

Allington, Edward Thomas (1951-2017).

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Allington, Edward Thomas (1951–2017)

Allington, Edward Thomas (1951–2017), artist and sculptor, was born on 24 June 1951 at Abbotsholme nursing home in Troutbeck Bridge, Westmorland, the eldest child of Ralph Allington (1922–2009), plumber, and his wife Evelyn, *née* Hewartson (1919–1989), of Allan Bank, Troutbeck Bridge. He had three younger siblings: a brother, Terry, and then twins, Stuart and Julia. His childhood was far from ideal. However, the influence of his grandfather, Thomas Allington, a carpenter, was significant, nurturing his childhood fascination with tools, archaeology, and classical antiquity. In his adolescence he became interested in motorbikes; a self-confessed petrol-head, he spent much time riding through the Lake District landscape, a context marked by the tension between romanticism and industrialization.

Between 1968 and 1971 Allington studied at Lancaster School of Art. During his final year he was able to travel to Greece. Through this visit his cherished image of antiquity was altered, seeing this ideal image now as a design on a tea-towel or in a plastic snow storm. It had a significant impact on his practice, the key question being how to assimilate the many absurdities of our age and to ‘create works so ironic even voluptuous and beautiful that they would echo the cultural paradox of the reality of today’ (artist statement, ‘Sculpture’, Lisson Gallery, 1984). From 1971 to 1974 he studied at Central School of Art and Design. At this time his ceramic work was becoming a vehicle for his fascination with ornament, motif, and kitsch.

During his time as a fellow at Exeter College of Art and Design from 1975 to 1977 Allington began to move away from ceramics. In his King Street studio he made one of his

most iconic works, 'Ideal, Standard Forms' (1980, Tate, London), consisting of nine geometric objects made in plaster and presented directly on the floor. They revealed his abiding interest in theories of form that reached back to Plato, whose elevated 'ideal forms' are abstract, perfect, unchanging concepts that transcend time and space. In Allington's sculpture each sphere, cone, cube, and ellipsoid is a mould of an original hand-crafted object; the work explores the tension between perfection and imperfection and the paradox of authenticity and mass-production. It was the inclusion of this piece in the decade-defining exhibition 'Objects and Sculpture' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and Arnolfini Gallery in 1981 that brought his work to public attention.

Allington's work was part of a sea change in British sculpture from the 1980s onwards. 'New British Sculpture' quickly gained international recognition through notable exhibitions overseas such as 'English Sculpture Now' at the Kunstmuseum, Lucerne, in 1982. He was included in 'The Sculpture Show' at the Hayward and Serpentine in 1983, in association with a number of artists including Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Richard Wentworth, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary, and Jean-Luc Vilmouth. These shows responded to a perceived impasse in conceptual and minimal practices and attempted to move beyond the prevailing discourse that had become prescriptive and imitative by the end of the 1970s. He continued to explore these ideas while studying cultural history at the Royal College of Art (1983–4). He won the John Moores Liverpool Exhibition prize in 1989.

Allington's approach was extraordinarily diverse, using a range of materials and production processes. Conceptually his practice revealed a deep engagement with memory, expressed through the continued presence of classical forms in everyday life; the philosophical concepts of beauty and form; restored architectural fragments, or the 'kitsch' reproductions of antiquity. His practice was anti-idealistic: it accepted and made visible

western culture with all its paradoxes. He further explored these ideas in a series of cornucopia works, such as *Fruit of Oblivion* (1982, Leeds City Art Gallery). These roughly painted hand-made volutes exploded open with plastic artefacts: fruits, vegetables, and flowers. The objects cascading from the work gave the illusion that they were holding up the plaster forms. Allington's drawings also explored illusion, space, and visual perception: often floating fragments of decorative ornament that cast their shadows upon the floors of oblique, white-walled interiors. His early ink and emulsion drawings were inscribed on graph paper, replaced later by pages of old business ledgers, evoking memory of the exchange of objects and materials.

Allington was represented by the Lisson Gallery, London, and Diane Brown Gallery, New York, at a moment that coincided with a growing international art market. In 1990–91 his work was impacted by an economic crash. From then on he increasingly had to balance his work-life commitments. He continued to exhibit widely, but with more sporadic support.

Allington contributed incisively to debates around the location of sculpture. Throughout the 1990s he developed many significant site projects in collaboration with architects, perhaps the most ambitious being for a vast energy plant situated in Saarbrücken, Germany, *Lichttempel* (1987–90). The sculpture seemed to the viewer to be precariously balanced on the edge of the building overlooking the river Saar. Curated by Kasper König, Allington's work at this time can be understood in relationship to European contemporaries: Thomas Schütte, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, and Katharina Fritsch among others. Other notable site projects included *Resting Form*, TSWA-3D, a double-sided *trompe l'œil* drawing approximately 12 metres long and propped in the portico of St Martin's in the Fields, and a long-term project entitled 'Decorative Forms Over the World' (various dates), undertaken in collaboration with the photographer Edward Woodman.

Allington also continued to contribute to debates around production, reproduction, and authenticity, perhaps most notably through an exhibition co-curated with Ben Dhaliwal, 'Reproduction in Sculpture—Dilution or Increase?', held at Leeds Art Gallery in 1994–5, with an accompanying catalogue and essays.

Exemplary in communicating his perspectives through writing and teaching, Allington was a regular contributor to *frieze* with articles that revealed the convergence between practice and cultural history. In 1993 he authored an insightful series of essays, *Method for Sorting Cows: Essays, 1993–97*, published during his research fellowship in sculpture at Manchester School of Art. He also was an active member of the editorial board of the *Sculpture Journal*. The significance of his teaching was borne out by the many tributes from those who were taught by him at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London (1990–2017), and while Gregory fellow at Leeds University (1991–3). He was appointed professor of sculpture at the Slade in 2006. In the last decades of his life he developed a significant body of research into the wider understanding of Japanese modern sculpture, together with the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, and Musashino Arts University, Tokyo.

Allington married Susan Jean Bradley (b. 1950), a nurse, on 29 March 1977; she sadly took her own life in 1984. At the time of her death the marriage had ended and he was living with his long-term partner, the artist Julia Wood, in London. Together they had two children, Thalia and Harry Allington-Wood. Following a long-term battle with cancer, Julia died in 2003, leaving Edward a single parent. In the final years of his life he lived with the artist Asako Nakakura. He died from liver disease at Homerton University Hospital, Hackney, London, on 21 September 2017. His long-term friend and colleague, the artist Gary Woodley, described his last few weeks in hospital, where he managed to orchestrate a final artwork, 'The Artist is present': a Harley Davidson petrol tank to contain his ashes, with

‘Allington’ replacing the tank logo. The artist’s wishes were meticulously carried out by his son Harry and daughter Thalia and finished by Sammy Miller’s workshop, Miller Motorcycle Museum, Hampshire, with the ashes making a final ride through the Lake District.

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personal knowledge (2021)

private information (2021)

b. cert.

m. cert.

d. cert.

Archives

Film

interview and documentary footage, BFI NFTVA

Sound

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Likenesses

J. Edelstein, bromide fibre print, 1987, NPG

obituary photographs