

Looking Back

- talking back to the Erechtheum, Rodin, and the nature of institutions.

An institution can be defined as any group or organisation where it is possible to replace every one of the people involved without substantially changing how the organisation functions. As part of an institution, what you do is more important than what you experience, your role dictates your relationships, and anything about you which is not of use to the institution is of no importance.

Caryatids are female figures used as pillars in architecture, and they make a good symbol of this subordination of the individual to an institutional role. The female body can be old, young, middle aged or pregnant; fat, thin or muscular; flexible or stiff. It can express rage, excitement, grief, love and disgust. It can hold, jump, rest, run and collapse. A classical caryatid reduces all this, and all the infinity of individual variety, to a post to hold up the roof.

Rodin's 'Fallen Caryatid' responds to this ancient use of the female figure by emphasising the softness and frailty of his subject.

"This poor little caryatid has fallen under the load. She's a good girl--look at her face. Serious, unhappy at her failure, not blaming anyone, not even the gods...and still trying to shoulder her load, after she's crumpled under it."³

It's a beautifully observed piece of work, but it carries a cultural baggage of early Nineteenth Century notions of romantic tragedy and of the fragility of women that set my teeth on edge.

In response to this, a dozen years ago I made *The Caryatid Who Walked Away*, a piece that depicts a girl who is not a good girl and who is not willing to spend her life trying to hold up the architecture, in the act of leaving her situation. What interests me about this piece now is the other caryatids, those still holding up the roof, whose shocked reactions to her defection from duty seem to hold some hope that they will all jump to freedom and leave the redundant edifice to crash un-regretted to the ground behind them in a great cloud of dust.

Looking Back is the same girl minus at least some of the naïveté and optimism of youth. Her ex-colleagues have not followed her but remain locked into their roles, the weight of the roof bearing down all the more heavily for her absence. While she seems puzzled by their decision, she sometimes wonders if it might not have been more moral to stay and help them get the job done - if her escape, freeing as it did no-one but herself, is not after all a failure. But you can see that she has no intention of going back.