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THE ARTISTS

Figuratively

SPEAKING

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When an art collector begins to acquire sculpture it is commonly seen as a rise in the sophistication level of that buyer; it is a signal of full walls and a mature collection. Buyers and collectors that are just starting out often, but not exclusively, first look to paintings and images as they are easier to digest in terms of an investment and as an object of desire. Sculpture however, is a far more elusive beast.







Aphrodite

Within

Hong Kong's burgeoning art world, Northern Irish-born sculpture David Williams-Ellis believes that the proliferation of sculpture is at an all time high. "I was in Hong Kong 20 years ago and there was very little in terms of sculpture," says Williams-Ellis. "All there was was Elizabeth Frink's 'Water Buffalo' in Central. It wasn't until 10 years later that Hong Kong started becoming more interested; and then in the last two to three years they started getting really keen. There are all these monumental buildings going up all over the place and they need some sort of definition."

And with sculpture you get just that. Buildings that are incredibly distinctive from afar can become a blur of cement and glass from the ground level. "If you put sculpture in a building, it gives a focal point. If you put figurative sculpture in, it gives people something that they can really relate to with the building. It gives the building a signature," states the artist.

Williams-Ellis began sculpting as a child at school in England. He attributes his early start in his career to a helpful teacher who "was a painter by practice, but a sculptor by inclination." Following school, he received his classical training in Italy under Nerina Simi in Florence and worked as an apprentice marble carver in Carrara before returning to London to set up his studio. Today he is based in Cumbria in Northwest England where he has a large workshop and studio.

Within the modern world of sculpture, Williams-Ellis can be seen as a traditionalist. Creating figurative works in bronze, he uses techniques that have changed little from antiquity called the 'Lost Wax Practise'. Working with a model, he moulds the figures from clay, which are then later cast in bronze within multiple layers of wax and clay moulds. "I always work from life and make to scale on site," he says. "I think you lose the immediacy and the relationship if you create a smaller model first. I believe that by doing that you lose heart and the work can become quite sterile and dead."

Williams-Ellis' figures are an investigation into the human form, sometimes quietly posed and introspective, and at other times filled with movement and action. Two good examples of this dichotomy in his work can be seen in his recent projects for Asia. 'The Leapers', a series of six double life-sized figures jump and stretch in succession through the air outside the I.F.C. in Shanghai, where Williams-Ellis was commissioned by the Sun Hung Kai group in 2011. The figures are filled with action and forward motion. They are a nod to the bounding commerce of the building before which they stand.

'The Watcher', which was commissioned by Swire Properties and sits in the company's Island East development in Hong Kong, shows the figure of a single man seated in thoughtful, protective repose. He is insular and considerate, a quiet static figure amidst the teeming masses. "I think that figure is very challenging. It worked in terms of its scale and everyone knows it now because it is so easy to relate to," says Williams-Ellis.



Tumblers

When asked why, in a world full of modern abstraction, he chooses to depict only figurative work, Williams-Ellis explains: "There is a lot of great abstract work out there but there is also a great deal of it that doesn't define enough, and which doesn't do anything with the space that it is. I love the mixture of stillness and movement within the human body. I try and achieve a range."

Right now he is preparing to hear about some large-scale projects in Asia. With major developments popping up all over major Asian cities, there is a call for work that is no longer available in the West. Both in terms of corporations and private collectors, it is an exciting time for an established sculptor such as Williams-Ellis. "It's so dynamic here at the moment. There's so much happening."

As Hong Kong cements its recently-established standing as the leading Asian art market and the cultural gateway to the Pan-Asian region, both corporations and private buyers alike have found a new confidence in what the indigenous market has to offer and their own ability to discern the tat from the Tate-worthy. "I am very excited to be doing more projects here," says Williams-Ellis, "I find it one of the most important and vibrant cities globally. Things are relatively quiet in Europe, especially in terms of big projects. But here people want to make a focal point to their buildings."