The Archetype Series: Introduction

First published in book *The Archetype Series,* Norbert Francis Attard, 2022
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**The new objet trouvé**

The history of found objects in art is far-reaching. The first and most well-known instance of found object art, one that penetrated from the gallery walls into the realm of popular culture, was Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain (1917) – a work of deliberate subversion that jolted not just art audiences into new dimensions of perception, but the entire world.

Even today, it forces viewers to question how they look at art, how they define it, and how far those definitions can be stretched. Fountain, which was famously exhibited as an inverted men’s urinal, broke beyond all earlier art movements to become a funnel for a wider set of questions. Fountain asks viewers to question art and the role of the artist, and in doing so challenges their intellectual defaults, their entrenched perceptions, provoking them to exercise agency over declaring that things may not always be what the world expects or wants them to be. Fountain reorders expectations and gives control back to both maker and viewer.

Such things were manifestoes. They proclaimed that the world was already so full of “interesting” objects that the artist need not add to them. Instead, he could just pick one, and this ironic act of choice was equivalent to creation – a choice of mind rather than of hand.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Like all great works of art, Fountain – which Duchamp coined the term ‘readymade’ for – brought meaning outside the work itself. It progressed art theory forward; connecting the practice of art to current political, social, cultural, and economic discourse; shattering outdated critiques; and providing wider, lay audiences with a moment they could attach personal meaning to.

In the centuries after Duchamp, artists from his contemporary Salvador Dalí to Piero Manzoni, Carl Andre, Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, Sarah Lucas, Ai WeiWei, Mona Hatoum and many more, all transferred objects that existed in the world of functionality into the world of concept. For each of them, the object became a portal into tangential thinking, into new ways of probing how humanity deals with its own condition.

**Reinventing the ruler**

The Archetype Series communicates with this canon of artmaking. It belongs to the practice of Found Object art, but equally speaks to the tradition of purist or classical sculpture. It also lives within the realms of Symbolist, Minimalist, and Conceptual Art. The series is made up of a collection of fifteen small-scale, three-dimensional compositions, built from objects that pre-exist – specifically, measuring rulers that have been appropriated and given new meaning: deferring, without entirely eliminating, their original intended use.

The works’ point of departure is the object itself – a four-sided, foldable tool known as a multi-angle template scale ruler, or more commonly, as the Angle-Izer. Regarded as an industry-standard template tool for creating professional layouts in tiles, bricks, paving, lumber and laminate, the four-sided mechanism takes determined form from workable surfaces – materials that need to be cut or shaped to specific shapes and sizes – and then uses that form as a stencil.

As a tool, the Angle-Izer offers precision and convenience, presenting an orderly and straightforward method for executing clear-cut finishes in construction-based activity. As an artist’s medium – and specifically within this series – the Angle-Izer represents both flexibility and restraint. It demands planning, repetitive building, layering, twisting, screwing, taking apart, building, rebuilding, and mounting. What it retains is the notion of ‘transfer’. As a tool, it transfers shape and scale. As an objet trouvé within this series, it transfers meaning.

**Architectural allusions**

In its elemental format, the four-sided ruler summons mechanical or process allusions within this series. Its author – Norbert Francis Attard – has practiced as an architect for decades. His architectural background has always held a position within his art practice. At times the influence of architecture manifests visually, as large-scale, site-specific installations. At others, it registers through method or process, in the meticulous precision of Attard’s prints, readymade collages, or graphic work.

Within this series, Attard’s architectural background presents itself at both the beginning and end of each of the structures’ lifespan. At the beginning, it is felt plainly through the object itself – the ruler – and its pragmatic connection to the practice of making buildings. At the end, it exists in the small-scale, three-dimensionality of each work. Singularly, each structure within the series possesses the same balance, proportionality, and physical soundness required for a building to stand up. When mounted, they take on the architectonic visuality of buildings in elevation. Collectively, they are a landscape of small-scale, metal monuments.

In between the starting and finished state of Attard’s structures, their mechanics are exposed. The components to their physical integrity – their joints, ruled parts and fixes – are left visible. This transparency adds to the series’ architectural qualities, evoking the spirit of the 1970s High-Tech period in architecture in diminutive form. High-Tech was influenced by engineering and new technology, taking form as a style that highlighted a building's mode of construction. It developed as a tangent of British Modernist architecture, with an ethos fuelled by an ambition to reveal the technical anatomy of buildings, the visible manipulation of space, the logic of physicality.

