

# RALPH BROWN

& THE FIGURE IN THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES





*I have felt in Paris an immense potential to 'do' within me as if I had it, in Paris, held it and with this some sort of key to what I must do. Will this remain in London or will the complications of life and college, all these things, having such temptations, drown my aspirations in a flood of petty detail, comfortable living.*

*Will I remember this hollow clang of ancient cracked bell ringing across my roof toll and the cool breeze stirring across the city beneath a dark sky luminous with stars.*

*...These figures against my wall. Old women, spare square, sagging or flaccid and hands and arms sinewy match stick, hens neck, leaning interested, regarding passive; curious like a bird, with lassitude, crocodilian in the manner of French concierge, hating humanity.*

*Figure man lying curving clothes twisted about him like rope, thank God it's summer. And woman with crop headed child limp escaped for the moment. Looking blankly ahead. How will she speak to the child when he wakes. A mother pregnant, beautiful standing. Contented animal deeply satisfied, a little blanket possibly.*

RALPH BROWN

Notes from a Paris sketchbook, 1954

RALPH BROWN

*Vernal Figure*

1956-7, Bronze

Edition of 6

135 x 46 x 46 cm



Ralph Brown in his studio with *Meat Porters* and *Man and Child* in clay, Digswell, 1959  
Photo: J Lewinski

Ralph Brown arranging his RCA diploma show June, 1955  
Photo: G Ireland

## RALPH BROWN & THE FIGURE IN THE 50S AND 60S

A photograph of Ralph Brown, pausing for a cigarette while arranging work for his 1955 Royal College of Art diploma, shows him gazing away from his sculpture. His expression is hard to read – thoughtful, maybe despondent, possibly weary. At his elbow, *Running Girl with a Wheel*, c.1954, rests on a wooden plinth. The girl reaches for her toy, which runs further to the left, further from the artist, expanding the tension of the photograph. We cannot but identify with the scenario of an object slipping beyond our grasp. As John Berger was quick to notice, Brown's sculptures – conjuring an atmosphere *around* themselves – are poignant because of the pressure of the outside world upon them.<sup>1</sup>

*Running Girl* was one of several full-size sculptures in Brown's diploma show that owed their existence to Paris. By 1955, Brown had paid two momentous visits to the capital. In 1951 he spent two weeks, visiting the Musée Rodin, seeing Germaine Richier's *L'Orage* (1947–8) at the Musée d'Art Moderne and meeting Alberto Giacometti installing his first exhibition at Galerie Maeght. A Royal College of Art scholarship in 1954 allowed a four-month return visit, during which Brown worked in Ossip Zadkine's studio at the *Académie de la Grande Chaumière* and gained access to Rodin's collection of plasters at Meudon. What was the impact of these visits? Brown recalled Rodin's work (deeply unfashionable at the time) as 'profoundly impressive', while Richier's *L'Orage* 'quite bowled me over, astounded me'.<sup>2</sup> He filtered his impressions into a student thesis on Medardo Rosso: an evocative piece of writing which sheds as much light on his own concretising beliefs as on art history.

Reading, we discover why Brown so admired Rodin's *Monument to Balzac*, 'upright in space and time, a punctuation', and *St John the Baptist*, whose head 'disturbs and flickers in the bronze'. We discover Brown's respect for the simplicity and directness of Rosso's *La Rieuse*, whose head embodies 'a tenderness, a humane and sympathetic approach



which Rodin never achieved'. We hear Brown thinking about surface, light and volume through Rosso's concern with the immediate, emotional effect of sculpture: 'It is significant that all Rosso's works photograph superbly, while little of Rodin's is photogenic. No photograph more than hints at the scope of the final *Balzac*, responsive to light values though it is.' And we hear Brown thinking about the siting and presence of sculpture in his verdict that Paris fosters line, not volume. The passage is worth quoting at length:

