**Butler, Reginald Cotterell [Reg] (1913-1981)**

A central figure among the post-war generation of sculptors who came to prominence at the 1952 Venice Biennale, Reg Butler is best known for winning the Institute of Contemporary Art’s competition to design a monument to the ‘Unknown Political Prisoner’ in 1953, though this was never fully realised as a sculpture. Butler initially trained as an architect, but started to achieve success and publicity as a sculptor with his first solo exhibition at the Hanover Gallery in 1949. His aesthetic influences were varied: from Freudian theory and Surrealism, to African and prehistoric art, as well as contemporary classicism and the post-war ‘art of trauma’. He went on to take part in the Festival of Britain in 1951 and, in the same year, began teaching at the Slade where he eventually became the Director of Sculpture Studies in 1966. Though his technique developed from welding to modelling and casting in bronze, his subject matter never strayed far from the female figure. From the late 1960s until his death in 1981, Butler produced increasingly distorted and overtly sexualised female figures in painted bronze, distancing himself from his more abstract modernist contemporaries.

Reg Butler was born in 1913 at Bridgefoot House, Buntingford, Hertfordshire, where his parents, Frederick William Butler and Edith Barltrop, worked as master and matron of a workhouse. Butler studied architecture at Regent Street Polytechnic from 1933-6 and was subsequently elected an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects, working as a tutor at the Architectural Association and as a practising architect until war broke out. As a conscientious objector, he avoided imprisonment by running a company producing parts for agricultural machinery. After the war, Butler was appointed technical editor of the Architectural Press and from 1947-50 worked as an architectural consultant; however, at the same time he was attending sculpture and life classes at Chelsea School of Art, and began creating his distinctive metal sculptures. The success of his first solo exhibition in July 1949 marked a turning point in his career as critics struggled to define these spindly, welded ‘constructions’, while the central work, the insect-like *Woman* (1949), was purchased by the Tate. Public commissions swiftly followed; Butler produced three works for the Festival of Britain in 1951, where his linear aesthetic fitted in well amidst the modernist design of the South Bank. The following year, he took part in the Venice Biennale, where his work was included in the British Pavilion’s ‘New Aspects of British Sculpture’ exhibition alongside Lynn Chadwick and Henry Moore, among others. This won him critical acclaim as a member of a new sculptural movement whose forms were tainted by Cold War malaise – a characteristic that Herbert Read dubbed ‘The Geometry of Fear’.

The high point of Butler’s fame, however, came with his victory in the competition for a monument to the ‘Unknown Political Prisoner’ in 1953 – and the consequent political debate around its proposed erection in West Berlin. The competition had been launched internationally in 1951 by the ICA and received around 2,000 entries. Butler’s skeletal, stylised bronze maquette attracted a great deal of publicity but, due to post-war political sensitivity and bureaucracy, it ultimately remained unrealised as a full-scale public sculpture. This was his most abstract period, after which he largely reverted to figuration: female bodies often suspended or encased within a framework of metal bars that owe much to the inspiration of Germaine Richier, such as ‘Figure in Space’ (1957-8), cast in a thin-shell bronze technique of his own invention.

Butler had begun teaching in the Sculpture department at the Slade in 1951 and was appointed Director of Sculpture Studies in 1966. His 1962 publication, *Creative Development: Five Lectures to Art Students*, criticised the formalist bias of most modern art training. Similarly, Butler was becoming disillusioned by the ‘neo-primitive’ nature of much modern sculpture, and turned to the female figure as a means of connecting with the contemporary world.

Increasingly reclusive and obsessive, by the late sixties he was developing the painted bronzes that would dominate his late career; the first appeared in public at the *Pittsburgh International* in 1970, with an exhibition of four large works at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York following in 1973. The erotic element within Surrealism, Freudian psychology, Hans Bellmer’s ‘The Doll’ series and the paintings of Tsuguharu Foujita have all been cited as key influences in this development. Butler died at his home in Berkhamsted in October 1981. He had already been honoured with a life-time retrospective at the J.B. Speed Art Museum in 1963, and was elected to the Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in 1965. The Tate put on a memorial exhibition in 1983-4, having bought a significant number of Butler’s works.

References and further reading:

Butler, R. (1962) *Creative Development: Five Lectures to Art Students*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Calvocoressi, R. (Ed.) (1983) catalogue for the Tate memorial exhibition… London: Tate.

Garlake, M. (2006) *The Sculpture of Reg Butler*, Much Hadham: The Henry Moore Foundation in association with Lund Humphries.

Images:

1. Final Maquette for the ‘Unknown Political Prisoner’ (1951-2), painted stone and painted bronze, 44.5 x 20.5 x 16.5cm, on long term loan to Tate from the Estate of Reg Butler (1986) <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/butler-final-maquette-for-the-unknown-political-prisoner-l01102> - for image reproduction go to [www.tate-images.com](http://www.tate-images.com).

2. ‘Figure in Space’ (1957-8), bronze (edition 6/8), 91.4 x 91.4 x 53.3cm, exhibited at Gimpel Fils, London <http://www.gimpelfils.com/pages/artists/artist.php?artistindex=39&subsec=1> - for reproductions email [info@gimpelfils.com](mailto:info@gimpelfils.com) or tel: 0207 4932488.