



UOA D32

ART AND DESIGN:
HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE



RESEARCHER

Kevin Dagg

OUTPUT TITLE

The Kurds

OUTPUT TYPE

Artefact: Group of Sculptures

DATE

April 2017 – 2018

FIG. 1
Kevin Dagg, *The Kurds*. Full group.
Photo Kevin Dagg.



01 / STATEMENT

The Kurds is a group of six wooden portrait heads of members of the migrant Kurdish community in Edinburgh.

The output builds on Dagg's longstanding practice research into figurative sculpture, in particular techniques and processes of woodcarving, including novel approaches to polychrome. It brings this research expertise to a focused interrogation of the meaning and potential of portrait sculpture with respect to a particular, marginalised community. It investigates how portrait sculpture can meaningfully function as a mode of community engagement and through this foreground broader questions around migration, identity and exclusion.

Three of the heads were exhibited in *After The Storm*, Royal Botanical Gardens, Edinburgh, April 2017.

Two heads were selected for the Society of Portrait Sculptors Annual Exhibition in London: *FACE 2019*, 3–8 June 2019 in La Galleria Pall Mall, the only forum for contemporary portrait sculpture in the UK.

One of the sculptures, *The Poser*, was the only sculpture to be selected from over 700 entries for the Scottish Portrait Awards, which was held at Scottish Arts Club, Edinburgh, 26 October – 1 December 2018, and Glasgow Arts Club, Glasgow, 21 January – 9 February 2019.

The Poser was shortlisted as one of six finalists by a distinguished judging panel (including the artist John Byrne, and deputy director and chief curator of the Scottish Portrait Gallery, Imogen Gibbons) and was awarded the Glasgow Arts Club Award for Fine Art. *The Matriarch*, won runner-up in the Heatherley School of Fine Art Prize for the best 3D human portrait, June 2019.

FIG. 2
Kevin Dagg, *The Poser*. Sycamore,
40 x 30 x 55cm. Photo Kevin Dagg.

“I was at the Kurdish Community Centre for their celebration of Newroz and I was taking photographs and introducing myself to the community. I was approached by a young man who insisted that I photograph him. I didn’t particularly want to but when I turned the camera on him he struck an impressive pose and when I returned that night, his was the best image. I understand he is a barber in Fife.”

Kevin Dagg



02 / RESEARCH DIMENSIONS

The Kurds is a practice research investigation into the potentials of sculptural portraiture as a form of community engagement.

The output comprises a group of six wooden heads based on members of the migrant Kurdish community in Edinburgh. Dagg initially produced a series of 12 clay maquettes at the Kurdish Community Centre over a 9 month period from June 2016 – April 2017, and later carved the six wooden heads in his studio.

Sculpting took place at the Kurdish Community Centre, and involved Dagg making work in single sittings, during conversations in which the sitters recounted their experiences of being immigrants. These encounters were designed to be informal and intimate exchanges, to which the act of sculpting was responsive. Sitters were encouraged to talk and move as they wished, and their expressions and gestures would reflect the stories they were recounting.

Dagg responded to the fleeting nature of these dialogues through a fluid use of clay. The clay portraits were then translated into wood using the same freestyle techniques of observation and expressive mark making. As the series of heads progressed this mark making became more expressive and a final register of vitality was added through CMYK coloured inks.

FIG. 3
Kevin Dagg, *The Barber*. Tree
of Heaven, 30 x 30 x 55 cm.
Photo Kevin Dagg.



“I had to go to court to prove my right to work in the UK. The judge told me that he didn’t believe that my certificate was genuine, but he did believe I was a barber, so I was granted permission. I now own a barber shop in Glasgow.”

The Barber

FIG. 4
Kevin Dagg, *The Beekeeper*.
Sycamore, 35 x 30 x 50cm.
Photo Kevin Dagg.



“Every year I return to the mountains of Eastern Turkey to help my father with the annual honey harvest. He is 95 and lives almost entirely on yogurt and honey. He has never tasted Coca Cola. My family have continued these traditions for many generations but the land is empty now, there are no jobs and all of the young people have left.”

The Beekeeper

FIG. 5
Kevin Dagg, *The Care Worker*.
Tree of Heaven, 38 x 30 x 50cm.
Photo Kevin Dagg.