*For Paris is not a sculptor's city. One expects clarity, lucidity, but if, as I believe, sculpture is an art of overtone, of implication ... these things are not sufficient. In the clear air of Paris, like pure water or ice, one can look down a wide desert of street bounded by great appalling decrepit walls. Beyond rise roofs, houses, chimney stacks and domes piling tiny, minuscule, black windows dotting the back cloth. Stimulating, and yet, hardly a sculptor's city – one can see the point perhaps of Giacometti or Richier, spidery, reduced to armature. Bulk could be too gross here ...<sup>3</sup>*

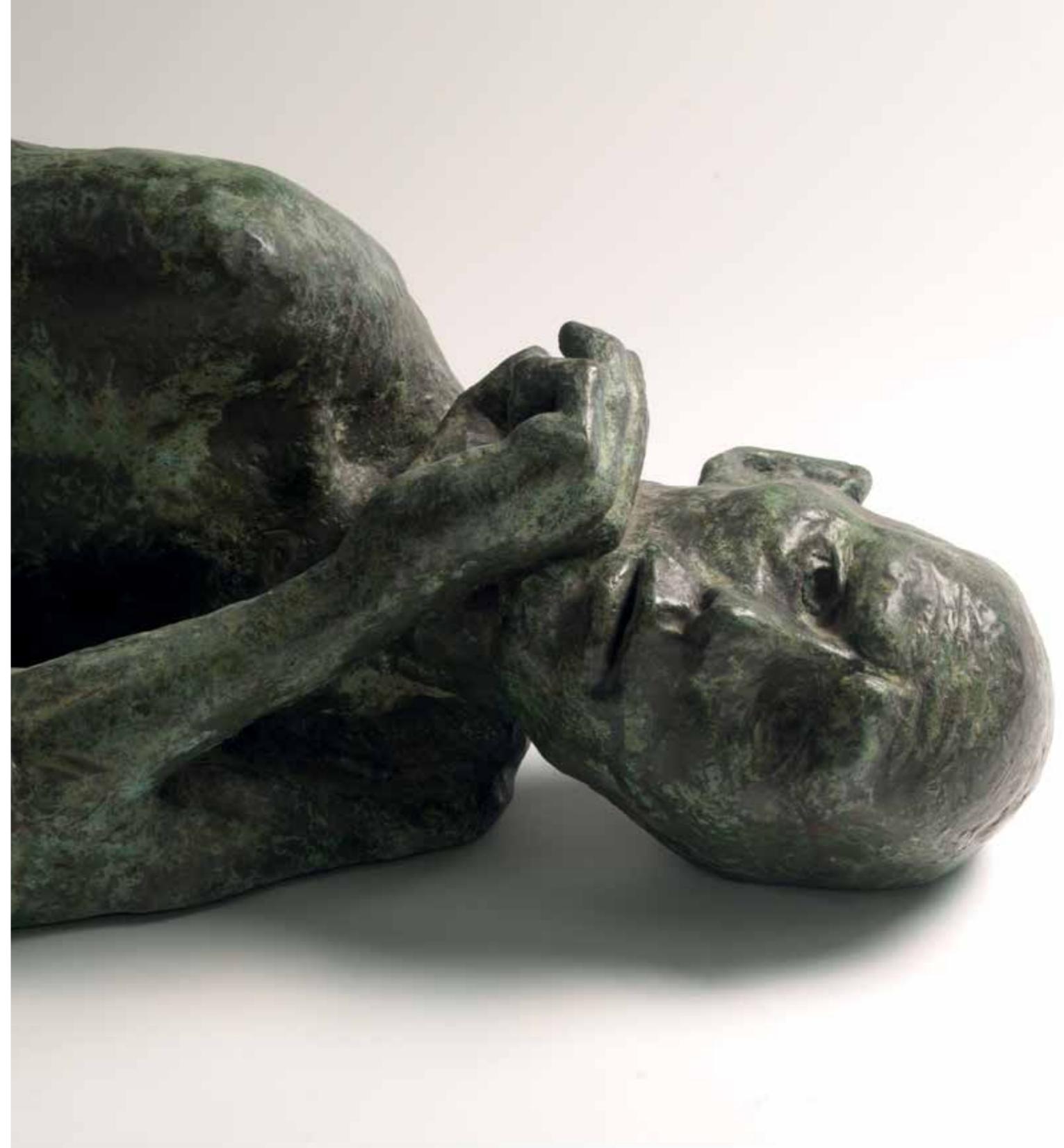
Yet Brown was creating sculpture with volume, in the very city he described as alien to its presence. In Paris he embarked on *The Wall*, a project whose planned realisation would be a full-scale street peopled with pregnant women, mothers and children, the sleeping homeless, a man stooping for a cigarette butt, a girl chasing a wheel. Brown's sketchbooks teem with notes and animated line drawings, acutely observed. He began full-scale preparatory models and maquettes in Paris; returning to London, he continued at life-size. The clay model



