

the navigator

*We have fallen in the dreams the ever living  
Breathe on the tarnished mirror of the world,  
And then smooth out with ivory hands and sigh.*  
W.B. Yeats



FLEEING FIGURE  
Collage, Mixed Media on Paper  
80 x 51cm

material devices

to Kimberley



J. Atkin at RHL studio, London

## MATERIAL DEVICES: THE DRAWINGS AND SCULPTURE OF JOHN ATKIN

by Tom Csaszar



HOSTAGE 1990  
Ceramic and found objects  
Height 180cm

The sculptures and drawings of John Atkin present not so much images of machines as they do diagrams of machines incompletely realized in our imagination. His playful inventions are casual and direct statements. And yet, like a well-written Tokugawa haiku - as opposed to a poorly written Elizabethan sonnet - they are metaphoric and rhetorical in the sense that they help us to discover our own metaphors in them, rather than impress us with the cleverness of the packaged rhetoric of their creator. They are not just literal observations, nor are they surrealistic details from one man's psyche, but more than anything else, they are complex metaphors simply put. Classical haiku frequently create parallels between states of nature and states of the human mind and human condition. Atkin's works explore how the human mind and the human condition are mirrored in the tools and devices that people make. And through this process these tools and machines are transformed into symbols and characters in the dramas of human experience.

Atkin's sculptures and drawings speak the same language as that of many other European and American sculptors, but they focus on the basics, what one might call the syntax and sound of sculptural language, rather than on rhetorical devices. Whether one thinks of Rodin, Brancusi, David Smith, Caro, Bourgeois, Chillida, Munoz, or Gormley, (or even Ann Hamilton, Joseph Beuys, James Hyde, or Franz West), there are points of comparison with Atkin's pieces. Yet there is a curious quality in Atkin's works that allows them to speak evocatively and emotionally without relying on one single type of sculptural metaphor - such as gesture or bodily reference - and to speak intelligently without relying on specific meanings and analogies - such as jarring juxtapositions, ironic comparisons, or particular literal references. It is not so much that Atkin doesn't use his own idioms and rhetorical devices, but more that he uses them directly and simply, allowing the viewer to complete them.

Exactly how Atkin manages to structure sculptural statements so that they are resonant with multiple meanings, while at the same time being spare with their use of sculptural rhetoric, can be seen in the series of drawings and sculptures of the last three years in the Navigator series. As the titles indicate, Atkin explores a wide range of aspects of this hybrid form, including how it locates itself and potentially explores the world - as well as, perhaps, setting up a model for us to do the same. His titles reference navigational instruments; the painter de Chirico; Mario dal Fabbro, the designer of an androgynous ironing board cum step ladder; and machinery's mortality in the drawing *Rattletrap*. In addition, titles such as *Migrant Navigator* personify the work as a character: a robotic, or semi-human, being - pushing it from the realm of the inanimate to the animate and conscious.

The three aspects of experience that Atkin clearly identifies in these transformations are ones that he has used consistently throughout his work. They are the primary physical scales and imaginative realms of the human psyche: that of the hand, the body, and the house. This may sound grand, like Atkin has replaced embellished rhetoric with psychological or theoretical intricacies. However, he keeps these three realms of his sculptural statements basic and clear. They are not only vectors on which one could build theoretical systems of experiential and perceptual concepts, but they are also the well-known imaginative modes that children use to address their toys. Whether a doll or a toy soldier, a chair or an article of clothing, as children play in the world they employ these three modes: first, ideas of that which can be held and used, that which can be felt with one's hands; second, ideas of personifying and characterizing objects, blurring the distinctions between the inanimate and unknowing and the animate and feeling; and third, ideas of creation of place, shelter, architecture, that which the body can perceive by moving around it and through it. In the '80s there were popular toys, five or six inches long, called "Transformers." By rotating the arms and legs around their joints, you turned them from robot people into machines, such as space ships. In his works Atkin allows us in our imagining to transform a section of a tool into a body part or a machine part into an architectural element

While these works have their playful aspects, all this is not without attendant threats and dangers - just as in children's imaginations there are areas of real fright, even though provoked by what we sometimes call fiction. (Of course to call it fiction we have to show disrespect and misunderstanding for the real nature of these perceptions.) The Navigator series is only tinged with that sense of cartoonish menace found in other recent works such as *Hunter and Trap* and *Sentinel*. The sculptures in Atkin's recent



HUNTER AND TRAP 2002  
Cast Aluminium 23 x 13 x 12cm  
REIVERS  
Works on Paper and Sculptures  
Kouros Gallery, New York 2002

exhibition "Reivers," which included some drawings from the Navigator series, employed related shapes and volumes, there with more stress on their being purposeful, yet unresolved. If not forthrightly menacing, they played off ideas of security and insecurity.

