

Recalling Bob Law

This book affords a welcome opportunity to attempt an overall assessment of the life and work of this important artist from the late 1950s to his death in 2004. Bob Law's contribution to British Avant-Garde art was crucial but often only dimly understood or acknowledged yet I would contest that he quietly charted a profoundly influential course. His metaphysical mapping of experience and form links constructive tendencies in post war St Ives to investigations of phenomenology, mistakenly referred to as British Minimalism, and thence to a post minimal, post conceptual use of the vernacular in the 1980s known at the time as The New British Sculpture.¹ I was fortunate enough to know Law when I was a very young student in 1961, a privilege that allows me to take the long view based on personal recollection. Hopefully I will also be able to justify my narrative through observation of the work in something approaching objective art history.

Growing up in Richmond and Twickenham in the 50s and 60s there were several striking role models for an aspiring young artist; it was that sort of place. The most colourful of these had to be Bob Law, he was a decade older than most of my friends but he was always a stimulating contributor to late night discussions that ranged from hilarity to profundity. Most of all I recall those eyes always surrounded by laugh lines questioning and faintly mocking. He never paraded his already significant reputation as an artist. When I first met him at the house of Paul Riley, a mutual artist friend, and later at Eel Pie Island he was working as a builder's carpenter and he found me casual labouring work at the site he was working on. At that time most aspiring artists worked on the buildings in one capacity or another. It was only when I later went back to his studio that I realised he was not only an artist but a very significant one with a room full of very serious works that were way beyond my understanding at the time.

Law often confounded me with his Puckish shifts of mood, his philosophical musings and most of all by his ability to embrace the contradictions of humorous self deprecation and deeply held conviction in his art. He ridiculed the art world where he occupied an uncomfortable edge and yet exposed us to penetrating and passionate raves about his often disturbing psychological and metaphysical insights into art and philosophy. At that age I had not come to understand that belief and scepticism can co-exist in the heart and mind without any trace of bad faith. I had not heard of Yves Klein and his deliberate strategy of proposing extreme metaphysical beliefs while creating material evidence to seemingly undercut our belief in his sincerity. I had not yet met Anselm Kiefer whose laughter at the inevitable failure of the search for transcendence in art accompanies his intense listening for an answer that never

¹ Like Bob Law a number of British artists, many of them associated with the Lisson Gallery, extended the material repertoire of Minimalism enabling a new narrative form to emerge. This loose group of artists had something akin to Arte Povera and yet had more explicit sources in Minimalism and Conceptual art. Take for example Tony Cragg's New Stones Newton's Tones, a rectangle of plastic detritus arranged on the floor according to the spectrum of colours. This was clearly based on the structural premise of Carl Andre and related to the more rustic forms of Richard Long but it invested the structure with connotations of science and social commentary. Bob Law had been charting this course for decades.

comes.² I knew little of Duchamp for that matter or of Joseph Beuys but when I did discover them and their fascinating and enigmatic worlds I kept being reminded of earlier late night conversations with Bob Law. Like these great artists he was humorous and urgently sincere. All of them found life mysterious and left it more so while the sound of uncontrollable laughter still hangs in the air.

In 1964 Law painted some very large canvasses in red yellow and blue that he joked could be titled as *Who Is Afraid of Barnett Newman* An obvious play on Newman's *Who is afraid of red yellow and blue* and Albee's play *Who is afraid of Virginia Wolf* Although he later virtually disowned this series I think that the ideas around the series marked a significant step in his evolution as an artist. In 1969 he began work on another series including very large stretched cotton canvases around the margin of which he had drawn a black line with the date inscribed in the corner.³ He told me that he thought of these as *Nothing to be afraid of* a title he did use that year. This escalation of the rhetoric of not-fearing Newman or not-fearing nothing seemed to me to arise from his struggle with scepticism and belief that may have brought him to recognise existential terror.