"I used to wear mini skirts in the 70's. My former husband condemned me as a Kurdish activist, and I was arrested by Saddam Hussain's forces. Luckily I could speak Arabic as well as Kurdish and I escaped jail through my 'clever tongue'. I fled with my 10-year-old son to Iran, where we became refugees and lived in a temporary camp near the border. I escaped again and fled across Europe, and all the while my son refused to go to school until he reached Britain. I've worked as a carer in Scotland for 28 years and my son is now married to an Italian woman and works as a architect in New York."

The Care Worker



FIG. 6
Kevin Dagg, *The Cook*. Tree
of Heaven, 50 x 40 x 58cm.
Photo Kevin Dagg.

"I was bullied at school by the teachers simply because I was Kurdish. They would beat me with a cane, so eventually I stopped going to school and would play outside all day. I am now learning to read and write at the Community Centre."

The Cook



FIG. 7
Kevin Dagg, *The Matriarch*.
Elm, 35 x 30 x 53cm. Photo
Kevin Dagg.

The female members of the group were more hesitant to be modelled than the males, but after several months Dagg was encouraged to model the most elderly member of the community. There was no direct communication between artist and sitter, and he modelled from a respectful distance whilst the other women attended to her every need. The session lasted only 50 minutes before the woman left without saying a word.



03 / ORIGINALITY

The Kurds innovates the discipline of portraiture through an expressive use of material and gestural mark making that communicates the stories of a migrant community.

The research situates itself in the field of contemporary figurative sculpture (Stefan Balkenhol, Georg Baselitz), particularly practices that build on the formal traditions of early 20th century German expressionist sculpture (Ernst Barlach, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner). It extends this field by using portraiture to capture the experience of a marginalised social group.

The output challenges the current predilection within contemporary sculpture for the machine made, by foregrounding the hand-modelled and hand-carved processes that acknowledge the emotional input of the artist and registers of the human psyche deeper than physical representation.

Dagg saw the process of working with the migrant community as a collaborative one that challenged the customary distinction between artist and sitter. Instead, the act of sculpting was fused with the dialogic process of communication – the sitter was as ‘active’ as the sculptor. This non-hierarchical dynamic brought a new register of expression to the works, offering a new path for portraiture as a socially-engaged practice.

The output brings positive visibility to an often-overlooked community, and through this, broader issues around immigration, identity and exclusion. It is the first time that this particular community has been the subject of artistic representation.

FIG. 8
Chisels. Photo Kevin Dagg.



FIGS. 9–10
Heads in progress in the studio.
Photos Kevin Dagg.

04 / RIGOUR

The wood that Dagg initially chose for the heads was ‘The Tree of Heaven’ (*Allanthus altissima*), a native species from China with a long and rich history and renowned for its ability to thrive in difficult environments – therefore symbolic as a choice for making portraits of a marginalized group.

However, this wood was difficult to carve and limited possibilities for expressive mark making. As such, Dagg experimented with a range of wood types including elm, pine and sycamore.

Even with a softer woods, the process of translation from clay into wood proved to be challenging due to the laborious nature of carving. In order to retain the gestural mark-making and better capture the intensity and vibrancy of the original clay maquettes, Dagg had to revise his technique and tools.

He decided to carve freehand as opposed to being strict with measurements. This required a willingness to accept mistakes since the medium does not allow the artist to correct errors.

Dagg also expanded his collection of chisels and sourced a range of hand forged vintage gouges stretching back to the 1780’s (FIG 8). The chisels were sharpened to a fine edge, enabling Dagg to expand his range of marks. They also allowed the removal of fine slivers of material, affording more possibilities for subtle gradation in form which could catch the light and be likened to pixilated images.

The ability to carve more fluidly across and against the grain also allowed Dagg to focus attention on the overall image rather than be restrained by the mechanics of the technique. The final effect aims to reflect the vibration and movement of an expression through gestural mark making.

The final piece in the series, *The Poser*, was carved in a couple of intense sessions which helped to retain the freshness of the original maquettes. Here the scale of mark is much more varied and there is a sense of movement and vitality lacking in the earlier iterations.

As the series of heads progressed, they became more expressive and vitality was enhanced through the addition of colour.

Oil pastels were explored as way of drawing onto the surface of the wooden sculptures in order to impart vitality to the heads. Whilst this technique had some merits, it obscured the grain of the wood.