RALPH BROWN  
Sketch of *Tête de Berger* from Paris notebook, 1954

AUGUSTE RODIN  
*Head of Pierre de Wiessant*  
1900, Bronze  
27 x 22 x 24 cm  
Private Collection

RALPH BROWN  
*Clochard* (detail)  
1955-6, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
30 x 168 x 38 cm





of *The Wall*, with its microcosm of humanity, was photographed outside in Kensington: a street double-framed by its urban landscape.

Today we can reassess some of the survivors of Brown's monumental project, and through them his approach to the figure in the mid-1950s. *Running Girl with a Wheel*, once full-size in plaster, exists today as a diminutive bronze maquette. *Cacao* (1954), modelled at *La Grande Chaumière*, is a smaller relative of a formidable life-figure, a beggar, who once leaned on the bench occupied by a woman and sprawling boy. (The model for *Cacao* was the eighty-year-old Italian, Libero Nardone, who sat for Rodin and Richier – a lineage that delighted Brown.) *Clochard*, the sleeping tramp from *The Wall* group, is perhaps the finest of all, showing Brown's unflinching regard in the bent limbs and exquisitely tender modelling of the figure's feet and back.

In their time, the mid-1950s, these works were welcomed into the fold of 'realist' sculpture; positioned in relation to artists such as Robert Clatworthy and Rosemary Young, whose work was exhibited by the Hanover Gallery.<sup>4</sup> The touchstones for these younger, figurative sculptors were from Europe: Giacometti, Giacomo Manzù, Marino Marini and Germaine Richier. It is startling to learn that it was Richier, not Giacometti or Picasso, whom David Sylvester proposed as the most influential contemporary sculptor, just as it is to realise how much better known her work was in 1950s London than today.<sup>5</sup> All the more important, therefore, that this exhibition offers a chance to consider figurative sculpture from this period anew, and each artist on his or her own terms.

RALPH BROWN  
First maquette in clay for  
*The Wall*, 1954  
Photo: Geoffrey Ireland

*Mother Begging with Child*,  
Paris, 1954  
Ink on paper  
21 x 16 cm

*Mother and Child*  
1954, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
100 cm high





Clatworthy's febrile surfaces, deriving from his technique of working plaster, are a specific means of communicating the energy latent within human and animal forms; Young suggests a more intimate response, often to the female form. Throwing the net wider to include the full range of sculptors exhibited here – Lynn Chadwick, Jacob Epstein, Geoffrey Clarke, Hubert Dalwood, Henry Moore, Kenneth Armitage, Bernard Meadows – merely emphasises the multiplicity of approaches, and Brown's own, particular position. A first glance identifies references to popular culture (Chadwick's dancers, Meadows' film directors), figures as votive items (Moore) or objects of hedonistic worship (Epstein). Honing our gaze, we become aware of the malleability of the figure as a vehicle for formal experiment: limbs and torso may be compressed in motion (Frink), lumped together (Dalwood), conjoined as in a crowd (Armitage) or geometrised (Chadwick again). Dalwood would abandon figuration altogether following the two works displayed here, realising that the body was no longer necessary as a hook for his mysterious, ritual objects. Clarke, if anyone, appears the outsider, for his precise, constructed use of iron. Yet Clarke, too, was transmuting shared sources of interest. In 1951, like Brown he travelled to France on an RCA scholarship, visiting Paris and the cave paintings at Lascaux. Like Clatworthy and others he responded to Marini's figures, producing his own, quirky *Horse and Rider* from iron and a piece of French driftwood.

