

Obituary Announcement

MICHAEL COOPER - SCULPTOR

PANGOLIN
LONDON



Michael Cooper in his studio, 2010
Photo: Steve Russell

It is with the greatest sadness that we announce the passing of the much-loved sculptor Michael Cooper who died on 25th January, 2025 aged 80.

Known for his intimate and irresistibly tactile, carved or cast bronze animals and figures, Cooper first realised he wanted to pursue becoming a sculptor whilst working in a dusty stone mason's yard under the arches of Waterloo station. Born in Dublin in 1944, Cooper moved to London to study at Heatherley's School of Art between 1969 and 1971. He later worked for portrait sculptor Anthony Gray and David Wynne whose well known sculpture *Boy with Dolphin* on the banks of the River Thames, Cooper helped install.

Later, Cooper was frequently commissioned to create his own public sculptures. His *Bears* carved in Belgian Fossil Marble at Bicester, Oxford and *Reclining Figure* in travertine marble for Covent Garden, exemplify his innate ability to reveal from cold, intractable lumps of stone, the vitality of living beings. Indeed, Cooper's unique skill in reducing complex form to sumptuously smooth surfaces, whilst still retaining the powerful essence of his subjects, allowed his work to communicate clearly which in turn elicited the admiration of the widest of audiences.

Working in a variety of mediums including marble, stone and bronze, it was Cooper's vast knowledge of the very nature of his materials that inspired his flowing harmonies of surface and enabled his subtle evocations of the power and grace of the natural world to shine through. Using only the most basic of tools, Cooper's reductive technique of carving meant that mass and gravity were ever present. As his great friend the late Oliver Hoare noted of Cooper: "It is the physicality of carving that draws him to his studio. The hammer and the chisel, and the blocks of stone each with their own personality. It is like a conversation but an intuitive one, which when it flows makes sense of every strike."

Allowing the essential character of his subjects to slowly materialise through long hours of what Cooper referred to modestly as 'chipping away', this most physical of relationships also enabled him to imbue his carved sculptures with his own energy. For his most recent solo exhibition celebrating his 80th birthday at Gallery Pangolin, Rungwe Kingdon wrote of Cooper's passion for capturing his subject's intrinsic character often through intense observation:

This ability to characterise a species in as difficult a medium as stone is not accidental. I have had the pleasure of travelling and carving with Michael in Uganda and have observed first hand how he completely identifies with his chosen subjects.

On a rainy morning in Kibale forest we watched a chimpanzee huddled on a log staring into the distance, waiting for the drizzle to ease. His fur frosted by the fine droplets of water seemed already mineralised, his expression frozen into impassive patience. Michael crouched low, crept close, hid behind tree trunks, looking; possessed by this opportunity to get to know his potential future subject.

Indeed a few months later, a magnificent Chimp duly arrived at the foundry, our whole experience condensed into the hunched form whose features captured both the dignity and character of our closest relative without a hint of anthropomorphism or sentimentality. The latent power suggested by the strong forms and restrained energy imbued in the stone.

Michael Cooper was a fellow of the Royal Society of Sculptors and exhibited at a wide variety of venues throughout his life, including Jersey and London Zoos, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and the Royal Academy. His ability to depict the sheer force of the animals and figures he created led to various large-scale public and private commissions and his work continues to be a much-loved feature of his wife's restaurant The Sir Charles Napier in Buckinghamshire.

Below: *Big Bear* in Bronze; *Snail & Gorilla* in Kilkenny Limestone

