



Royal Society of

**SCULPTORS**

**FIRST@108**  
PUBLIC ART AWARD

**RUPERT NORFOLK**



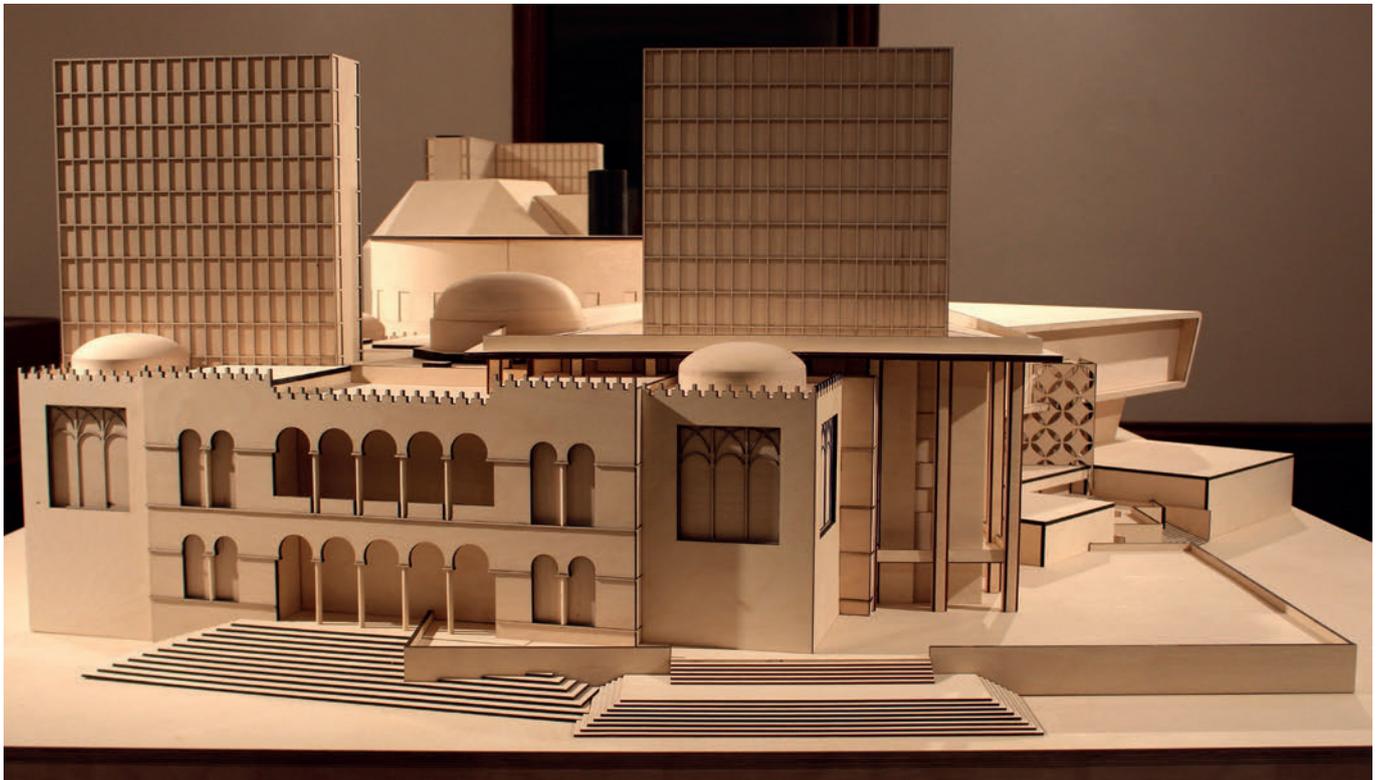
**I can remember my first steps. I can see it now, from my own diminutive point of view, my grandma's hands stretch out from the settee opposite.** The sofa is sludgy green with flowers. I'm not sure if it was particularly fashionable even then, back in the early 1980s. Someone else – I don't know who, they were behind me – is holding me. They let go. I step forward with a sense of fear and pride. The proverbial giant leap rendered as a tentative toddle. I can hear my family's encouragement. For a moment, I'm on my own. And then back, cradled in a pair of loving arms, to safety.

Or at least I swear I can. It hardly seems credible: I would have been barely past twelve months old. No study has supported the idea that one might retain memories from that age.

This (false?) memory comes flooding back when I think of *Playground*, Rupert Norfolk's new sculptural

commission for the Royal Society of Sculpture's biennial FIRST@108 Public Art Award. In uniform pale blue a set of toy furniture is laid in a tangled mess outside the society's headquarters, as if a child has abandoned its play: called to tea, it's getting dark, time for bed. Yet there's something amiss. Not only is the uniformity of the colour at odds with the usual garish palette of these toys, but the individual items morph into each other, slice each other, their solid forms bleeding with a seemingly unrestrained elasticity. A soft-edged car merges gracefully with a low slide, a set of toddler's swings and a baby seesaw interrupt a Wendy house without the slightest of resistance.