A decade is a long time in twentieth-century sculpture, encompassing significant changes for each of these sculptors. Brown, in 1955, was praised for his lack of

MARINO MARINI  
*Seated Bather*  
1945, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
33 x 34 x 14 cm

ROBERT CLATWORTHY  
*Seated Figure 11*  
1958, Bronze  
Edition of 8  
21 x 12 x 13 cm

HUBERT DALWOOD  
*Standing Figure*  
1957, Skin Bronze  
Unique  
115 x 48 x 39 cm

RALPH BROWN  
*Seated Queen Maquette*  
1962-3, Bronze  
Edition of 9  
51 x 22 x 22 cm



generalisation: that he could convey perfectly the hollow under an ankle, the sag of a back – the working imperfections that make us unique and human.<sup>6</sup> By the early 1960s he had begun to liberate his figures from such specificity, cleaving head and ribcage in the superb *Turning Woman* (1962), exploring space and weightlessness in the series of swimmers (1959–60) or melding meat-porter and carcass in the enigmatic *Relief - Sarcophori* (1960). The works that conclude this exhibition chronologically impose a fresh symmetry on the figure, at the same time as it undergoes its most extreme metamorphosis. There is an unexpected violence to the *Seated Queen* (maquette, 1962–3), whose frame is bisected then masked by a bulbous sheath. Brown retrospectively described such figures as 'the ant queen, Catherine the Great, the Empress of China, Margaret Thatcher ... woman as monster'; admitting they were an unbidden interruption to his work.<sup>7</sup> At the time, Nevile Wallis invoked Richier, describing Brown's sculptures as 'aggressively lacerated females and insectile creatures resembling now a praying mantis, now some corrupt temple goddess with horned head-dress'.<sup>8</sup> This mutability, and the question of how far the body could be pushed and remain human, had been addressed in relation to Richier nearly a decade earlier.<sup>9</sup> Here we can contemplate Brown's own hybrids, unsettling yet still undeniably human: obstinate reminders of a vision that broadens and enriches the scope of twentieth-century figurative sculpture.

JUDITH LEGROVE

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John Berger, 'The Reaction of the Young Contemporaries', *New Statesman and Nation* (29 January 1955), p. 136.
- <sup>2</sup> Ralph Brown, Notes on France (ca 2008), Artist's Archive.
- <sup>3</sup> Ralph Brown, 'Some Digressions on Medardo Rosso', *Ark 15* (1955), p. 45–7.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for instance, John Berger's review of Clatworthy and Young at the Hanover Gallery, 'Two Views', *New Statesman and Nation* (19 February 1955), p. 244.
- <sup>5</sup> David Sylvester, 'On Germaine Richier', [exhibition catalogue], Hanover Gallery (1955). Richier's work was also included in 'London – Paris: new trends in painting and sculpture' at the Institute for Contemporary Arts (March–April 1950).
- <sup>6</sup> John Berger, 'Around and About' [review of 'Eight Young Contemporaries', Gimpel Fils], *New Statesman and Nation* (17 September 1955), p. 324.
- <sup>7</sup> Ralph Brown, conversation with Diana Eichler (1984), [typescript], Artist's Archive.
- <sup>8</sup> Nevile Wallis, 'Rodin and After', *The Spectator* (19 July 1963), p. 84.
- <sup>9</sup> Sylvester, *ibid.*



GERMAINE RICHIER  
*L'Orage*  
1947-8, Bronze  
Tate Collection, London  
200 x 80 x 52 cm

RALPH BROWN  
*Turning Woman*  
1962, Bronze  
Edition of 4  
153 x 56 x 45 cm





RALPH BROWN  
*Clochard*  
1955-6, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
30 x 168 x 38 cm