The attendant unease of *The Navigator* and his cousins is of a slightly different sort. One is not quite sure how and through what process these beings or machines find their way, but this is more anxiety provoking than menacing. And somehow one has an odd trust in the intentions of these semi-conscious devices. The overall rhythms of the shapes seem familiar and coordinated in their purpose. The tilt of the device is neither too solid and immobile, nor too







BOLLIHOPE SHIELD Mixed Media on six suspended and upholstered wood templates

eccentric and unstable. Even the articulations of hole and notches are oddly reassuring and familiar, although one is not quite sure why at first. These rather minor details are one key to how Atkin structures sculptural form, making sure that the smooth graceful curves do not become too abstract, but retain echoes of the everyday. Additionally, these articulations provide a sense of both purpose and incompleteness. Do other parts fit here? Are we waiting for them to be returned? Were they removed because unnecessary? Are we looking at the chassis (stand-in for the unadorned human body)? Or are we looking at the crucial aiming device or tongue to be fitted onto another chassis to guide it? Through the formal and narrative questions that Atkin raises here, we are pulled away a bit from Batman or Grimm's Tales, and brought into the orbit of the literature of writers like Samuel Beckett, Edward Bond and Maurice Blanchot. The menaces felt to be external - threat from that beyond one's control - and the menaces felt to be internal: anxiety, impotence, misunderstanding, and failure - perhaps beneath one's control - are related by Atkin, in a subtle understated manner

that hints at the relationship between childhood fears and adult fears, while not confusing the two. One of the pleasures of Atkin's works, whether the drawings, the wall hung sculptures of the Pendulum series, or the small and large sculptural pieces, is the manner in which his understated choices engender the quiet drama of the complex world of their potential actions. In the wall hung assemblages, painted shapes, derived from dressmakers' patterns, overlap, interrupting each other, and drawing boundaries, one against the other, to create form in a carefully orchestrated exchange. Many of Atkin's drawings are made of sheets attached one over the other, sometimes also covered with a slurry or grog of clay, which is then drawn over. So the spaces and lines describing the forms pass through various phases on their way to description. This flat shape bends here, is deflected there, as it moves through space and across different surfaces supporting it, like flesh over bone, its connective tissues yielding, but stretching only so far. The material of the devices in the drawing seems to be rigid - metal, wood, maybe plastic - and the design and scheme seem



planned and purposeful, yet the drama of the material and spatial existence of the entities in the drawings make them seem anything but easily realized, make them seem anything but at ease in their world. One is never quite sure if the objects and spaces depicted in Atkin's drawings exist only because this particular matrix of sheets of paper and clay, like a pair of special glasses, allows one to see an ephemeral aspect of things, or if the objects and spaces assert themselves against the shifting material forces of the paper and clay, existing in spite of energies that are tugging at them, pulling them gently apart.

Similar elements and events occur in the sculptures. While the interruption of one form overlapping another that occurs in the wall-hung pieces is not literally present in the sculptures, one feels the particular interruptions and exchanges between the shapes of *The Navigator*, with each other and with the surrounding space, as events related to those of the wall-hung series. The arc or bend of each edge and shape is responding. To what? To a missing piece? To the space needed for an arm or wheel to rotate? To a means of designing the element to have



FLEEING FIGURE  
Mixed media on Ceramic Grog  
82 x 53cm

less weight but remain equally strong? What is important is not the particular answer here, but that there is an exchange and response going on, that *The Navigator* is not a self-contained, isolated, self-governed, born-all-at-once, device, but is poised to interact. And, as in many of the drawings, the fulcrum of the action and drama is an undetermined relationship between material existence and the immaterial forces of intention, design, purpose, desire, or decision. A similar relationship exists in our understanding of a character in the context of the actions and forces of a play, whether by Beckett, Shakespeare, August Wilson or Nicholas Wright. And also, like in a play, the result is an idea of the forces in the world, between people and within people, that are material, determined, unyielding, and those that are immaterial, indeterminate, yielding.

