



**Bruce Murray Arnott:
Into the Megatext**

Book launch

Ashraf Jamal
Sven Christian



Bruce Arnott, installation view of *Broody*, 1977. Bronze, 350 mm (l). Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture, 2023. Photo: Sven Christian.

This discussion, between Ashraf Jamal and Sven Christian, took place at the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture on 28 May 2023, during the launch of *Bruce Murray Arnott: Into the Megatext* (2023), which is co-published by the Centre and Print Matters Heritage. The launch was accompanied by an exhibition of the same name, which ran from 22 April – 26 June 2023.

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Sven Christian [SC]: My involvement in this project began in 2020, when Mari Lecanides-Arnott approached me to work with her on a publication, but she and Bruce Arnott began to think about publishing a catalogue of his works as early as 2015. At the time, Arnott was working closely with Kim Gurney to develop the catalogue, which became an invaluable resource for both the book and exhibition, which grew out of the book, which is structured into three sections. The first is a series of essays by Mari Lecanides-Arnott, Elizabeth Rankin, Kim Gurney, Stella Papanicolaou, Trevor and Francis Thorold, Mugendi K. M'Rithaa, Gabriella Kaplan, Ashraf Jamal, Denise Penfold, and myself. The second section includes nine of Arnott's own writings, penned at different stages in his life. The final section comprises a sculpture catalogue, visual timeline, and a reflection by Tony Morphet, who was a close friend of Arnott's.

Ashraf was one of the first contributors we approached. In preparation, he read Arnott's inaugural lecture at UCT (2003), where he picked up on a quote by Arnott, that 'all sculptures are "points of entry" into the



great sculptural megatext.’ Ashraf titled his essay “Into the Megatext,” and we later adopted it as the title of the book and exhibition.

Ashraf Jamal [AJ]: Sven edited my last book, *Strange Cargo: Essays on Art* (2022). Thanks to his initial suggestion, I started reading Arnott and was struck not just by the idea that all sculptures are part of a greater megatext, but what the hell this ‘megatext’ was. The more I read Arnott’s vision of sculpture, the more fascinated I became by the interface of various global aesthetics. There was a syncretic vision of the history of sculpture, as well as this enormous investment in non-Eurocentric aesthetics. I was intrigued by his concern with Grecian and Romanesque sculptural forms — the centrality of the body and mind in

Bruce Arnott,
installation / detail
view of *Aphrodite*,
2015. Bronze, 985
mm (h). Villa-Legodi
Centre for Sculpture.
Photo: Sven Christian.

perfect synthesis; the tie between rationality and beauty. You will have heard the palindrome, "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty." It makes you believe that there's an inextricable link between the two. For me, there's something dangerous in this value system. While Arnott was invested in Romanesque and Grecian art, he was also very suspicious of its autocracy and its control of the global imagination; hence this shift towards an interest in African aesthetics.

At present, I think we're witnessing a shift in the history of South African art. There is a major global, primarily Western, interest in our African Modernist artists, of which Arnott is a great example; people who are on the verge of being neglected and erased from history are being brought back into, not national, but global history. I find this very exciting, so the timing of this book is perfect.

SC: In his inaugural lecture, Arnott speaks about the Renaissance as a 'brilliant but flawed deflection' from a cultural mainstream. I'd like to talk about how this intersects with the idea of representation, and from there, his approach to public space, beginning with his first public commission *Sphinx* (1977) for the Baxter Theatre.

AJ: In the mid-nineteenth century there was this phenomenon called 'statuemia.' Suddenly, sculptures of leaders in business, science, politics, the arts, and music were popping up all over Europe. At present we're experiencing, for lack of a better term, 'statue dysmorphia.' It's easy to cut off Rhodes' nose. The symbolism is banal,



Bruce Arnott, *Sphinx*, 1977. Bronze, 1200 mm (l). Collection: Baxter Theatre, University of Cape Town. Image courtesy of the Bruce Murray Arnott Archive.

and statues are largely the embodiment of that, especially statues that embody white mythology. Arnott side-steps this because his sculptures aren't emblematic of any imperial heritage. Nobody is going to run over to *Sphinx* with a hammer, because it doesn't represent anything abhorrent. His work is tied to something else. It's an ego-less art form. Its links are more primal and collective; to a greater sense of being,

with its connections to the spirit world, the natural world... All of these are locked into a much more age-old value system.

SC: When you talk about statuemania and the monumental I think about *Citizen*, which was installed outside the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) in 1986. He produced that work in response to Anton van Wouw's statue of Paul Kruger in Pretoria. It was a spoof of sorts, that also references Mr. Punch; a recurring motif in much of his work. Although commonly associated with British culture, Mr. Punch has its own lengthy history. It dates back to the time of Constantinople, the invasion of Turkey in the fifteenth century, and the introduction of Byzantine mime, which gave rise to the figure of Pulcinella, who travelled and morphed throughout Europe, going by different names, dressed in different guises. *Citizen*, to me, reads a bit like Winston Churchill — this tank-like, overly-confident figure moving full-steam towards an unknown future. It's telling that Arnott should refer to *Citizen* as a 'modern day *condottiere*, without a horse.' *Condottieres* were often depicted and memorialised on horseback, giving the sculptors of old a headache: how to get this big heavy bronze to balance on these spindly legs? Leonardo da Vinci eventually found a way around that, but Arnott picks up on that history in the construction of *Citizen*. There's this constant, varied set of references at play in all of his work.