RALPH BROWN  
1928 - 2013



RALPH BROWN  
*Running Girl with  
a Wheel*  
1954, Bronze  
Edition of 9  
30 x 13 x 24 cm

RALPH BROWN  
Sketchbook drawing  
Paris, 1954





RALPH BROWN  
*Sketch for Cacao*  
1954, Pencil on paper  
Unique  
20.5 x 16 cm

RALPH BROWN  
*Cacao*  
1954, Bronze  
Edition of 8  
71 x 29 x 18 cm





RALPH BROWN  
Sketchbook drawing  
1955, Ink on paper

RALPH BROWN  
*Vernal Figure*  
1956-7, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
135 x 46 x 46 cm





RALPH BROWN  
*Woman Bathing*  
1960, Bronze  
Edition of 9  
36 x 14 x 16 cm

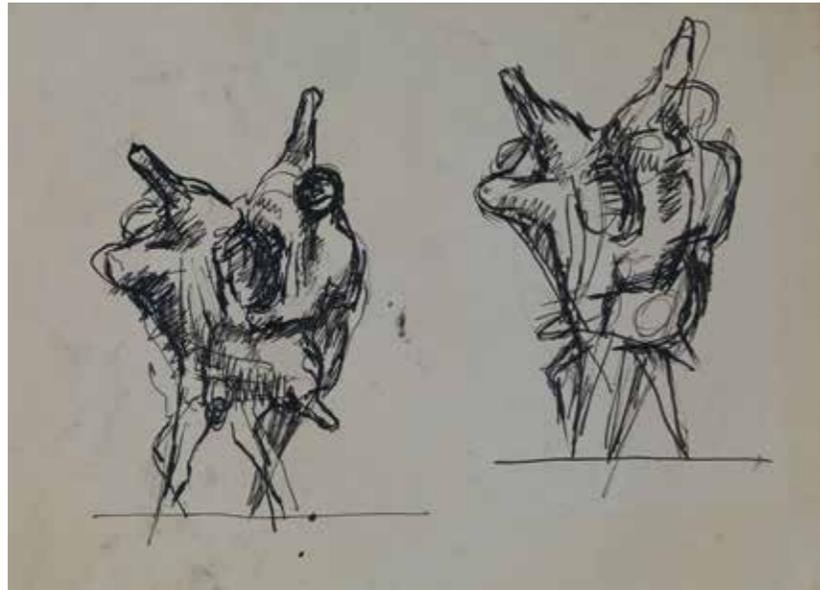
RALPH BROWN  
*Woman Bathing*  
1960, Pencil on paper  
Unique  
20 x 13 cm





RALPH BROWN  
*Man with a Carcass*  
1959, Bronze  
Edition of 10  
38 x 22 x 17 cm





RALPH BROWN  
*Studies for Meat Porters*  
c.1959, Ink on paper  
Unique  
14 x 18 cm

RALPH BROWN  
*Relief - Sarcophori*  
1960, Bronze  
Edition of 10  
56 cm high





RALPH BROWN  
*Man and Child - Relief*  
1960, Bronze  
Edition of 10  
64 cm high



RALPH BROWN  
*Man and Child*, 1960,  
cast concrete at  
Tulsa Hill School



RALPH BROWN  
*Swimming*  
1959-60, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
92 x 95 x 36 cm



RALPH BROWN  
Unveiling of  
*Fountain for Hatfield*  
1960-61, Bronze

RALPH BROWN  
*Swimming*  
1959-60, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
92 x 95 x 36 cm





RALPH BROWN  
Sketchbook drawing  
c.1959, Pencil

RALPH BROWN  
*Swimming Movement*  
1960, Bronze  
Edition of 7  
59 x 69 x 18 cm



