Matt Rugg:

Early and Late Works

12 November 2022 – February 2023

NewArtCentre.

Dr Harriet Sutcliffe
Curator; Matt Rugg retrospective – "Connecting Form"
Hatton Gallery, Newcastle University 2023-24

The Stuff of Matter

Matt Rugg was an English abstract artist whose work, as Jon Wood has remarked, "occupied a fascinating place between painting and sculpture." He is widely known as one of the leading advocates of Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton's pioneering Basic Course (often referred to as Basic Design), developed at King's College, Durham University (now Newcastle University), in the 1950s and 1960s. Throughout his practice, Rugg chose not to define his work as either painting, sculpture, drawing or construction. This resistance to traditional fine art categorisation gave him the freedom of execution to simply experiment and produce work by whatever means he saw fit. What he was doing within his practice, and to some extent his teaching, allowed him to be defiant and non-conformist. His work, therefore, does not fit neatly into one category or another but occupies an interesting space somewhere in between. Sculpture becomes drawing, drawing becomes sculpture, and painting becomes construction. There is a fluidity in his language and a freeness in his work that links and connects these disciplines to become his own vocabulary.

Rugg's work has a quality of functional objects and materials that are made to live in our cities. His work speaks between notions of manufacturing, craft and design, but exudes a handmade quality. It aligns to the process of fences, signs, cabling, and barriers, bolted and joined by simple and direct means, yet holds a deeper sense of craft with functional and yet honest ways of construction. The industrial landscape and manufacturing are ever present in his work. This fascination started when he was living, studying, and working in the North East, at King's College, Durham [1956-65]. This was the start of his passion for collecting things and finding delight in the abandoned and unwanted. Here he began picking up discarded old railway sleepers, near the docks by the river Tyne, to practice his carving, or cutting them up and incorporating them into his painted constructions. This would become a lifelong preoccupation for Rugg. Like a magpie, he searched out and found materials, objects, stencils, string, thread, industrial belts, wire, tennis court fencing, and galvanised metal ducting. These would all be squirrelled back to the studio to be incorporated, woven, manipulated, folded, or riveted with ease into his next lyrical construction. Sometimes these objects would become new prized possessions and would be preserved and kept amongst his treasured collection of objects, housed in glass cabinets of curiosities to be constantly referred to as if they were some rare precious jewels.

His coiled *Anatomy* works exude energy, rhythm, and melody. They contort themselves but demand your attention. They are a line, a drawing escaping from the page, looping, weaving, draping, linking to itself and the architecture of the space to which they cling.

Matt Rugg teaching on the Basic Course with Eduardo Paolozzi and Stephen Buckley, 1962
© Richard Hamilton Collection. National Arts Education Archive at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. RH/PS/1B

The viewer is drawn to these disobedient structures. They try and hold these forms in their hands or in their minds. Although it might be believed that these rapturous 'things' may have been a result of some kind of industrial process, they have, in fact, been made by the artist's hand through continuously twisting, winding and wrestling the material around itself. In this process, Rugg remarked that these works "make themselves". These robust, heavy, sophisticated but seemingly weightless structures seem to be a sheer celebration of what wire can do, and what happens when it is tamed into submission by Rugg, whilst at the same time, allowing the material to do what it does best.

Materials and ways of making exemplify the term coined by Victor Pasmore, "the developing process". With some pieces, a process of adaption and reappropriation are in constant flux, added to, sliced off, and reassembled into something new. In his wall-based constructions and drawings, there are defined bold blocks of material or texture, often contrasted with the delicacy of line or wire. These delicate gestures are like music rhythmically dancing upon a surface, or trying to penetrate deep into the surface, weaving through, behind and around.

The work included in this show has been made decades apart. The medium and material may change through different periods of Rugg's practice, but there is a consistency in his language, rhythm and motif that runs throughout the work.

Circular Construction 1964

Painted wooden construction
53.5 x 60 x 10 cm
21 x 23 ½ x 4 in.

Relief with Blue V 1963

Painted wooden relief
61 x 61 x 8 cm
24 x 24 x 3 in.

White Circle 1964

Painted wooden construction,
aluminium frame and
wooden backboard
92 x 92 x 35 cm
36 x 36 x 13 ½ in.

Curved Construction 1964

Painted wooden construction
on wooden backboard
111 x 110.5 x 39.5 cm
43 ½ x 43 ½ x 15 ½ in.

Boomerang 1962

Wooden construction
109.5 x 94 cm
43 x 37 in.

Circles and Shapes 1963

Painted wooden construction
45 x 41 x 12 cm
17 ½ x 16 ½ x 5 in.

Composition 1964

Painted wooden construction
122 x 91.5 cm
48 x 36 in.