AJ: Sven and I have altercations around this artwork because he's got a great sense of humour and I lack one. When it came to the book I said, 'Don't put *Citizen* in my article!' Although I understand its roots



Bruce Arnott, *Citizen*, 1986. Bronze, 2250 mm (h). Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the Bruce Murray Arnott Archive.

— its links to Churchill, Robert Hodgkin's businessman, or Ubu Roi — I didn't want that sculpture to accompany my essay. The key thing for me is that it's also tied to that African Modernist moment. Again, the intelligence of this work... Nobody is going to go out and say, 'Here is a white imperialist, let's knock this sculpture down.'

SC: That actually did happen, shortly after it was installed. At the time, the ANC offices were across the way from JAG, and *Citizen* was interpreted as a celebration of capitalism. Its nuance was lost within the political climate of the time. But he also writes about how the sculpture acquired a patina of grilled sausage from the nearby street vendors, and how his cane was constantly liberated for scrap metal, which Arnott really enjoyed. He liked its site-specificity and how the artwork generated this range of responses.

I know that you were more drawn to his early work, from the 60s, when his work was quite geometric; these abstracted forms. The oldest work on exhibition, *Winged Figure*, was made in 1962. It's one of the works that you were drawn to, alongside *Numinous Beast* (1979), *Composition* (1961), *Sphinx*...

AJ: Earlier I mentioned the word 'primal,' which is not something that is locked in the past. The primal is *now*. It's how we engage the world. Arnott captures the depth of our primal energies and forces, rather than foregrounding a representative or hubristic idea of what a self or being or character or moment 'should' look like. If history is structured



TOP LEFT: Bruce Arnott, *Composition*, 1961. Wonderstone, 506 mm (h); **TOP RIGHT:** Bruce Arnott, *Winged Figure*, 1962. Bronze, 500 mm (h); **BOTTOM:** Bruce Arnott, *Numinous Beast*, 1979. Bronze, 2800 mm (h). Collection: Iziko South African National Gallery. Images courtesy of the Bruce Murray Arnott Archive.



TOP LEFT: Bruce Arnott, *Punch III*, 1979. Bronze, 633 mm (h). On loan from the Jack Ginsberg Collection;
TOP RIGHT: Bruce Arnott, *Rites of Demeter I*, 1994. Bronze, 463 mm (h). Images courtesy of the Bruce Murray Arnott Archive.

causally — time past, present, future — then he snaps it vertically, not because he wants to commemorate some lost past but to say, ‘No. This is what defines us now.’ These issues are always there, at all points in time. That’s where the work’s currency is important. For example, there’s a graphic, archetypal energy that can be clearly dated in his *Punch* works, but there are other archetypal works that are harder to read iconographically. I suppose I’m more drawn to these, because they tap into other energy fields. His fertility goddesses are a good example, as is *Sphinx*. There’s this amorphous, raw force that emerges.

He may as well be making these things out of mud and clay. *Sphinx* is very rooted. It's wonderfully grounded.

SC: That artwork is a fountainhead. It sits at the entrance to Baxter Theatre, and he made a sphinx because they have this sentinel quality, but I also love how unthreatening *Sphinx* is. I don't look at it and think it's going to devour me if I don't get the riddle right.

AJ: Yes, it doesn't give you a cold sweat. The energy you get is a warm. Its graphic quality is in the mark making, in the sculpture itself.

SC: Mari Lecanides-Arnott writes about the place of drawing in Arnott's work in her essay. He taught at Michaelis for a long time, and this approach seems to have rubbed off on a number of his students. We recently had a panel discussion around the *Layers* exhibition, during which Ângela Ferreira, who was one of his students, spoke about the place of drawing in her work. I could almost hear Arnott in what she was saying. He produced a lot of drawings, not only as preparatory sketches — those drawings included in the vitrines — but as you say, through these incisions in the making of his work. *Sheep* (2016) is a great example. There's a small wooden maquette of the work upstairs, which stems from *Gem* (1993–4), a work that he made while undergoing Jungian dream analysis in the early 90s. It's an egg-shaped, wooden form, cut into segments of equal thickness, on which he painted different dreams that he'd recorded in his journal. But the sculpture has this negative space where the ear should be. If I were to sculpt something, I'd probably make a protrusion for an ear, but he



works in reverse, and a lot of the details that you see in his sculptures are produced from simple, linear incisions; a line that denotes or breaks the form...