RALPH BROWN  
*Swimming Woman*  
1960, Bronze  
Edition of 8  
41 x 41 x 33 cm





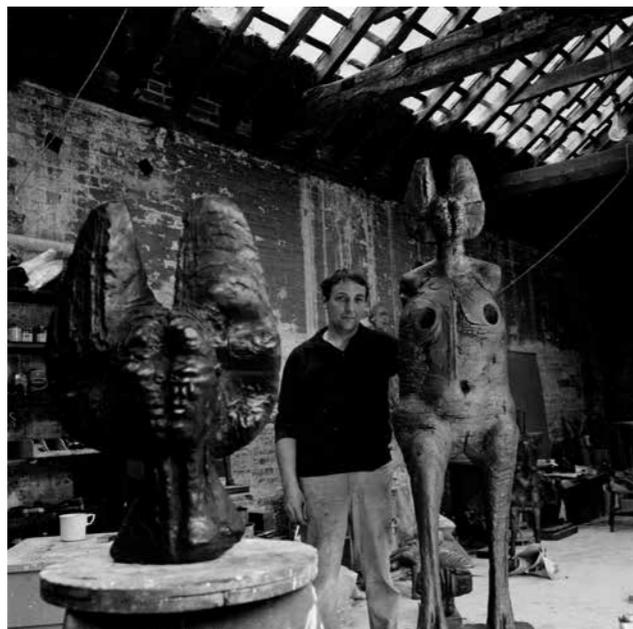
RALPH BROWN  
*Turning Woman*  
1962, Bronze  
Edition of 4  
153 x 56 x 45 cm

Sketchbook drawing  
1962, Pencil





RALPH BROWN  
*Female Head*  
1962, Aluminium  
Edition of 7  
29.5 x 28 x 12.5 cm



Ralph Brown with  
*Head, Queen* and  
*The Queen* in his studio  
in Digswell, c. 1963  
Photo: J Lewinski

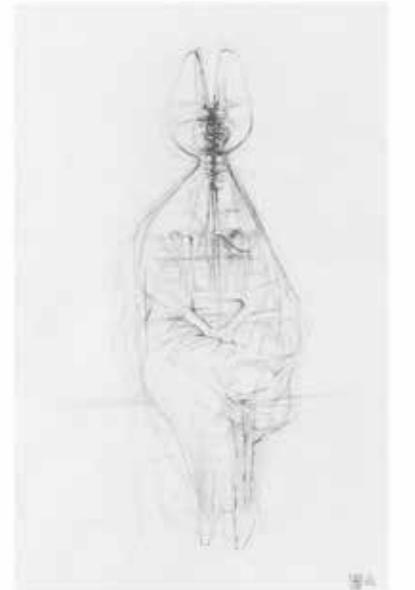
RALPH BROWN  
*Head, Queen*  
1963, Bronze  
Edition of 8  
43 x 30 x 21 cm





RALPH BROWN  
*Seated Queen Maquette*  
1962-3, Bronze  
Edition of 9  
51 x 22 x 22 cm

RALPH BROWN  
*Seated Queen*  
1962-3, Pencil on paper  
Unique



RALPH BROWN  
*Figure/Head Large*  
1964, Aluminium  
Edition of 7  
99 cm high



*Everything moves, everything runs, everything turns swiftly. The figure in front of us is never still but ceaselessly appears and disappears, owing to the persistence of images on the retina, objects in motion are multiplied and distorted, following one another like waves through space. Thus a galloping horse has not four legs but twenty and their movements are triangular.*

*In art, everything is conventional. The truths of yesterday are downright lies today. We again affirm that a portrait to be a work of art neither must nor may resemble the sitter. To depict a figure one must not paint that figure; one must paint its atmosphere.*

Umberto Boccioni quoted in Ralph Brown's sketchbook, 1954

*One feels the human form like a landscape, it's lying there like a beast about to move.*

Ralph Brown speaking on film, 2009

MARINO MARINI  
1901 - 1980



*Seated Bather*  
1945, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
33 x 34 x 14 cm



GERMAINE RICHIER  
1902 - 1959



*Woman No. 3*  
1952, Bronze  
Edition of 8  
19.5 x 14 x 8 cm  
Private Collection

*Warrior 14*  
1956, Bronze  
Edition of 8  
22 x 10 x 7.5 cm  
Private Collection