Exhibited in the 1960 Final Degree Show at Hatton Gallery, Newcastle
Young Contemporaries 1961
Arts Council Award

Untitled, 1960
Oil on board
123 x 92.5 x 3 cm
48 ½ x 36 ½ x 1 in.

Introduction by Phyllida Barlow

Matt Rugg described the obsessive winding of the wire around itself as a way in which these works ‘make themselves’. If [his] drawings persistently strive to disrupt formal solutions, then so too do these hanging works. In its industrial manufacture, wire is extruded, pulled through and stretched as part of its production process. These works seem to continue that process. Their absolute wiriness is what they are. Their subject is the stuff itself. Wire is coiled for convenience at the end of its production. In these works the coiling process is continued, but not for convenience. This is the action of the wire itself in a dream state. It is coiling around itself over and over again, wrestling itself into muscular tendons which semi-collapse, their weight making gravity as much a part of them as the wire itself. These nameless, robust, heavy, but paradoxically elegant and seemingly light and almost airborne structures defy categorisation. They are drawings as well as ‘things’; they are ‘stuff’ as well as air; they are crafted as well as making do; they are without movement as well as taut with potential energy.

Matt Rugg, *Anatomy V*, 2010, galvanised wire

Matt Rugg, *Anatomy VI*, 2012, galvanised wire

Matt Rugg in his studio, 2011 © John Maddison

Matt Rugg 1935 – 2020

1935	Born in Bridgwater, Somerset
1959/60	Awarded BA Fine Art with First Class Honours from King's College, University of Durham in Newcastle, and showed in the Young Contemporaries, with the award of the RA-Arts Council prize in 1960
1960/61	Appointed Studio Demonstrator, a role assigned to the top graduate of the year. Showed in the Young Contemporaries, with the 1961 award of RA-Arts Council prize
1961/62	Studio Demonstrator role extended for a second year, with the award of a Hatton Travelling Scholarship; Matt visited collections in the Netherlands (1961), and Belgium and France (1962)
1962 – 65	Lecturer in Painting, Department of Fine Art, Newcastle University
1965 – 1983	Studio near Ravenscourt Park, West London
1965 – 67	Lecturer in Painting, Chelsea School of Art
1967 – 74	Lecturer in Sculpture, Chelsea School of Art
1976 – 96	Studio on Acre Lane, Brixton, South London
1974 – 94	Senior Lecturer in Sculpture, Chelsea School of Art
1994 – 2020	Studio in Brixton and also in West Norwood, South London

Solo Exhibitions

1963	New Art Centre, London
1965	Galleria del Naviglio, Milan
1966	New Art Centre, London
1970	New Art Centre, London
2011	Silent Notation, Chelsea FutureSpace, Grosvenor Waterside
2017	Notations - between drawing and sculpture, The Cut Arts Centre, Halesworth
2022	Notations – passages, intervals at The Cut Arts Centre, Halesworth
2022	Matt Rugg: Early and Late Works, New Art Centre, Roche Court
2023	Forthcoming retrospective Connecting Form, at the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle University, then touring, with a new documentary film and a monograph by Michael Bird to be published by Lund Humphries

Selected Group Exhibitions

1957/58	Man, Machine and Environment, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne
1958	Nine Young Contemporaries, at Gimpel Fils, London
1959-61	Young Contemporaries exhibition
1961/62	The London Group
1962	Sculptors Today and Tomorrow, Bear Lane Gallery, Oxford Twenty-Six Sculptors, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London New Painting 61-64, Arts Council New Art Centre, London
1963	Construction England, Arts Council of Great Britain
1964	New Art Centre, London Bradford City Art Gallery Queen's Square Gallery, Leeds
1965	British Sculpture in the Sixties, Contemporary Art Society at Tate Gallery, London
1965	Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol Painting 64-67, Arts Council British Sculpture in the Sixties
1966	Structure 1966, City Museum Cardiff, Welsh Committee of the Arts Council of Great Britain
1967	18th Salon de la Jeune Peinture, Musee de l'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris
1969	English Landscape Tradition in the Twentieth Century
1974	British Sculptors' Attitudes to drawings, Sunderland Arts Centre
1975	The Sculptor as a Draughtsman: works on paper, JPL Fine Arts, London
1979	Prizewinner, 2nd Tolly Cobbold/Eastern Arts National Exhibition
1985	Exhibitor 5th Tolly Cobbold/Eastern Arts National Exhibition
2017	Pioneers of Pop, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle University

Public Collections

Arts Council England

British Council

Hatton Gallery, Newcastle University

Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne

Leamington Public Art Gallery and Museum

Leicestershire Education Committee

Leeds City Art Gallery

New Art Centre, Roche Court

Tate Britain

Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Photograph of Matt Rugg in his studio, 2011, by John Maddison

Photograph of Matt Rugg teaching in Newcastle with Eduardo Paolozzi by permission of the National Art Education Archive, Yorkshire Sculpture Park

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