When Law first showed me one of the *Nothing to be afraid of* pieces he was in a light hearted mood and joked about the Tate acquiring or showing 'nothing'. It was discomfoting to an enthusiastic disciple, as if Yves Klein owned up to not having access to 'immaterial pictorial sensitivity'.⁴ Later that night in a different mood he returned to the painting and its possible title. 'You know how people talk to someone suffering from a breakdown; "There there, there is nothing to be afraid of". Well that has to be the most horrifying thing anyone could think of to say. Nothing is precisely what there is to be afraid of'. I knew exactly what he meant from personal experience since someone close to me had been afflicted with a severe nervous breakdown. During one of her shattering attacks she also explained to me as I tried to comfort her and find the cause of her panic that she was not afraid of anything; but as she said it her eyes conveyed that this absence was indeed the source of her profound terror. In a way Bob's revelation helped me to get a handle on the meaning of our horror of the void. Nothing to fear but fear itself might be a more benign way of looking at it.

I was later to discover that these vast 'empty' canvasses and the line that explored their margins actually followed an earlier model for feeling his way into the world of nature that started with his *Field drawings* in the late 1950s in Cornwall. He has spoken of lying in a Cornish field visualising the limits of the space around him, the way trees grew and the clouds passed overhead.⁵ He was interested in classical ideas of measurement such as the figure of Vitruvian man and he later scaled his canvases to the reach of his own body. This idea of scale and taking the experiencing human body as the starting point for a map of the world seems to persist in one way or

² This decription is paraphrased from a passage by Peter Schedahl on Pollock, Peter Scheldahl: 'Les Drippings' from *The Hydrogen Juke Box: selected writings* ed Robert Storr Berkeley University of California Press.

³ The Tate gallery own a precursor for 'Nothing to be afraid of' 'Drawing 24.4.60' 679 x 1006 mm from 1960. This work also consists of nothing but a hand drawn margin although it is a bit more lyrical in its marking than the severe biro line he later moved on to.

⁴ Yves Klein infamously sold immaterial pictorial sensitivity to collectors who paid him in gold leaf and received a certificate declaring that they now possessed this sensitivity.

⁵ 'Bob Law in conversation with Richard Cork' excerpts of which were published in *10 Black Paintings 1965-70*, catalogue Museum of Modern art, Oxford, 1974.

another through all aspects of his work. By 1959-60 the simple rectangle of the field with the trees, stars and clouds in the margins became an empty rhomboid with nothing but a date in the bottom right hand corner, exactly the form that reappears in the later canvases. Unlike a Minimalist drawing that ostensibly should have been affect free Law's line feels its way inside the edge of the canvas tracing an imperfect path. This path is full of the pathos and uncertainty of spatial exploration. Like a blind man feeling his way through an empty room.

Law has spoken about the necessity of imperfection that allows the mind to grasp a form and travel along it in a way that perfection disallows.⁶ This is a profoundly human way of framing the world and one that makes perfect sense for an artist who is a craftsman with a well developed feel for material. Law's art at its most severe is also at its most bodily it's most alive. It is also in keeping with his study of Zen philosophy in which the circle has a start and a finish and is as much to do with the human body and the motion of the wrist as it is with geometry. Interestingly Richard Serra's later oil stick drawings such as *Ishmael*, 1987 are strikingly similar to Bob Law's 1960 *Closed drawings* and the paintings that followed them in the ICA exhibition that year. I suggest that far from making Bob a Minimalist this shows how even Serra escapes from the absolute reductive interpretation of his art. Certainly there is nothing 'affect free' about standing next to a Serra steel wall. Serra's oil stick rhomboids within rectangles of paper generate the same powerful sense of weighty leaning into corners that we associate with the sculpture.



