

From the collection



Fearing Russian repression after the Hungarian revolt, Marté Szirmay's parents emigrated, arriving in New Zealand in 1957.

Her stepfather, Frank Szirmay, was a figurative sculptor in the academic tradition, but her own interests were in abstraction. Study at Elam School of Fine Arts in the 1960s brought an appreciation of the Russian constructivist

brothers, Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, and their engineering aesthetic but not their literalism. In her own work she sought to naturalise manufactured materials including steel and resin, deploying them to describe shapes derived from nature such as the koru as well as to make purely abstract geometrical forms.

In contrast to her organic curves and rounds, her technique remains firmly industrial, with highly polished and patinated surfaces eschewing any trace of the maker's hand. During the 1970s, reflections off the chromed sheet metal surfaces made her works dematerialize, seeming to "fall apart in a pool of light". This reflection of the surrounding environment allowed indoor sculpture to undergo a metamorphosis as the natural light entering a space changed with the time of day.

Commissioned for the lift lobby on an upper floor of the Medical School's Link building, a brutalist fair-faced concrete structure designed

by architects Stephenson and Turner, this sculpture is designed to complement the geometric regularity and severity of the surrounding building. Describing a gentle arc, like a bird's wing lifting, the shiny cascade of welded sheet metal is made to seem malleable and light, its heavy and hard reality dematerialized by the design.

The work's scale is human, and its form relates to bodily gesture and structure, alluding to movements and growth associated with the study of human biology. Yet it remains a mutely modernist work with no title, suggesting that it derives its meaning from purely formal elements, such as the manipulation of materials.

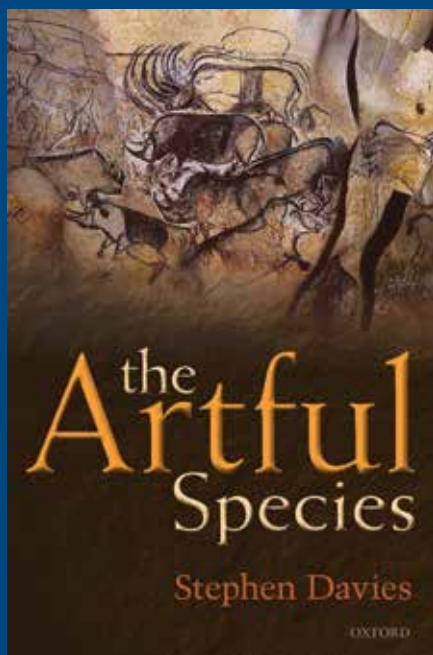
While the syntax of this sculpture derives from Cubism, with a sequence of flat planes describing the progression through space of a figure like Marcel Duchamp's 1912 painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the structure describes an arabesque like a dancer en pointe. Playing off against the rigid horizontals of the cast concrete, and its own triangular base, the sculpture gently spirals around a vertical axis, treating its surrounding space as a material, palpable element and stirring it up.

Espousing a Buddhist philosophy where everything has its position on the Wheel of Life, yin balancing yang, light and dark, sun and moon, life and death, Szirmay works to invest all her sculptures with a sense of the universe as a dynamic entity in a state of flux. Seeming to be uncompromisingly abstract, mechanical and exact, tightly closed to interpretation, this work's allusions to natural realms unfold slowly, inviting empathy and contemplation.

Linda Tyler

Marté Szirmay born 1946, Untitled, 1975, welded stainless steel sheets, 1300 x 1600 x 1350mm

Books



***The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* by Professor Stephen Davies (Philosophy), published by Oxford University Press, explores the idea that our aesthetic responses and art behaviors are connected to our evolved human nature.**

Our humanoid forerunners displayed aesthetic sensibilities hundreds of thousands of years ago.

In Part One, Stephen analyses the key concepts of the aesthetic, art, and evolution, and explores how they might be related. He considers a range of issues, including whether animals have aesthetic tastes and whether art is not only universal but cross-culturally comprehensible.

Part Two examines the many aesthetic interests humans take in animals and how these reflect our biological interests, and the idea that our environmental and landscape preferences are rooted in the experiences of our distant ancestors. In considering the controversial subject of human beauty, evolutionary

psychologists have traditionally focused on female physical attractiveness in the context of mate selection, but Stephen presents a broader view which decouples human beauty from mate choice and explains why it goes more with social performance and self-presentation.

Part Three asks if the arts, together or singly, are biological adaptations, incidental byproducts of non-art adaptations, or so removed from biology that they rate as purely cultural technologies. Stephen does not conclusively support any one of the many positions considered here, but argues that there are grounds, nevertheless, for seeing art as part of human nature. Art serves as a powerful and complex signal of human fitness, and so cannot be incidental to biology. Indeed, aesthetic responses and art behaviors are the touchstones of our humanity.