

SHAUN GLADWELL TAKES A RUNNING LEAP OFF MIKE PARR'S UNTITLED SCULPTURE. RUINS, ICEBERGS, WAVES AND A JUMP — GLADWELL ENGAGES WITH PARR IN A WHOLLY UNIQUE WAY.

ARTIST'S CHOICE: MIKE PARR'S UNTITLED

SHAUN GLADWELL

If architecture for Goethe is 'frozen music' then at some point that sonic structure exploded into shards of feedback and distortion. One of these sharp fragments landed near the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney, in the form of a sculpture: Mike Parr's *Untitled*, 1988 (on loan from the John Kaldor Collection).

Moments after seeing the work for the first time, I was taking a hard run at it and launching into the air. But before getting into this, a quick note on how to find Parr's work.

It's best to sneak up on the AGNSW from behind, the Woolloomooloo side. It's the informal approach — no neoclassical façade appearing through the trees. Parr's sculpture flanks the gallery's offices, near the land bridge, a giant wedge rising from the cut grass, rendered in Naples yellow concrete.

Prima facie, the wedge looks less like sculpture than its immediate neighbours, the William Tucker, *Prometheus (for Franz Kafka)*, 1989–90, and Henry Moore, *Reclining figure: Angles*, 1980. In this company, Parr's work could be mistaken for the foundations of an aborted building. But we *know* it was designed this way — born as a ruin, or, as Robert Smithson would have it, a 'ruin in reverse'. I think of the work as embracing the aesthetic of the future. It's what so many urban forms will look like not so long from now — fragments and chunks, half buried and obscured. I can't resist these Ozymandian reflections before the wedge. The well-maintained surrounds throw Parr's raw and weathered aesthetic into sharper relief.

Up close, it's possible to see the handling of the concrete rendering — tactile and brittle. My internal protractor guesses the wedge is angled at about 30 degrees. A second,

smaller, wedge branches from the first, and without any specific reason, there seems to be a complex subterranean volume, a sculptural netherworld, and all I'm seeing is the iceberg's tip.

Perhaps this work is the antipodean version of the enigmatic monoliths of Arthur C. Clarke's novel and Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). (The film depiction of the monolith, or Tycho Magnetic Anomaly 1 as per Clarke, looked suspiciously like a John McCracken or David Smith sculpture.) Parr's piece is an irregular monolith and yet just as esoteric. The past, present and future have collapsed into this concrete anti-monument. It's one piece in a giant ontological jigsaw puzzle that we will never completely understand.

Untitled is closely related to Parr's overall aesthetic: direct, unapologetic, clear, at times violently confronting, and yet politically sensitive. I imagine the sculpture critically 'wedging' itself within a discourse of various 'isms', from formalism to minimalism and even specific architectural styles such as brutalism. All this is evident in the work, however it's the relationship to the viewer's own body that is something also very Parr and must be experienced empirically with the sculpture en plein air.

On occasion, the work has made me hungry. From a distance it's easy to see the sculpture as a giant slice of cake buttered with lemon icing, or a slab of polenta. Clearly, my stomach drives these hallucinations only moments before I've reached the AGNSW cafe.

Ruins, cake, polenta, a monolith, perhaps the reductive cross-section of a breaking wave and potentially an extreme sports facility, it's the deceptive simplicity of this work that

allows it to perpetually become other. It is foremost a sculpture with only symbolic function; however, others will want to actually 'use' the wedge and find new functions for it. Mountain-bike riders will immediately perceive this sculpture as a launch ramp, screaming to be jumped from; the *traceur* and *traceuse* of parkour will read it as a runway to the sky; and, if set in a paved, smooth space, then without a doubt skateboarders would be all over it as well.

I didn't hesitate when spotting the sculpture for the first time many years ago. I gave myself a decent 10-metre sprint, building up enough speed to mount the flat spine of the wedge, which now looked like a steep gangplank, and launch from the top, veering away from the AGNSW towards Mrs Macquaries Chair. I also consciously launched feet first, not the headfirst position of Yves Klein's 'leap into the void' as, unlike Klein, I was doing this for real and wanted some chance of survival.

Now, after many jumps, some of which were on mountain bikes, I cannot dissociate this artist's surname from 'parkour'. My next statement might be totally misunderstood, but it's possible to get a 'serious rush' from this sculpture (and at least one second and 2 metres of airtime). As in so many of Parr's works, there is a clear connection *from* the work *to* the body of the viewer — a visceral path. Also indicative of Parr's overall oeuvre is the fact that *Untitled* offers no soft landing.

OPPOSITE
Shaun Gladwell with Mike Parr's *Untitled*, 1988
Concrete, dimensions variable
Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust, Sydney,
on loan from the John Kaldor Collection
Photograph Jamie North