Law went on to paint another kind of nothing, *the black paintings* starting in 1965 and continuing into the 1970s, that also had their origin in early *closed drawings* done in St Ives in 1960-61. He was amused by the acceptance of these apparently minimalist

⁶ Bob Law in *The Necessity for Magic in Art* 1964 a paper prepared for Sussex University. Excerpts reprinted in the catalogue of the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition *Bob Law Paintings and Drawings 1959-78* 1978.

works in the market. To acquire and value such an empty object would be an absurd thing to do if that is all you believe them to be. However these works were anything but empty. Law layered different colours between the layers of black directly onto the untreated white canvas using acrylic paint to create a profoundly matt surface that defies the eye to exactly pin point where it lies in space. The Art Gallery of New South Wales has a painting from the later series, *Blue Black Indigo Black* 1977. Anyone who looks at the work for more than a few seconds begins to sense the depth in the subtle veils of indigo and blue within the black which immediately becomes a vertiginous void. In order to achieve this effect Law flooded the canvas with liquid layers of colour. He allowed two or three days for drying between layers to provide maximum absorption and to avoid one coat catching on another. It was a strenuous process that required technical mastery. He reported that sometimes the eighth or tenth coat could go wrong and then three weeks of patient work would be lost. He estimated that only one in eight survived to completion.⁷ I can't help thinking of the paradoxical materiality of these works in relation to Malevich's black squares that seem to be nihilistic, anti-representational gestures and yet on close inspection reveal layers of carefully applied paint that leave a powerful trace of the artist in the void.

Law described this void in his work as a Zen space for meditation. He was very aware of the obvious reference to Malevich but unlike the earlier Barnett Newman references he was not making a purely conceptual or dadaesque comment. These works have been made in such a way as to produce a powerful visual phenomenon that has considerable affective potential. Unfortunately these friable surfaces are very vulnerable. Law believed that most of the early black paintings were damaged beyond restoration. The problem is exacerbated because the optical depth they achieve is dependent on the spatial ambiguity of the surface as much as on the depth of layered colour. The smallest mark on the surface denies its visual ambiguity and instead of space you start to see the mark as image. This necessity for an undisturbed field also accounted for so many paintings never reaching fruition. It is impossible to go back and achieve an even coat once you have any incident in one layer.

The other problem is the public's lack of commitment to looking. I have taken tours of the collection where visitors have been invited to spend a few moments in front of Law's painting with no interpretive instructions. After about 30 seconds they express considerable excitement as the depth opens up before them. I have asked whether they have never seen the work before and been told 'yes we have seen it but never really looked at it'. This alas is why there is so little deep connection between phenomenological works of art and the public. I suspect that Law almost enjoyed the ephemeral nature of such works and the resistance they pose for instant understanding. For me the difficulty involved in penetrating the work ultimately makes the experience all the more profound. Compare the discovery of an infinite void in a 'dull black monochrome' by Law with viewing a James Turrell void which produces a similar effect with clever use of light and space but requires little effort on our part to experience it.

Law's theme of the void and an associated movement towards dematerialisation appears in many forms beyond painting for example in sculptures the use of text in his

⁷ 'Bob Law in conversation with Richard Cork' catalogue *10 Black Paintings* 1965-70, Museum of Modern art, Oxford, 1974.

art and in poetry. He did at one stage suggest that his own work was a transition from the wall to conceptual art that would ultimately only reside in the mind of the beholder.⁸ He wrote about Jasper Johns very perceptively in relation to this idea in his paper *The necessity for magic in art* 1964. He described the flag paintings as being more than the original flag because of the way Johns makes us examine the familiar icon again. The painting becomes better than the thing it represents; it extracts the idea from the pop object. “He makes the flag ‘his’, real forever in a sort of timeless way”. In the same paper he goes on to speak of Johns’ text works where for example he uses blue letters to spell out the word blue and used red for the word red. In this way the quality red and the word red double up in a tautological representation. In these works by Johns we can see a prefiguring of Joseph Kosuth’s three and one series where we are asked to contemplate and compare the object, its photographic representation and the dictionary definition.