AJ: To what extent are his shapes rotund, or exclamatory? A lot of his sculptures create density, warmth, volume. An artist like Brancusi is much more austere, but I don't see anything daunting in how he presents things to the world. He doesn't want to aggress people, but to entice them, gently. That's a very important personality trait. Speaking about his students, we forget that he was a deeply loved teacher. The temperament of the person deserves to be recognised. He wasn't just gifting his knowledge but his spirit, his energy, and his students were adopting that and translating it in their own ways.

SC: His role as an educator and curator is addressed in Elizabeth Rankin's essay. It's something that Mari really pushed for in her editorial capacity — to tap into different spheres of Arnott's life. He taught at Michaelis, but there was a time, prior to moving to the Underberg,

TOP LEFT:
Bruce Arnott,
installation view
of *Gem*, 1993–4,
accompanied by
Arnott's dream
journal and a
drawing of *Gem*.
Villa-Legodi Centre
for Sculpture;

TOP RIGHT:
Bruce Arnott, *Sheep*,
2015. Bronze,
985 mm (l). Iona
Wine Farm. Image
courtesy of the
Bruce Murray
Arnott Archive.

when he worked at the South African National Gallery. Rankin's essay deals primarily with this period: the exhibitions he curated, his approach to acquisitions... He was quite instrumental in acquiring the work of black artists into the SANG collection in the late 60s, at a time when that was almost unheard of. He'd also just spent time at the Courtauld Institute researching the influence of West African sculpture on Europe. It's that long arm that you were intuiting in his work, that reaches into different periods in history.

AJ: He was also infinitely more progressive than we are now. We're going through a great deflection again: we react against everything, we don't embrace anything. We have a very stunted idea about what is important. His focus on the importance of West African art on Europe — that broader sense of knowledge — isn't being taught to students. They aren't being given that scope of knowledge to be able to position South Africa, and Africa, within a global framework. Arnott was a planetary being. It's not just about Africa versus Europe, but that there are other sculptural forms from elsewhere — Easter Island, Polynesia... It's not just a north/south dichotomy, in terms of the energy field, and that worldliness, his attentiveness to history, is profoundly lost.

SC: *Oracle* (1988) has roots in Taoist philosophy. The work is comprised of these diagram-like forms, set up in a circular shape.



Bruce Arnott, *Oracle (water feature)*, 1988. Paarl granite, 7000 mm (d). Collection: University of Cape Town, Chancellor's Walk. Image courtesy of the Bruce Murray Arnott Archive.

Mari Lecanides-Arnott: He really tried to find common ground, of which there is plenty. He was looking at all of these threads.

AJ: I never met Bruce Arnott. I never listened to him speak. But reading him, his life was so vivid to me. I was overwhelmed by his lectures; I could feel his voice, his person, the qualities of life that he espoused, and the grace, fulness, and kindness of the positions that he took about art history. Even when he challenges, say, Grecian aesthetics, he doesn't sit there and lambast it. He's not an aggressive personality. Looking at his notes on *Oracle*, I see the words 'disc', 'void', 'water'. They're simply jotted down, in your vocabulary Jeremy [Wafer], but articulated entirely differently. The key thing is what makes that sculpture singular; what makes that man make that kind of work.

SC: One of Arnott's texts is a speech, delivered for the opening of an exhibition at Michaelis in 1990. At the time, Albie Sachs' now famous paper had been doing the rounds, and he'd been invited to give the opening address, but couldn't, for whatever reason. Arnott then wrote the speech, structuring it in this hypothetical, tongue in cheek form that played with the idea of what Sachs might have said; in some way, projected his own views. There's one part that seems relevant to this discussion, namely: 'I would have liked him to have said that nationalism in any form is a selfish and exclusive creed, and that he was bored of nationalists from right and left, jumping at their own shadows because these are in fact the same shadow, and that the whole ugly charade is not conducive to making art.'

AJ: My friends and I were discussing the Tate Britain makeover, right now — that’s an ugly charade if there ever was one. You have a painting from the 1700s, of a person drinking tea, but then you have a wall text about the history of plantations and the exploitation of people — this text-heavy, polemical discourse. It impacts negatively on what one is able to teach, what one can and cannot say. In his case, Arnott allowed for the possibility of grace, kindness, generosity — the search for knowledge. These things endure. They’re not defined by ideology or politics. That’s what’s so beautiful. It’s very heartening that Arnott is finally being integrated into global discourse. It’s so urgent and so necessary.

FOLLOWING PAGE:

Installation views of
*Bruce Murray Arnott: Into
the Megatext* (2023)
at Villa-Legodi Centre
for Sculpture. Featuring
works on loan from
the Brenthurst Library,
Johannesburg (*Alma
Mater maquette*, 1995)
and the Jack Ginsberg
Collection (Cull, 1980),
amongst others.



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Cover

Bruce Arnott, installation view
of *Clockwork Klopjag*, 1985.
Bronze, 400 mm (h), Villa-
Legodi Centre for Sculpture.
Photo: Sven Christian.

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VILLA-LEGODI Centre for Sculpture

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