*"The effort needed to see things without distortion takes something very like courage" wrote Matisse in 1954. "This courage is essential to the artist, who has to look at everything as though he saw it for the first time: he has to look at life as he did when he was a child."*



This strange, dreamlike, concurrence of childhood playthings mimics the fitful ability of memory – in which fantasy and reality slide into one another. Memory can be thought of not as some indisputable video recording, capturing the past in a continuous swoop, but as a series of disparate images, flung up in the air and pieced together as they land randomly in the present. Something similar seems to have happened in Norfolk's sculpture. These objects, which were already childish reimaginings of everyday objects, shrunk to accommodate small bodies, have become even further confused in the artist's hands, entangled shadows of the real world: yet, as a child's imagination often does, they allow us to look upon these forms anew.

*Playground* is as unmonumental (from the eyes of an adult) as the surroundings of South Kensington are grand. The usual rule of bold and simple public sculpture is subverted in Norfolk's complexity of form. Indeed, it is telling that the purpose of the original toys are not merely to keep a child amused, but have a developmental learning use. These scaled-down simulacra of adult objects allow a child to familiarise themselves with the world outside the womb, safely providing a psychological ownership of space. If *Playground* evokes the presence of play in the public realm, it highlights how little civic space, especially in richer areas,

is actually used, occupied or 'owned' (mentally, emotionally) by the public at large. Norfolk's work subverts the streetscape from being mere means to travel A to B and makes it an active space, animated by the spectre of child's play. In doing so the artist affirms the fundamental aspect of good public art: that it is not public art because it is in the public realm; but that it serves a general public, intellectually, politically or otherwise.

This question of how form moulds action and narrates the world around us is one that the artist poses again in the galleries of RBS. The architecture of national libraries, like national monuments are prone to be, is grandstanding; their designers tasked with producing more than a building, but visions of national identity, sovereign stories. The National Library of Belarus is a space-age bauble expressing a bombastic modernity. The National Library of France is equally forward looking, but cool in steel and glass. Its 1960s counterpart in Australia however, with its classical columns, looks for a history the young country lacks. Sourcing digital 3D models from the Internet – of eight national libraries at random – CAD blueprints produced by amateur enthusiasts – Norfolk overlapped the data, producing a strange smorgasbord design. This he materialised in laser cut wood as a large architectural model. The grand steps of Greece's library sweep down from the geometric pattern



of Saudi Arabia's hi-tech facade. The domes of the National Library of Libya merge with the book depositories of Sweden and China. The result goes beyond the mixed up fashions of architectural PoMo, to become a disconcerting space, imaginary, as recognisable histories and styles hectically intermingle. National stories are challenged and intertwined, identities merge, the book collections are in disarray.

Both *Playground* and *National Libraries* provide glitches to reality. One can trace the childhood visions of the former back to earlier work by Norfolk. In *Beach* (2011/14) for example the artist took a casting of the ripples the tide had left in a stretch of sand, replicating it repeatedly as paving stones. These were laid as an imagined landscape, an apparently fossilised bay encroaching on two inland wooded areas (the first at the 2011 Lustwarande sculpture festival in Tilburg, The Netherlands, and then as a permanent installation in the grounds of the Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridgeshire), as if a stretch of the seaside has been conjured up in a game of make-believe. There is a masquerade of



materials – in which expectations and suppositions concerning the fabric of a sculpture are playfully subverted – that reoccurs in the artist's earlier work too. At first glance *Large Box*, a sculpture from 2010 for example, seems a rustic receptacle, made from rough-hewn branches. On second glance however the viewer discerns that the sticks are in fact a singular stick; cast and cloned in gypsum. A uniformly-positioned facsimile of a knot proves telltale. The overlapping of *National Libraries* has precedent too. *Table* (2014) seems to offer a kind of tabletop topography. Various shapes are vacuum formed into a Polyethylene workbench. Overlapping and intermingling it appears as if an abstract landscape is being depicted in miniature: look closely and the silhouettes of everyday objects – tools, toys, kitchen utensils; the things that lent themselves to the moulding process – soon become apparent.



Norfolk has won a sculpture prize. So be it, but better we think of him as a collagist. Not just how he takes disparate imagery or objects and combines them anew to something awkward, but also in the manner he patches and overlaps spaces of impossibility and zones of imagination, into the physical world. It's a task so easy for a child; for an adult, it is a strange and masterful skill.

– Oliver Basciano, January 2018