Law notices, as Ian Burn⁹ was to a few years later, that Johns’ text works move towards conceptual art where our attention is brought back to the nature of our seeing and reading. Burn was an acute observer and his focus was always to make the beholder more conscious and more responsible for their looking. He described Johns’ heavy impasto number paintings as drawing our attention with the inference that they could be interpreted in some way through the text or numbers’ arrangement. In fact there was no such meaning but in the process of seeking a pattern we become absorbed in looking at the richly worked surfaces and discover something about looking and why we do it. In drawing the connection between Burn and Law I am interested to affirm a phenomenological gestation of conceptual art. If we accept Burn’s view of conceptual art as enhancing the beholder’s understanding of the nature of their looking we can begin to think of Law as a conceptual artist. For example when Law writes “the viewer... finds himself alone looking at a practically blank canvas – at this point he either rejects it or gets turned on by the *idea of the idea* in front of him”¹⁰ he is describing precisely this transition from authorial presentation to shared understanding with each beholder.

The idea of the object disappearing, leaving only the idea, obviously appealed to Law at a poetic level and yet he nearly always embodied his ideas and texts into objects. His poems were often stamped out onto lead roofing sheets salvaged from building sites. The word could hardly be manifested in a more concrete and essentially indestructible element than lead. He often gave both the lead and the words very specific forms, for example *Out of the stars* 1986 is stamped onto a house or obelisk shaped lead form. The words follow a Fibonacci spiral linking the cultural with the natural and reinforcing the metaphysical nature of Law’s project. The poem is all space and disappearance too: ‘Out of the stars there came a spark lost in the milky way past all silence to that one electron.’ The houses or obelisks usually have a void at their centre suggestive of the voids that Anish Kapoor was to make much later.¹¹

⁸ Bob Law in 7 aus London, Kunsthalle Bern 1973

⁹ Burn was a founding member of Art Language in London 1964-67 and subsequently in New York 1967-77. He hotly debated the nature of conceptual art with Sol LeWitt and Adrian Piper at their apartment and in the pages of Fox magazine.

¹⁰ Bob Law quoted from *Bob Law Paintings and drawings 1959-78* catalogue at Whitechapel gallery London 1978

¹¹ Kapoor and Burn are both connected to Yves Klein in different ways just as I think Law is. Kapoor clearly pays homage to Klein in his voids. Burn worked at Savages the framers in London applying gold leaf which Yves Klein had done there before him. At about that time Burn did make a blue

There are also playful sculptures that use language in the titles as part of the work; *Hole within a whole on wheels* 1984 for example or *The eye of the needle* 1980. It was Marcel Duchamp who wrote that the title of a work was another colour in the palette and this is certainly true for Law's work as a whole.



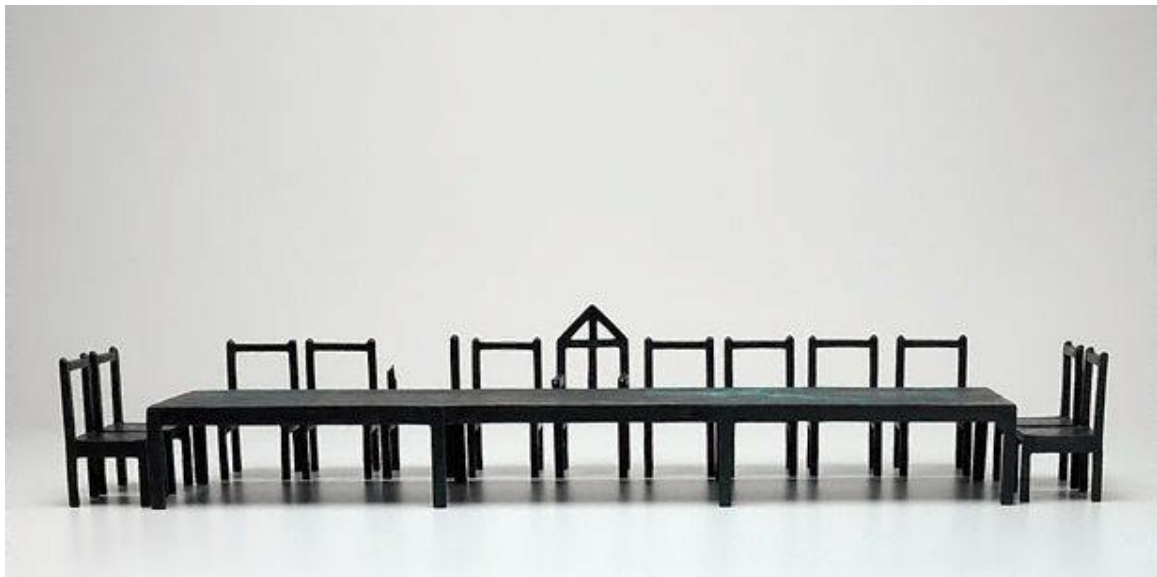
Law was a builder and a consummate craftsman as well as a conceptual artist. In 1989 I watched in awe when he carved *Christ Chair in Ultramarine II*¹² out of drift wood using a cheap Chinese kitchen cleaver and no other tools. The dovetailed joints of the chair fitted perfectly no screws and no fillers were needed and yet it is a fantastically robust piece of furniture/sculpture. I recalled that he had made furniture out of drift wood and other found timber while working briefly as a shepherd in Hampshire in 1961. In Cornwall between 1957 and 1960 he learned ceramics with

