# Ovid Variation #1, Opus 397, 1980

**ROBERT ADAMS (British, 1917 - 1984)**

*"I am concerned with energy, a physical property inherent in metal, [and] in contrasts between linear forces and masses, between solid and open areas … the aim is stability and movement in one form."* (R. Adams, 1966, quoted in A. Grieve, 1992, pp. 109-111)

Robert Adams was born in Northampton, England, in October 1917. He has been called *'the neglected genius of post-war British sculpture'* by critics.

In 1937, Adams began attending evening classes in life drawing and painting at the Northampton School of Art. Some of Adam's first-ever sculptures were also exhibited in London between 1942 and 1944 as part of a series of art shows for artists working in the Civil Defence, which Adams joined during the Second World War.

He followed this with his first one-man exhibition at Gimpel Fils Gallery, London, in 1947, before starting a 10-year teaching career in 1949 at the Central School of Art and Design in London. It was during this time that Adams connected with a group of abstract painters – importantly Victor Pasmore, Adrian Heath and Kenneth and Mary Martin – finding a mutual interest in Constructivist aesthetics and in capturing movement.

In 1948, Adams' stylistic move towards abstraction was further developed when he visited Paris and saw the sculpture of Pablo Picasso, Julio Gonzales, Constantine Brancusi and Henry Laurens. As such, Adams' affiliation with his fellow English carvers, such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, extended only as far as an initial desire to carve in stone and wood. Unlike his contemporaries, Adams did not appear to show much interest in the exploration of the human form or its relationship to the landscape. Instead, he completely embraced undiluted abstraction, becoming one of the first to do so in the British Isles, before the emergence of Anthony Caro.

"*I do not abstract from nature as such, although I may be excited by certain relationships observed in nature and this may be the germ of a new work. Nevertheless, this experience must be understood for what it is, and be completely assimilated before being used, and my problem remains to make the work completely objective, with its own life and laws."* (R. Adams, 1957, quoted in A. Boström et al., 2008, p. 52)

Adams experienced his most prolific and acclaimed years of sculpting between 1950 and 1980 when he became one of the foremost sculptors of the British avant-garde in the post-war period. His reputation was propelled by successful exhibitions at the International Arts Program in New York (where he met artists Alexander Calder and Robert Motherwell); a second solo show at Gimpels in London; and a major commission for the Festival of Britain in 1951.

He was known for his careful craftsmanship, often creating detailed sketches to guide the fabrication process. For him, the precise handling and arrangement of materials used were a direct reflection of his creative beliefs and intentions for each piece. The materials and techniques he used were essential to expressing his overall vision for the artwork.

Arguably the most significant moments in Adams' career were his two exhibitions at the Venice Biennale in 1952 and 1962. The first Biennale cemented Adams' name in the 'Geometry of Fear' movement alongside Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Geoffrey Clarke, Bernard Meadows, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull.

The title, coined by Herbert Read, reflects the deep sense of unease and anxiety that lingered after World War II, a sentiment powerfully captured by a group of British sculptors. Through the use of abstract, geometric forms, these artists explored the emotional and psychological effects of living in a post-war world. Their innovative techniques and materials gave their works a striking, raw quality that spoke to the nuances of the time, making their sculptures a poignant artistic reflection of the complexities of the modern world.

Together the artists of the Geometry of Fear movement exhibited in the *New Aspects of British Sculpture* in the British pavilion. In fitting with the materials and language that the group worked in, Adams' approach to sculpture subsequently changed from carving to working in bronze, welded iron and cast concrete – essentially modern materials to reflect a modern world.

Ten years later, at his second Biennale, Adams co-hosted an exhibition with Hubert Dalwood at the British Pavilion, this time presenting a series of welded screens. These flat-panelled sculptures, such as *Untitled (Screen Form)* now form a significant part of the artist's lasting legacy.



Robert Adams, *Untitled (Screen Form),* 1962, Bowman Sculpture

The *Ovoid Variations* mark a particular turning point in the work of Robert Adam. Created in the late stage of his career, the series of rounded abstract bronzes are markedly softer in tone to his previous work. *Ovoid Variation #1, Opus 397*, is circular in form with a flattened surface that draws attention to the distinctive silhouette which is broken by a 'bite' cut out in the top corner. Adams utilised the forms of contrasting surface levels and patination in this work to create a visually arresting piece that evokes impressions of the natural world and themes of new life, particularly the process of germination. The smooth panelled surface is interrupted by a raised polished band that elegantly sweeps across its base to then be absorbed back into the main surface towards its centre.

During the period of the creation of this work, Adams was creating art in relative isolation in Essex and took much of his inspiration from the natural environment. In contrast to his previous steel *Screens* series, Adams moved away from the sharp-edged modularity distinctive to this work in favour of more curving forms that spoke of a sense of renewal and protection.

*Ovoid Variations* highlight Adam's exploration of life from its very beginning. The central themes of renewal could be seen to reflect the artist's meditations on the natural processes of creation, as his own life drew to a close. *Ovoid Variation #1* was exhibited at the Gimpel Fils Gallery's *Robert Adams Late Bronzes* exhibition in 1988 shortly after his death in 1984.

Adams's work can be found at various sites, including the Arts Council Collection; Tate Gallery, London; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C. Adams also has a permanent large-scale installation at the BP House in London.

Literature

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