s, Twiss has conjured up an ever-expanding cast of surrealist-tinged sculptural oddities and curiosities.

He has stuffed a heavy metal Queen Victoria into a suitcase; caught steel albatross either soaring through the sky or pinned to the specimen table; and exhibited headless, bikini-clad bodies that cast real shadows. Twiss first came to prominence as a puppeteer: that sense of theatre and of having inanimate objects 'perform' for an audience has never left his practice.

Twiss's art revolves around the fragmentary: a collection of bits and pieces that spark associations by crossing between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown. Here, he presents the severed arm of the Statue of Liberty. Roughly hewn steel fingers still cling to the torch that has become such an iconic symbol of freedom and liberation.

Offering up Lady Liberty's arm as a 'relic' in this way sets off that web of associations that characterises Twiss's art. The sculptural fragment is more commonly associated with ancient than contemporary sculpture, belonging more to the museum than the gallery. How has this famous statue become a museum piece? Has Lady Liberty been victim to statue-toppling – one of the most visible signs of a regime or leadership change? The sculpture is made out of galvanised steel. Steel was the backbone of modern America, the material out of which its cities and cars were constructed. Twiss's use of steel in a sculpture based on American symbols and values offers an interesting play on the old Modernist stress on 'truth to materials'.

In many ways, this sculpture is about art and art-making, often romanticised as another act of freedom and liberation. It's not much of a stretch to see the dismembered arm as symbolising that of the artist holding his tools. Cast or constructed versions

of hammers, drills and easels regularly crop up in Twiss's work. The hand of the sculptor is never far behind. Here, it is strongly felt in the working and manipulation of materials – the intensely physical way that the metal has been twisted, joined and soldered. This is a sculpture that feels manufactured rather than created, that belongs to the workshop or the back shed.

The value Twiss places on workshop practice was made clear when he reconstructed his studio as part of an exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery in 2003. Like this exhibition, *Relic USA* takes a stand for the importance of studio practice and making objects at a time when contemporary sculpture often looks elsewhere for its bearings and function. Perhaps it is in this engagement with materials and the processes of making that Twiss believes real freedom can be found.



Aaron Lister

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.govttbrewster.com
www.mhgallery.co.nz

Greer Twiss's Education Pack:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz/downloads/twiss.pdf

Greer Twiss Film:

Greer Twiss, made by Darcy Lange.

Books:

Shute, G. (2006). *Insights: New Zealand Artists Talk About Creativity*, Auckland, Random House.