



COMPOSITIONS IN SPACE

Angela Griffith reflects on the multifaceted practice of Alex Pentek, whose work ranges from the solidity of public art to the floating paper sculpture currently on view at the RHA

As we drive on our national roads, walk in our municipal streets and parks, enter our civic buildings we will inevitably encounter public art. The primary purpose of public art, in an open, democratic country such as Ireland, is to aesthetically enhance our shared spaces and to reflect or challenge commonly held societal values and interests. The best of these works become established and cherished landmarks as they reflect, and become part of, our shared heritage. They enrich our lives by allowing us, for what might only be a brief moment, to engage with something beyond our individual concerns. They remind us that we are part of something bigger. Public art can honour the individuals that we recognise as nation builders, commemorate events that defined who we were and who we are, and celebrates our wider cultural landscape. As public art reflects the mores of past and contemporary society, it also carries the burden of representing these same ideals to future generations and retaining its relevance.

The Cork-based artist Alex Pentek has produced some of Ireland's most successful public sculpture and he has established a significant international presence, exhibiting in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. In addition to creating large-scale site-specific works including *Hedgehog*, Co Wexford, *Hidden Landscape*, Co Longford (Fig 6) and *Rabbit*, Co Meath (Fig 3), to name a few, his practice also includes sound performance (he is a jazz drummer) and gallery pieces, much of which involves working in paper inspired by the Japanese art of origami and mathematical enquiry.

As an artist, Pentek welcomes the challenges and possibilities of public sculpture and believes, once it is displayed, the work is publicly owned. Notwithstanding the meticulous management of his commissions, from concept to production to display, he is interested in exploring the notion that an artwork's meaning is completed by the viewer. This meaning, and the material expression of the artist's original idea, is also determined significantly by the work's interaction with its site. Public art may have to negotiate unwelcoming or unlikely settings, or specific social or political circumstances. While some artists aspire to transcend these environments, this is not altogether Pentek's approach. He believes that the visual experience of the viewer is not limited to the object itself, rather its position, its surroundings and its exposure to natural and man-made events inform how a work is perceived. As Pentek states, 'I am excited by the idea of creating site-specific works that playfully blur the boundary between object and setting and are of such a scale and impact that they become a defining public icon'.

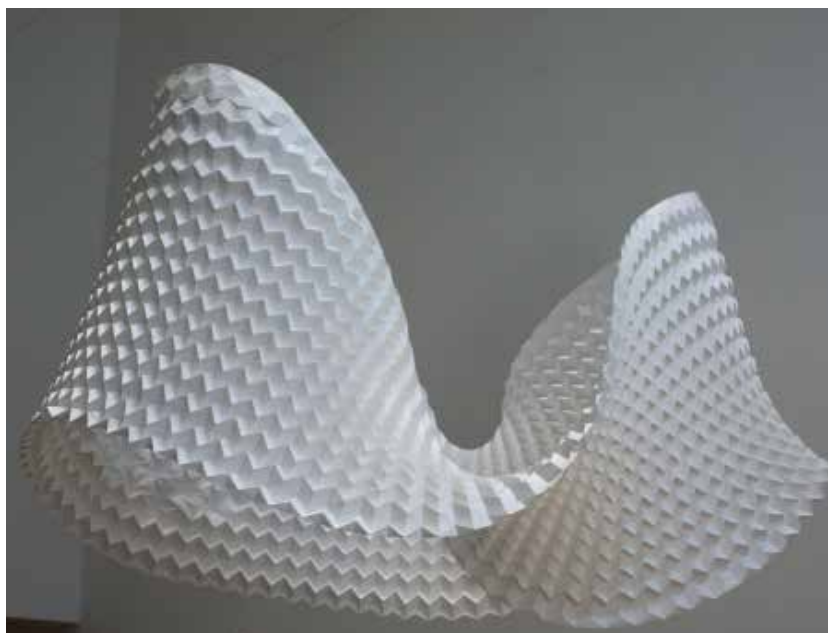
Pentek personally eschews purely formalist claims that art has no meaning other than an aesthetic experience and argues that for him,



1 ALEX PENTEK
KINDRED SPIRITS 2015
stainless steel. 6x6x6m
Midleton, County Cork.
Photo Red Power Media

2 Alex Pentek
at the National
Sculpture Factory,
Cork. Photo Neil
Danton

3 RABBIT (inspired by the
origami rabbit created by David
Shall). Corten steel. H. 6m.
Ashbourne, Co. Meath. Photo
Leanne Keaney.



respect and understand the material nature of paper. Pentek is particularly drawn to the Eastern idea of memorised response, when the acquired knowledge of, and subsequent manipulation of materials becomes intuitive and utterly controlled. This skill is acquired through continuous, dedicated practice. Once the artist has command of his material, they have the tools to represent ideas or to interpret nature as they desire. Analogous with his experiences as a drummer, this intuitive symbiosis of thought and action resonates in his work.

The principles of origami have informed many mathematical studies, another important thread in Pentek's work. His enquiries have centred on the hidden (implicate) and visible (explicate) order of things. Mathematics provides a theoretical basis to explain equally the order and chaos of life. His new site-specific gallery work for the Royal Hibernian Academy, on show until April this year, explores spatial dynamics (Figs 4&5). Some pieces are Möbius forms – single-sided mathematical puzzles which exist in three-dimensional space yet are unorientable. Curated by Victoria Evans, the show's title 'Folded Space' recalls Frank Herbert's cult science fiction novel *Dune* where folding space allows for time travel, to experience otherness. Other folded paper works consist of a single sheet comprising individual star-shaped folds, a fold uniquely created by Pentek. From the two-dimensional a three-dimensional object is created. These mathematical constructs, like all of Pentek's work, follow Fibonacci sequencing, a numerical pattern comprising of numbers equating to the sum of the two preceding numbers.