In Atkin's sculpture this interaction of material and immaterial forms and forces activates our experience and understanding. And, to return to the analogy of haiku, *The Navigator*, like some drawings, is paired down to the essential statements that define it, at least in this particular incarnation, delicately balanced on the edge of appearing, or perhaps disappearing. One element added or removed would shift irreversibly the characterizations, so delicately balanced. However, unlike all literary analogies, Atkin's sculpture leaves it up to us as to how long we take to read what's going on, how many imaginary elements or forces we associate, how long or short a drama we make of it. In the inevitable silence of sculptural language, we are left with our own perception and association, with what we will make of this - as when we consider the visible landscape of the world or the single events in a day.

Tom Csaszar is an artist, art writer, and lecturer. He is a frequent contributor to *Sculpture* magazine, and teaches in the graduate programs at the University of the Arts and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, both in Philadelphia.

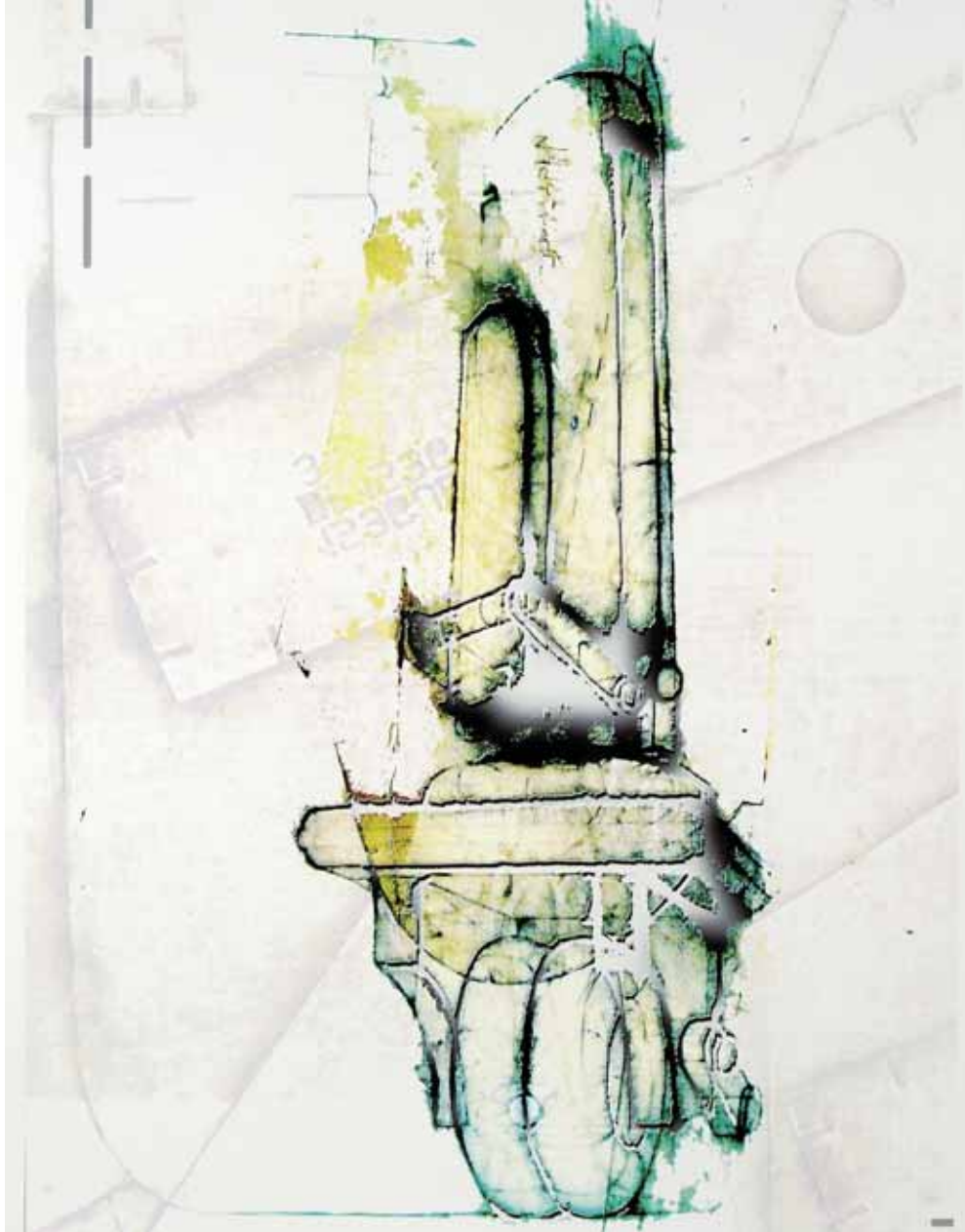


the  
navigator

works on paper  
&  
sculptures



BORDER RAIDER  
Mixed Media on Paper  
83x51cm



STUDY FOR THE 'INVENTOR'  
Colour Inkjet Print  
152x120cm

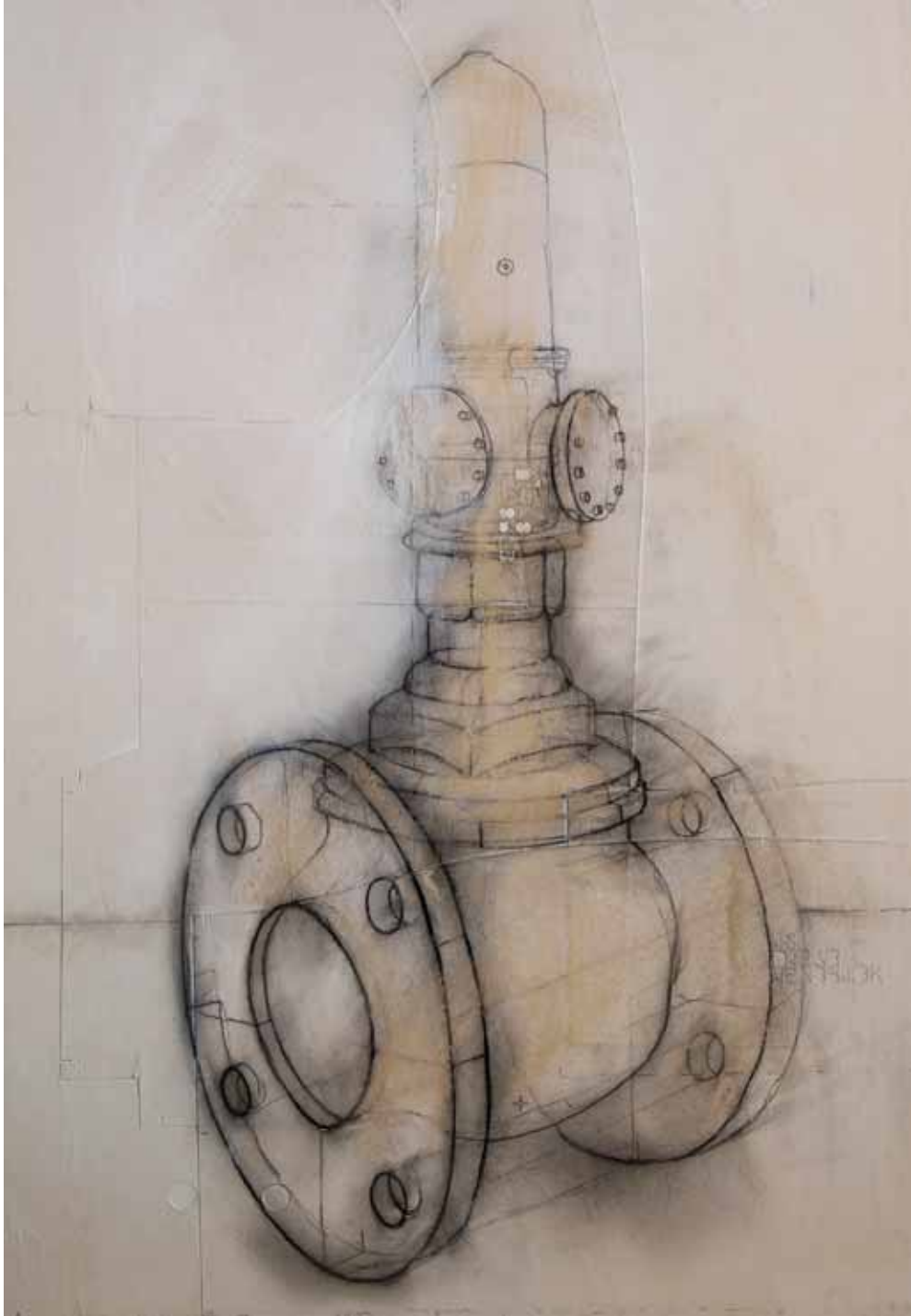


LOOKOUT (front view)  
Bronze  
Height 50cm



LOOKOUT (back view)  
Bronze  
Height 50cm





SENTINEL II  
Mixed Media and Collage on Paper  
87x56cm



WANDERER II  
Mixed Media and Collage on Paper  
87x56cm



NAVIGATOR  
Corten Steel  
Height 71cm



SENTINEL  
Cast Iron  
Height 33cm



THE SIGNALLER (front view)  
Painted Wood  
Height 67cm



THE SIGNALLER (rear view)  
Painted Wood  
Height 67cm



PORTRAIT OF DAL FABBRO (back view)