A more successful method of colouring involved the use of CMYK printing inks sprayed onto the surface using a rudimentary mouth spray. This is an innovative technique that is the result of several years of research and experimentation. The inks were sprayed onto the surface to build up the four colour separations of cyan, magenta, yellow and black. The colours were initially sprayed in sequence to build a spectrum but the process eventually became a more integrated passage between colour application and carving.



FIG. 11
Kevin Dagg, *The Poser*.
Sycamore and CMYK inks.
Photo Kevin Dagg.

FIGS. 12–13
Maquette for *The Poser*.
Clay, 30 x 25 x 25cm. Image
courtesy of Norman McBeath.



FIG. 14
Kevin Dagg, *The Matriarch*.
Elm and CMYK inks.
Photo Kevin Dagg.

FIGS. 15–16
Maquette for *The Matriarch*.
Clay, 30 x 25 x 25cm. Image
courtesy of Norman McBeath.





FIG. 17
Kevin Dagg, *The Cook*.
Tree of Heaven and CMYK inks.
Photo Kevin Dagg.

FIGS. 18–19
Maquette for *The Cook*.
Clay, 30 x 25 x 25cm. Image
courtesy of Norman McBeath.



FIG. 20
Kevin Dagg, *The Care Worker*.
Tree of Heaven and CMYK inks.
Photo Kevin Dagg.

FIGS. 21–22
Maquette for *The Care Worker*.
Clay, 30 x 25 x 25cm. Image
courtesy of Norman McBeath.



FIG. 23

Kevin Dagg, *The Kurds*, on display at *After the Storm*, Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, April 2017. Photo Kevin Dagg.



05 / SIGNIFICANCE

In its investigation of a migrant community, the output has particular currency at a time when questions of identity, belonging and ethnic integration are at the forefront of social debate.

The output was disseminated through several exhibitions and won several awards.

After The Storm, Royal Botanical Gardens, Edinburgh, April 2017, a group exhibition curated jointly by Kevin Dagg and Sophia Lycouris which explored traumatic events and resilience through the metaphor of storms.

Two heads (*The Matriarch* and *The Poser*) were selected for the Society of Portrait Sculptors 55th Annual Exhibition in London: *FACE 2019*, 3 – 8 June 2019 in La Galleria Pall Mall, the only forum for contemporary portrait sculpture in the UK. *The Matriarch* won Best Runner Up exhibit.

One of the sculptures, *The Poser* was the only sculpture to be selected from more than 700 entries for the Scottish Portrait Awards, held at Scottish Arts Club, Edinburgh (26 October 2018 – 1 December 2018) and Glasgow Arts Club, Glasgow (21 January – 9 February 2019), where it won the Glasgow Arts Club Award for Fine Art.

The piece was shortlisted as one of six finalists by a distinguished judging panel (including the artist John Byrne, and Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the Scottish Portrait Gallery, Imogen Gibbons).

The Poser was well received during the exhibition and an image of the piece appeared in much of the subsequent publicity and media coverage.

The Matriarch won runner-up in the Heatherley School of Fine Art Prize for the best 3D human portrait, awarded by the Society of Portrait Sculptors, June 2019.

FIG. 24

Dagg and his sculpture, *The Matriarch*, at the award ceremony for the Heatherley School of Fine Art Prize, Society of Portrait Sculptors, June 2019. Photo Kevin Dagg.



FIG. 25

Dagg with his sculpture, *The Poser*, which won the Glasgow Arts Club Award for Fine Art. Photo Kevin Dagg.



06 / APPENDIX

Video

A short video of the story behind *The Poser*.

https://media.ed.ac.uk/media/t/1_k8kdln2a

Press

'Kevin Dagg's striking sculpture...'

The Art Guide,

Homes and Interiors Scotland, 2018.

https://issuu.com/peeblesmedia/docs/art_guide_2018

'...features some of the finest examples of contemporary portraiture including: *The Poser*, a complex sculpture in sycamore wood and ink by Kevin Dagg.'

Edinburgh Life,

December 2018 edition.

A half page image and brief text were featured in the Glasgow Herald.

<https://www.facebook.com/scotportrait/posts/the-story-behind-kevin-daggs-brilliant-sculpture-of-the-poser-winner-of-the-glas/2093560487402709/>

Lecture

Dagg gave a public lecture for 50 attendees discussing the process behind *The Poser*.

Scottish Arts Club,

21 November, 2018.



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