monochrome albeit a high gloss one. Law was a carpenter too and repeatedly returned to the void as subject.

¹² In 1989 when Bob came to Australia for an exhibition at Lennox Street Gallery in Melbourne he stayed with us in Sydney. 'Christ Chair' was believed lost at sea and so he made mark II for the Melbourne show in my wife Anne's studio. When mark I subsequently turned up he gave us the sequel which we treasure still.

Bernard Leach and was encouraged to paint by Peter Lanyon. Leach took an interest in the way Zen invokes the interaction of nature and culture. In Leach's work this is expressed through the hand, the clay and the transformative energy of fire. Lanyon was also interested in the human gesture as a response to nature. These are two different ways in which artists can engage with the sensation of the world around them and give it meaning. Law absorbed these ideas and the understanding of materials and their transformation at an early stage and it stayed with him always. His furniture sculptures particularly the chairs are particularly evocative of that body-centric experience of the world and his love of working with the hand and the specific quality of wood or lead or paint.

I suppose the early *Field drawings* could have been conceived as precocious ideas for land art such as Denis Oppenheim's *Cancelled crop* 1969 except they needed to remain as mental images, or so I believe. This is for me at the heart of the work, the way we are asked to feel our way into space to come to an intuition of time and energy by encounters with nothingness or at least by conspicuous absence. *Christ chair in ultramarine* and *Last supper* both 1984 are striking examples of this. The chair in art often stands for its absent sitter but in Law's case the idea first came to him while he was contemplating the voids of his black paintings. He became very conscious of the chair he used to sit on while mediating in the studio. Law was always interested in Asian philosophy and Zen Buddhism in particular. Meditation entails first boring down into the body acknowledging every part of the body and its breathing before moving on to transcend its attendant pains. He later said that he would have loved to make his Field Drawings as sculpture but that it was impossible.¹³ He wanted to make the whole thing; him, the chair and the painting but in the end the chair had to metonymically stand for the rest just as the Field drawings stand for feeling the space of the field.



The Last Supper 1984 in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales was made in wood as a maquette and later cast in bronze with the view of eventually scaling it up as a life sized sculpture and he did in fact make a full sized drawing of it. Thirteen chairs are arranged around the table with Christ's magisterial chair and

¹³ From an interview with Roger Taylor on 'Gotham City Gossip' at Radio 3RRR Melbourne 25.03.89.

Judas' broken chair defining the narrative precisely and without actors. *Christ chair in ultramarine* 1984 was left as wood and painted with ultramarine blue in low sheen paint that he then sanded back to give it a slightly distressed feel. The chair back is supported by a cross shape and the pediment at the top gives it a further ecclesiastical feel. The ultramarine is of course an acknowledgement of that 'aviator of the void' Yves Klein who attempted bodily transcendence or ascension when he leapt from Iris Clert's second floor window in Paris in 1961. Another association with Klein came when Law made a proposal for a rainbow installation. Exhausted by the lengthy delving into black this proposal in 1973 involved shining powerful Xenon lights through a cloud of water vapour in a gallery dome while the public moved through it wearing wellington boots and umbrellas. This was subsequently realised at Gunnersbury Park in 1982. It is an idea that brings to mind Klein's proposed architecture of the air.