Ash

Height 71cm





PORTRAIT OF DAL FABBRO (front view)

Ash

Height 71cm



RAIDER  
Mixed Media on Paper  
80x56cm

## BIOGRAPHY

John Atkin was born in Darlington, County Durham, in 1959. He studied painting at Leicester Polytechnic between 1978 and 1981, after which he returned to the North East of England to set up his first independent studio, in Hurworth, Co. Durham.

During this time he was invited to meet Henry Moore at his studios in Much Hadham. As a result of this meeting, Moore generously agreed to assist Atkin with his plans for postgraduate study. Atkin went on to study Sculpture at the Royal College of Art, (under Prof. Phillip King), in London between 1982 and 1985. He was awarded the Drawing Prize in 1985 and began to prepare new work for his first two solo shows. The first, *Strange Meeting*, at the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne and later in London at the Juda Rowan Gallery.

From 1985 to 1986 Atkin was awarded the Stanley Picker Fellowship in Sculpture at Kingston upon Thames Polytechnic. The location of this studio was the original site for the construction of Sopwith Pup and Camel airplanes destined for action in the Great War.

Since 1986, Atkin has exhibited extensively in England, Europe, Australia and the United States, with Awards from the British Council and Australia Council in 1989. This culminated in a major exhibition of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in Melbourne, (formerly Heide Park and Art Gallery), in 1989, organized by Maudie Palmer. Other exhibitions of his work were at Rex Irwin Gallery, Sydney and the Jam Factory Gallery, Adelaide. In 1998 he was invited to exhibit a series of new wall based constructions at Hartford University, Connecticut, an exhibition organized by Peter Mclean. This exhibition and subsequent series of lectures stimulated a great deal of critical interest in his work, which resulted in exhibitions in Kansas City, Boston, Boise, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Chicago and most recently in New York, at the Kouros Gallery.

The British Council, the Royal College of Art, Loughborough University and, most recently, the Arts and Humanities Research Board, have generously supported these exhibitions.

His work has also been exhibited and supported by Sculpture at Goodwood and at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice, Italy, *Thinking Big*, 2002 - 2003.

Public commissions can be located at the Great Eastern Hotel, Liverpool Street, and London and at the Orwell Riverside Development, Ipswich.

Atkin is Reader in Fine Art at Loughborough University School of Art and Design.

He has lived and worked in London since 1982, is married to Kimberley and has two children, Joel, age 6 and Tallulah, age 3.

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2003 Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich, UK  
John Atkin & Mark Arctander, Crown Center Gallery,  
Loyola University, Chicago, USA
- 2002 Reivers - Sculptures & Drawings, Kouros Gallery,  
New York, USA  
Scorched Earth - Drawings and Sculptures, Philadelphia  
Art Alliance, Philadelphia PA. USA
- 2001 Drawings & Pendulum Reliefs, Paesaggio, Gallery,  
Hartford, CT. USA.  
The Made and the Unmade, Sherry Leedy  
Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri, USA
- 2000 The Made and the Unmade, Hemingway Gallery,  
Boise, Idaho, USA  
Scorched Earth, Sylvia Schmidt Contemporary Art,  
New Orleans, LA. USA  
Pendulum Reliefs, Danna Center, Loyola University,  
New Orleans, LA. USA  
Cut, Made and Unmade, Real Gallery, New York,  
NY. USA
- 1999 Pendulum Reliefs, Alpha Gallery, Boston, Mass. USA  
Cut, Shillam & Smith 3, London. UK  
Distant Voices, Davis Gallery, Wellfleet, Mass. USA  
Distant Voices, Grayson Gallery, Woodstock, Vt. USA
- 1998 Taub Hall Gallery, Hartford University, Hartford, CT. USA