GEOFFREY CLARKE  
1924 - 2014



*Head*  
1953, Iron  
Unique  
28 x 6 x 7 cm



*Effigy*  
1951, Iron  
Unique  
27 x 81 x 16 cm

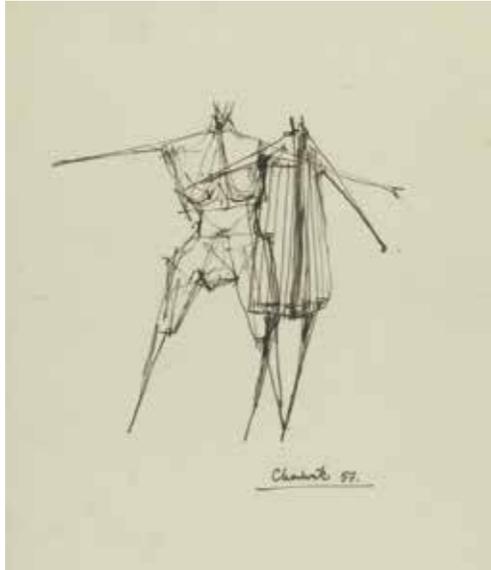
ROSEMARY YOUNG  
b.1930



*Women and Children*  
1953, Bronze  
Edition of 5  
21 x 37 x 11 cm



LYNN CHADWICK  
1914 - 2003



*Dancing Figures*  
1957, Ink on paper  
Unique  
33 x 40 cm

*Dancing Figures V*  
1955, Bronze  
Edition of 9  
40 x 15 x 14 cm



HENRY MOORE  
1898 - 1986

*Upright Motive Maquette No.12*  
1955, Bronze  
Edition of 9  
32 x 8 x 10 cm  
Private Collection





JACOB EPSTEIN  
1880 - 1959



*Young Bacchus*  
1956, Bronze  
Edition unknown  
26 x 14 x 5 cm

KENNETH ARMITAGE  
1916 - 2002



*Untitled*  
1957, Gouache and  
ink on paper  
76 x 21 cm

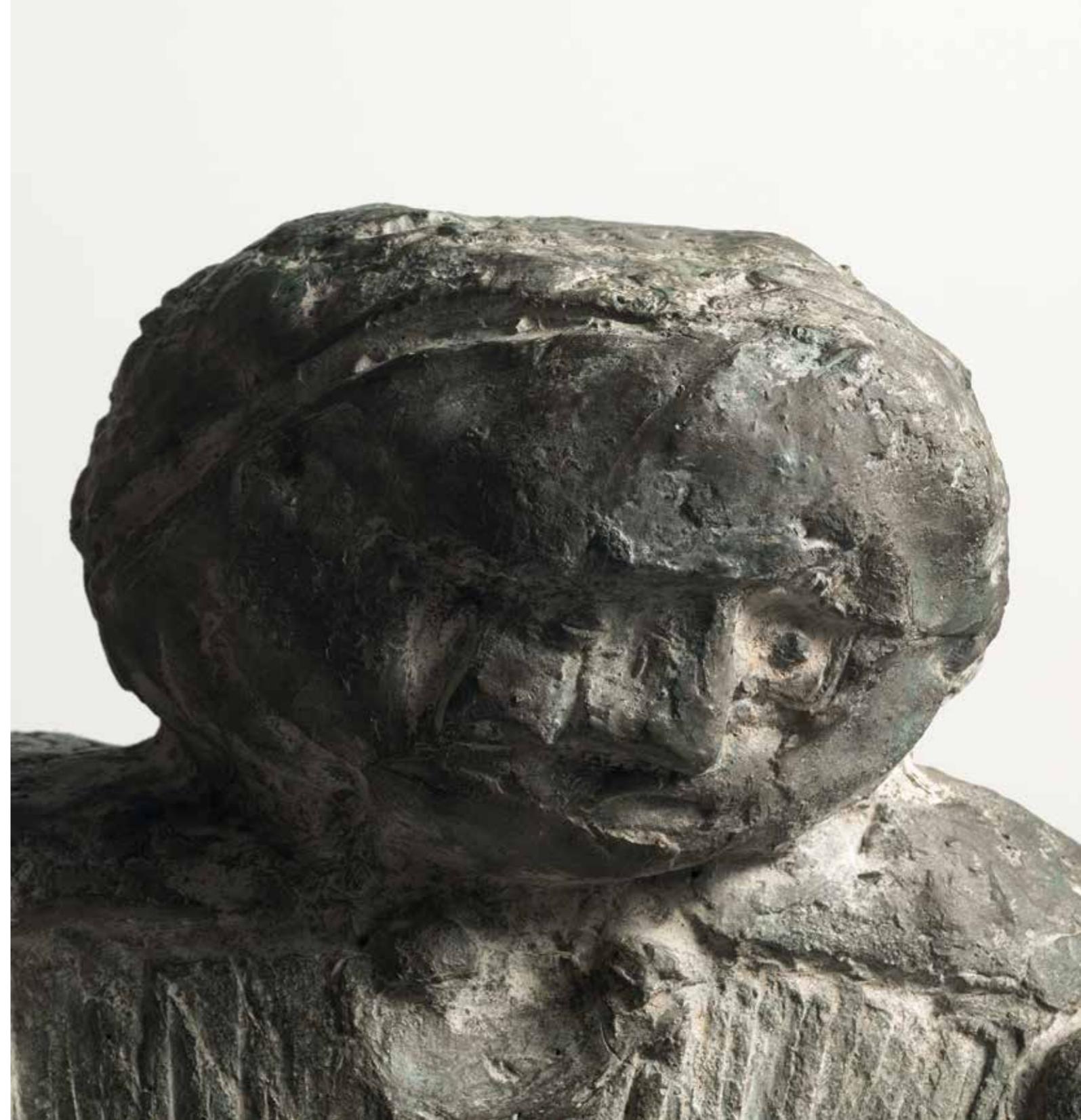
*The Seasons (Model A)*  
1956, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
70 x 45 x 26 cm