Looking back on the time spent with Bob Law I realise now that much of the substrate for my subsequent thinking as a curator was formed during those occasionally obscure conversations in the sixties. Law connected me to a world that might otherwise have remained remote to me. In 1969 he insisted that I accompany him in his old yellow¹⁴ Deux Cheveaux to Liverpool for the John Moore's award at the Walker Art Gallery. He had bought the car when he briefly lived in France and drove it back to London. I can see why he responded to a car made of corrugated iron with string seats. There is something so immediate about its design and materiality. It was a memorable journey including breakdowns on the new motorway in appalling weather but we got there. I was flustered but Bob managed to keep up a stream of fascinating ideas all the way even as he worked on the engine. We speculated about Duchamp's story of the 'headlight child' on his infamous trip on the Jura Road. Visualising the road being eaten up by the lamps of the yellow machine still colours my memory of that day. Once we arrived at The Walker Art Museum I was suddenly amongst what seemed to me at the time to be the great and the powerful. That was the year Richard Hamilton's *Toaster* won the prize jointly with Mary Martin who sadly died before she could receive the prize. Hamilton was another of my heroes that I had never expected to meet.

I still don't think most of us who knew Law in Twickenham realised just how important he was and I certainly did not really understand till many years later after leaving England for Australia in 1975. In 1983-84 I was researching an exhibition that was to tour Australia and New Zealand in 1985-86. *The British Show*¹⁵ attempted to capture the new spirit of sculpture that emerged at that moment in England. Nicholas Logsdail's Lisson Gallery was the powerhouse behind this new way of thinking about materials and images. Logsdail had gathered a group of very good young sculptors that he launched into the market just as the frenzy for new image painting burnt itself out. It was an extraordinary strategy that really paid off as we were suddenly surrounded by a wealth of post minimal and conceptually informed sculpture that had scarcely ever been equalled.

While looking through Logsdail's archives I realised how important Law was in the history of this new movement even though it has never been overtly acknowledged.

¹⁴ I remember it as yellow but can't swear to that.

¹⁵ *The British Show* curated by Anthony Bond and William Wright touring Perth, Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Auckland 1985-1986.

At that time he was working on sculptures including the chairs which I saw for the first time when I visited him again in the studio after nearly ten years living in Australia. For me the underlying story of our exhibition was the way the younger generation had taken Minimalism and turned it up side down to reintroduce narrative. It was structurally dependent on the literal use of material in Minimalism but it reinvested that raw matter with a story line. Law was significantly senior to most of the new sculptors and you could see that his work had been mining this possibility since the late 1950s. He was not part of the art school system and had little direct influence in that way but Nicholas Logsdail had always kept a collaborative atmosphere in his gallery and through him younger artists were exposed to Bob Law and other older artists like Peter Joseph and Stephen Willats. I suspect that there was a virtually subliminal exchange of ideas between generations or perhaps it was just the zeitgeist.

The last time I saw Bob Law was at Nicholas Logsdail's 50th Birthday. He was somewhat down on his luck and very despondent. With the proceeds of a period of relative market success in the 1980s he had purchased an old house in Folkstone and gutted it relying on his own building skills to renovate it as his dream house. Sadly for Bob a condition he had been struggling with for years¹⁶ that had curled his fingers and was now acting on his spine made this impossible. He was left holding a gutted shell of a building and could not sell it. He lost everything and told me at Nicholas' party that he was getting by sleeping on peoples couches for the time being. At the end of his life he returned to Cornwall to live and made his first and last print portfolio there *Kisses and Crosses 2000*. I recently hung these again at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and noted with pleasure how they too returned to the divisions of space from the Cornish field drawings of the 1950s. It was also immediately obvious when they were seen against *The Last Supper* that there was a common language of interval and feeling out of forms and structure based on the human body that inspired everything he made from the late 1950s to the end of his life.

¹⁶ The disorder was known as Dupont's Contractum and it led to his having to loose some of his fingers.