The Archetype Series also does this, albeit denying the technical dimension of the works to dominate the leading narrative. Instead, the frankness of process is sublimated into symbolic transference. Because all the structures are made using the same method – and that method remains visible throughout each work – this sublimation becomes a departure point for viewers’ interpretations. There is an oscillation between revelation and control. In the nuance of their physical appearance, the sculptures each show a candour and homogeneity of form. This uniformity makes space for the series’ focus – interpretive analysis and symbolism.

**Platonic manipulations**

The Archetype Series presents a set of sculptural compositions as vessels for wider social, cultural, political and metaphysical commentary. Its subjects range from the poetics of geometry to the transcendence of nature, from pop iconography to the marriage of low and high culture, politics, religion and language. Its commonality lies in its offering of symbols as custodians of deeper meaning. The series’ title, in this respect, is mindful of the legacy of the Platonic concept of ‘pure form’, which is believed to embody the fundamental characteristics of any given thing. If the opposition to ‘purity’ is taken as ‘manipulation’, then the structures each present purity of form as an invitation for interpretative manipulation. They offer the big idea – the details are left to the viewer to supplement and build on through their personal readings.

The meaning of the word ‘archetype’ also refers to a recurring symbol – a definition which is honoured by the series’ uniform black colour, silver fixings and metal material across each structure. This formal consistency allows power to occupy the structures’ symbolic references. The ‘archetype’ therefore becomes the carrier of amplified ideas. The notion of recurrence also speaks directly to the found four-sided ruler, which as a tool in its original form, relies on a system of repeating shapes.

The original pattern of forms of which actual things are copies.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Structures in Space**

Attard’s ‘archetypes’ do not belong solely to the definition of Platonic form. Nor do they adhere exclusively to Duchamp’s readymade tradition. They also cannot be classified only as drawn from the High-Tech architectural period. Instead, they share the common trait between all these movements and ideas – which is the notion of reduction and clarity of form. In this, the series also shares legacy with the protagonists of the Minimalist movement in sculpture. Its relationship with Minimalism rests strongest with the work and thinking of Donald Judd, whose concepts ushered new standards of novelty into the art world for their emphasis on a physical, phenomenological experience.

This refers to Judd’s emerging conceptual thesis from the 1960s, where he became interested in more than just the ‘object' in art, but the way in which it held space and influence within its setting and context. In 1964, he wrote Specific Objects, a text that expounded a new kind of art that was released from conventional frameworks of painting and sculpture. It instead focused on an investigation of space and dimensionality, and – like The Archetype Series – used commercial materials that allowed an emphasis on total, unified shapes. His ‘stacks’ and ‘box-like forms’, many of which are untitled, best exemplify these new preoccupations. Where the focus of sculpture diverts from the object itself towards its relationship with what is around it.

Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In a very oblique sense, Judd’s interest in the wholeness of sculpture relates back to Duchamp’s readymade philosophy. Judd asserts that “it isn't necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyse one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting.[[4]](#footnote-4) This rings true with Fountain. What’s more, he declares that “if you take an object […] or a single thing, and you put it in a space […] it trails off into all directions, into indefinite space”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Yet, while Attard is strongly influenced by Judd’s new ideas around the spatial potency of sculpture, The Archetype Series does not divorce itself from subject-matter. It is steeped in metaphor, sharing the legacy of traditional painting and sculpture in its representational essence. What it does enlist from Judd, is the idea of meaning held beyond the object itself. In Attard’s series, meaning is held both within the object and in the dialogue between object and viewer. The focus therefore becomes the ritual of interpretation.

**Space to symbol**

Uniformity and repetition create a framework within the series that supports Attard’s own symbolic canon and metaphors. Each structure represents a symbol that means something distinct and whole to him on a personal level. His method, however, releases and abstracts that specificity, bringing the sculptures more in line with Plato’s concept of eidos, where an essence or form embodies the fundamental characteristics of a thing, rather than its specific peculiarities. In doing so, the series gives interpretative power back to the audience.

The Archetype Series therefore performs in a circular pattern of universality, specificity and then universality again. It begins with universality of form, imparting visual cohesion through its medium, colour and exposed mechanics. It moves to specificity in its provocation of symbolic meaning, and invitation for personal contemplation. Finally, it returns to universality through an inevitable shared understanding – its symbols, although provoking individual readings, are understood instinctively. They are well known, ubiquitous, belonging to a collective visual language. The symbols within The Archetype Series are taken up by the artist, unpacked, and then returned into a shared discourse.

