

Ledelle Moe, **Fold**, 2022

### Vulnerable Monumentality

Our conversations about the disintegration of the monumental – at times, bemoaned and at times, celebrated – seem to be centuries long. Ledelle Moe is offering a perspective that steers away from either extreme, reflecting our age’s ambivalence towards modes of expression that entomb memory, the body and the self within hard surfaces or atop pedestals.

For her first solo exhibition with SMAC Gallery, Cape Town, the artist is presenting *Fola*, a large-scale, yet intimate, exploration of the limits and the potential within the tradition of figurative sculpture. It is the scale of the work, somehow always unexpected, that first demands the viewer’s attention as we confront a human-like figure caught in what may be interpreted as either temporary or permanent repose. It is a body, a shell and a mound, all at the same time. It seems to be morphing into its own medium of concrete and steel, its structural seams are exposed while its boundaries remain uncertain. Swaying between shape and shapelessness, *Fola* appears to be melting into the space of the gallery while insisting on being present with its particular kind of heavy materiality. It is neither an emphatic marker of space and time nor an exercise in deconstruction, despite its modular steel structure. It offers a space away from the linearity of history, a site of refuge, a retreat from the certainty of its narratives.

I am reminded of the late 18th-century drawing, in red chalk and brown wash, by Henry Fuseli that captures the anxieties and the melancholy of the advancing modernity. It is titled *The Artist’s Despair Before the Grandeur of Ancient Ruins* (1778–79). Dwarfed by the enormous fragment of a lost antique sculpture the protagonist is depicted as overcome by grief for both the irretrievable past, the impotence of his own generation and the uncertainty of the future. The gigantic scale of the fragment reinforces the scale of this loss and the disintegration of everything solid that “melts into air” in the hands of time and the relentless modern age – the process that Marx would so vividly describe seventy years later<sup>1</sup>.

In 1994 art historian Linda Nochlin discusses Fuseli’s drawing as capturing not only the zeitgeist on the precipice of the modern age but also anticipating the central role fragmentation (and cropping as one of its manifestations) will play in the representational strategies of modernity<sup>2</sup>. Fragmentation is an important element in Ledelle Moe’s language. It is embedded in her work, but it is not used in simple juxtaposition to the lasting and the monumental; hers is

a fragmented, wounded monumentality from the start. All her sculptural works begin as pen drawings. Intensely worked, yet also ephemeral, the drawings combine the fierce certainty of mark making with the drifting, abandoned and disintegrating forms. The artist then replicates the intensity of the drawn lines in the voluminous structure of welded and bent steel rods; it serves as a kind of carcass for the final work. Once complete, it is cut into modular components and can be taken apart or assembled, thus closing or opening the void or the cavernous space inside. In the final stage, this spatial steel drawing is given its body by applying concrete, which is moulded and carved in a short time allowed before setting.

These materials, with their industrial pedigree and modernist lineages, may seem unlikely catalysts for conversations about vulnerability, emotional exposure and the exhausted certainties of our times. Hard, uninviting, even bleak, the artist insists on making them home for human connection; revealing fragility behind the hard surfaces; making exposed steel framing read like surgical sutures; carving into them a sense of piercing vulnerability, undermining their known histories. The enormous sculpture that starts as an awe-inspiring and even overwhelming shape ends up crawling under our skin asking for compassion.

The connection between the work and the viewer then becomes an exchange. If Fuseli's broken-off sculpture fragment and the grieving artist hailed the end of the old, and the inevitability of the modern, Moe's *Fola* offers the viewer a space to retreat, if momentarily, from the past-future highway. It reflects the sensibility of our age caught between the newly uncertain past and the equally uncertain future, neither of them holding promises or ideals. It is an opportunity to step away from the lineal sense of time, into a space that can offer a refuge, a detour to a place of recognition of both strength and vulnerability. For a brief moment, the scepticism and the sense of alienation may be suspended while we look for a soft landing inside the quietly breathing, concrete and steel sarcophagus.

Text by Olga Speakes

<sup>1</sup>K. Marx, 1848, *The Communist Manifesto*, as quoted in M. Berman, 1982, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, NY.

<sup>2</sup>L. Nochlin, 1994, *The Body in Pieces. The Fragment as Metaphor of Modernity*. Thames and Hudson.