

Michael Snape , 2015  
Text by James Angus

Given corporate paranoia these days, it's remarkable that anyone prepared to make an appointment on a Friday can visit the Bluescope steel plant at Port Kembla and watch steel being made. The scale of process and product is astonishing. These sorts of plants don't ever pause and take a moment to reconsider things. Steelmaking is relentless and slightly terrifying. The entire facility seems quenched by water, constantly, so there is always an audible hissing of steam above the roar of conveyors, furnaces, hydraulics, alarms. Without water, the liquid metal would destroy the machines that produce it.

It's no coincidence that early last century this particular steelworks was founded next to a port, as is often the case, in order to easily receive the various ores and make use of an endless supply of water at the same time. Mid-tour, sitting in a heavily air-conditioned minibus covered in dust from the coke and iron ore, staring out across the harbour at a newly delivered fleet of hybrid vehicles, it's not long before the laugh-a-minute commentary of the tour guide fades and our predicament starts to emerge. For sculptors who choose to work mostly in steel, these sorts of experiences ought to be humbling.

This has everything and nothing to do with the recent sculptures of Michael Snape. Whether they like it or not, both steel manufacturer and artist are entangled in an elegant mess of form and function. This is a situation sculptors have found themselves in since the invention of the readymade. The search for a formal logic outside of the studio, whether it be a simple visit to the plumbing store or a field trip through the wastelands of New Jersey, created many of the great origin myths of architectonic sculpture.

It's tempting to view these sculptures through the same lens. They come from a careful formulation of heavy industry cast-offs, usually two elements at any given time, into a revised and semi-opaque logic. As is the case for many sculptors, gravity is an unkind friend: picked up off the factory floor with traces of a very practical geometry still intact, weighty steel components are made to support one another. The results could be said to look effortless, despite all the welding and rigging. Maybe it's time to move on from art history and revisit an alternative model to better understand what's at stake here.

Ad-hocism, a term coined by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver during the nineteen-seventies in their book of the same name, might be a helpful way of considering these sculptures at-large. Ad-hocism is a theory of discrete objects, removed from their place in the orbit of architecture and design, conjoined, repurposed, and returned to the world for different and new ends. As a theory of recycling, it undermines the very logic that drives a steelworks. Ad-hocism also handily describes what seems to drive Michael Snape. Green futures aside, how can a sculptor of metal find a meaningful place in the world? Perhaps the answer is simply to look for cracks, repair form to function, and love your children.

*James Angus is an artist. He is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York and Triple V, Paris.*

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