**Fifteen**

As with Fountain, the weight of this series lives beyond the physical. It is energised by symbolism, allegory, superstition, folklore, critique, and lamentation. It also exists in the fullness of the series – the decision to include fifteen structures itself inferring meaning onto the work. The number fifteen is taken up as a final, additional symbol, that lives alongside the visual metaphors carried by the series. Beyond the series, the significance of the number fifteen permeates into popular culture belief systems with an energy that Attard responds to and connects with. In numerology, which is a belief in the mystical relationship between numbers and coinciding events, the number fifteen is tied to curiosity and exploration, love, new beginnings, and positivity. These are all conditions that shaped the context in which The Archetype Series was made.

For Attard, The Archetype Series marks a period of prolific art production – created during months of near solitary confinement within his Gozo studio, where he funnelled a life’s worth of ideas and metaphors into a collection of fifteen three-dimensional emblems. The finality of the number fifteen serves the series with an order that perhaps substitutes what has recently been lost within Attard’s personal context – a lifetime partner, confidante and soulmate. The completeness, ferocity and positivity of the number fifteen perhaps serving as an underlying antidote to grief; the fuel that fed the production of The Archetype Series. Spiritually and religiously, the number fifteen also holds meaning. In the Bible, it denotes ‘rest’, which comes after deliverance, and which – in Attard’s case – comes with an intention to provide new artistic subject-matter.

Within the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a miniature altarpiece known as The Fifteen Mysteries and the Virgin of the Rosary (Netherlandish Painter, possibly Goswijn van der Weyden, ca. 1515–20) depicts fifteen mysteries associated with the Virgin Mary's life. Five are joyful, five sorrowful, and five glorious. They are each held within a framework – an ordered, systematic representation of colour, framing, and composition. In many ways, they are also archetypal; setting aside their miraculous subject, they navigate through the episodes of parenthood, grief, and spiritual redemption. In their universality and access, they invite specificity. The Archetype Series can be similarly read as fifteen mysteries. Episodes that gain new relevance with each person’s interpretation. Its structures also represent meaning that is joyful, sorrowful, or glorious. They are at times didactic, ironic, hopeful, and questioning.

Yet their most significant role is in their ability to summon these introspections through formal innovation, making art the portal into wider thought in the same way as the Virgin of the Rosary altarpiece does, even today. Both in their singularity and as a collection, the structures’ qualities – their size, their blackness, their angularity – arrest the viewer into a moment of instant focus, which is then drawn out into longer contemplation. Duchamp’s Fountain did this is its own time not because it was the only work of art that has ever gripped audiences to the degree it did, but because it offered amplified visual novelty.

As Judd’s writings explain, “the disinterest in painting and sculpture is a disinterest in doing it again”.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Archetype Series draws from movements before it, as well as from Attard’s own artistic periods – his architecture that spanned his entire career, his installation art from the 1990s, and his graphic posters from the 1970s – but offers something separate. In his quest to channel the power of symbols and elicit the interpretation of the viewer, Attard creates a body of work that is activated by what exist around it: space, people, and his own catalogue of meaning and memory.

The new world of forms which replaced that of the 19th century corresponds, just as did the medieval and Renaissance forms which supplanted those of the classical and medieval worlds, to a new conception of physical and philosophical reality, and to the artist’s responsibility to discover forms properly expressive of these new ideas.[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. *The Shock of the New,* Robert Hughes, Thames & Hudson, 1991, p. 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Plato's "Eidos" and the Archetypes of Jung and Frye,* Interpretations, Vol. 16, No. 1, Eugene Williamson, 1985, p. 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Specific Objects’ in *Donald Judd Writings*, Donald Judd, ed. Caitlin Murray, Flavin Judd, David Zwirner Books, 2016, p. 141 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Specific Objects’ in *Donald Judd Writings*, Donald Judd, ed. Caitlin Murray, Flavin Judd, David Zwirner Books, 2016, p. 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Donald Judd Interviews*, ed. Caitlin Murray, Flavin Judd, David Zwirenr Books, 2019, p. 406 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ‘Specific Objects’ in *Donald Judd Writings*, Donald Judd, ed. Caitlin Murray, Flavin Judd, David Zwirner Books, 2016, p. 135 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1880-1940*, George Heard Hamilton, Yale University Press, Pelican University of Art, 1993, p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)