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art, like all forms of communication, including non-verbal, is a complex and nuanced thing. He acknowledges that being overly theoretical when discussing his work can be a barrier to engaging with audiences. And while his work can be enjoyed as a purely aesthetic experience, it is essential to him that it is underpinned by his own explorations of the nature of being, personally, culturally, scientifically and philosophically. He seeks to explore the interconnectedness of himself as maker, with the object, the viewer and its contexts. Each of his designs stem from his reading of subjects as diverse as mathematical and scientific explorations of space, order and chance, together with modernist and Eastern theories of design and making. Pentek describes meaning as being applied as a philosophical layer of 'colour', one whose hues and tonality are perceived by each individual viewer.

The act of making is an essential part of Pentek's practice. This makes him somewhat unusual among his peers given the industrial nature of some of his work. At times he may use assistants but he is involved in every aspect of his process from steel welding to paper folding. Pentek's love of origami began when he was a student at Cork's CIT Crawford College of Art & Design. As an exacting process, the practitioner must fully

Science has discovered that this sequencing is a natural occurrence in biological organisms, such as plant cells, leaf patterns and flower petals. So, while viewers may not immediately understand the mathematical basis for Pentek's constructions, their rhythmic patterns, directed by nature's own mathematical harmonies appeal to an innate, deep-seated aesthetic instinct. At the moment Pentek is developing a new body of origami inspired work that will be exhibited at the Crawford Gallery, Cork, in November.

This year Pentek will unveil a large-scale work in the heart of Australia's Gold Coast, to coincide with the 2018 Commonwealth Games. The city has begun an ambitious programme of municipal development, which includes commissioning a number of innovative public artworks. Selected from an international panel of artists, *Urban Oasis* comprises a series of four, eleven-metre-tall steel ferns set into the city pavements, each representing different stages of the plant's growth. The work recalls the region's botanical heritage, as one of the most diverse sub tropical littoral rainforests in Australia (Fig 9). It asks viewers to consider the impact of civilisation on the environment and reminds them that humanity's hold over nature is fragile, that nature needs to

reassert itself at some point. The majority of Pentek's work is effectively nonfigurative. And while natural forms may inspire aspects of his work, these forms become deconstructed, abstracted as they are monumentalised. Presented in this way audience perceptions are challenged. As in this work and in others, scale is a vital component, it brings the atriality and it excites, bewilders and challenges.

The artist's internationally acclaimed 2015 sculpture *Kindred Spirits* is located in Bailic Park in Midleton, County Cork (Fig 1). It commemorates a poignant event in Irish history when the Choctaw Nation sent a donation to alleviate the suffering of the Irish during the Famine despite their own devastating oppression by the American government at that time. A ring of feathers, each unique and distinctive, align to suggest an empty bowl, representative of deprivation. At a distance they appear insubstantial, echoing the fragility of life. But as the viewer approaches the forms of the feathers dissolves, the tensile strength of steel, held together with 20,000 individual welds declares its permanency, and signifies the power of people when united by compassion. President Michael D Higgins said of *Kindred Spirits* that it 'reminds us of how strongly art speaks to us across oceans and generations'.

Informed by gestalt theories on visual perception, Pentek questions whether the viewer actually sees what is before them but rather they 'see' what their brains have preconceived. Therefore, he attempts to confound this prejudgement through scale and materials, to force the viewer to challenge their initial engagement, to look beyond. Pentek wants to illicit a pre-intellectual response, to create art that cannot be rationalised

immediately, an object that must be negotiated. Therefore, what initially seems to be delicate and fine, such as an unfurling fern or floating feather, is in fact made of hard and unyielding steel. In other works, at a distance what appears to be carved from a solid material is in fact a folded sheet of paper. The closer the viewer is to the object the more they come to realise that these forms are abstractions.

Among Pentek's most evocative works is *Make a Wish*, which stands on the site of the Omagh Bombing (Figs 7&8). It was part of the process of reclaiming the site for the local people, marking a new community space that heralded the future but also allowed for respectful reflection of tragic past events. Representing a towering bronze dandelion in seed, the child's game of blowing the seeds and making a wish is re-imagined on a greater scale, signifying hope and regeneration.

Pentek is mindful that he is working within a particular time and place, that in the case of his public commissions they serve a particular function. But he also seeks to create art that transcends borders or timelines. Pentek's art explores what unifies rather than differentiates his audiences. All can admire and negotiate its physical form, its considered design and its masterful execution. Furthermore, the artist's theoretical principles, obvious or oblique, ensure Pentek creates an interconnected understanding of the universe and our place within it. ■

Alex Pentek 'Folded Space' RHA, Dublin, until 22 April 2018.

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4&5 FOLDED SPACE
2018 single folded sheet of cartridge paper, RHA Gallery, Dublin. Photo Victoria Evans

6 HIDDEN LANDSCAPE 2014
Corten steel 11.5m. Longford. Photo Seán O'Dowd

7&8 MAKE A WISH
2008 bronze, optic fibre, LED lighting & interior elements. 8.6m. Omagh, Co Tyrone, Northern Ireland. Photo Jude Brown. Detail photo Ann Lane

9 URBAN OASIS
(work-in-progress) Surfers Paradise, Queensland, Australia