HUBERT DALWOOD  
1924 - 1976



*Standing Figure*  
1957, Skin bronze  
Unique  
115 x 48 x 39 cm



HUBERT DALWOOD  
*Reclining Figure*  
1957, Skin bronze  
Unique  
22 x 41 x 14 cm



ROBERT CLATWORTHY  
1928 - 2015



*Seated Figure 11*  
1958, Bronze  
Edition of 8  
21 x 12 x 13 cm



ELISABETH FRINK  
1930 - 1993



*Spinning Man V*  
1960, Lithograph  
Edition of 65  
86 x 73 cm

*Spinning Man*  
1960, Bronze  
Edition unknown  
12 x 27 x 11 cm



ROBERT CLATWORTHY  
1928 - 2015

*Walking Figure 1a*  
1962, Bronze  
Edition of 8  
40 x 9 x 15 cm



BERNARD MEADOWS  
1915 - 2005



*The Directors (Wall Reliefs)*  
1963, Bronze  
Edition of 6  
70 x 76 x 16 cm



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An exhibition of this scale and ambition does not come to fruition without the help of others so we have many to thank. Firstly to Carrie and Jasper Brown whose support and opening up Ralph's archive has been integral to the show. To Judith LeGrove for her insightful introduction in the face of a very broad subject. To the galleries, dealers and private lenders who have helped locate and lend works Keith Chapman, Blain Southern, Gimpel Fils, Osborne Samuel, Alan Wheatley, Connaught Brown and Sladmore Gallery. Our thanks are also extended to Steve Russell Studios for their skilful photography and Pangolin Editions for their continued support and assistance.

## PICTURE CREDITS

p.12 © Tate London, ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2016

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Printed to coincide with the exhibition:

*Ralph Brown and the Figure in the Fifties and Sixties*

14 September - 22 October 2016

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90 York Way

London N1 9AG

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ISBN 978-0-9956213-0-5

Designed by Pangolin London

Printed in Century Gothic and Corbel

Photography: Steve Russell Studios

Printing: Healeys Printers, Suffolk

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