detail of SIGNALLER I

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2003 1st Guilin International Sculpture Exhibition,  
Guilin, China  
London Art Fair; (Berkeley Square Gallery), London, UK
- 2002 Thinking Big: Concepts for twenty- first century British  
sculpture, Guggenheim Museum, Venice, Italy
- 2001 New Concepts, Sculpture at Goodwood, Goodwood,  
UK  
The Armory Art Fair, Alpha Gallery, New York
- 2000 Summer Show, Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art,  
Kansas City, MO. USA  
Drawings, Hartwick Art School, New York State.  
Chicago Art Fair, Alpha Gallery, Chicago, Illinois.  
Encounters, Sharjah, Museum of Art, United  
Arab Emirates.
- 1999 Abstraction 2 to 3, Cleveland State University Art  
Gallery, Cleveland, USA (invited artist)  
Rentre, Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston Upon Thames,  
London  
New Work, Monograma, Rome, Italy
- 1997 Cities 97, London Docklands, London  
In Transit-in Residence, Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston  
Upon Thames  
The Loughborough Group, Atrium Gallery, London  
The Loughborough Group, Economist Plaza, London
- 1994 The Loughborough Group, Bede Gallery, Jesmond, UK  
National Garden Festival, Gateshead, Newcastle, UK
- 1993 Open Crossing, BBK, Dusseldorf, Germany
- 1992 Sculpture at Canterbury, Kent, UK
- 1990 New Work, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, UK
- 1989 Picker Fellows, Watermans Arts Centre, London
- 1988 10th Sculpture Triennial, Mildura, Victoria, Australia
- 1987 Basle Art Fair, (selected artist), Basle, Switzerland  
Reivers, Mach, Atkin, McCann, City Gallery, London  
Hackney Artists Drawings, City Gallery, London  
Athena Awards, Barbican Art Centre, London
- 1986 Recent British Sculpture, Exchange Square, Hong Kong.
- 1985 The Eighties, Juda Rowan Gallery, London.

## AWARDS, SCHOLARSHIPS AND RESIDENCIES

- 2002/3 AHRB. Small Grants in the Creative and Performing Arts
- 2001 British Council. Awards To Artists. USA
- 2000 Research Award. LUSAD, Loughborough University
- 1999 Research Award SSH, Loughborough University
- 1998 Research Award, Royal College of Art, London  
Research Award. LUSAD, Loughborough University
- 1995 British Council Travel Award. Germany
- 1993 Residency. Jam Factory Gallery, Adelaide, Australia
- 1990 British Council Travel Award. Australia Residency. Victoria College, Melbourne, Australia  
Residency/exhibitions. Australia Council Award
- 1989 Connecticut Artists Studio Program, Bantam, Connecticut, USA
- 1988 Residency. Mildura Arts Centre, Victoria, Australia  
Award. The Elephant Trust. Australia
- 1987 Residency. Grizedale Forest, Cumbria, UK
- 1985 Fellowship. One year Stanley Picker, Trust Kingston University. UK Award. Drawing Prize. Royal College of Art, London
- 1983 Award. Henry Moore Foundation. Visit - Ed Kienholz, Berlin Studios
- 1982 Scholarship. 3 years. Henry Moore, Foundation. MA Sculpture, RCA
- 1981 Major Award. Northern Arts. Newcastle upon Tyne

## SELECTED COMMISSIONS

- 2003 The Navigator, 2003 Ipswich River Action Group, Ipswich
- 2000 Great Eastern Hotel, Liverpool Street, London
- 1998 Brindleyplace plc, Birmingham. Inlet/Outlet design for plaza
- 1996 Brindleyplace plc, Birmingham. 6 paintings
- 1991 The Outsider, Carrick Hill, Adelaide, Australia
- 1989 The Watcher, Hartlepool Marina Development, Cleveland, UK
- 1988 Iron Rations, Mildura Sculpture Triennial, Australia
- 1985 Watchman, Tsukaba Expo 85, Japan  
Mies van der Rohe, KIUK London. Bronze  
Mies van der Rohe, KIUK Paris. Large-scale drawing



detail of LOOKOUT

John Atkin would like to thank the following for their help and support

Ipswich River Action Group, Public Art Working Group, Ipswich Borough Council, Commissions East, Tom Cszasz, Sue Arnold, Pauline West, Malcolm Revill, James Rawlinson, Mike Cheal, Peter Elliot, Crown New Media, Rebecca Weaver, Douglas Atfield, Jason Cole, John Petch, David Hatley, Sam Adams, Rod Barton, Leanne Castle, Anita Jones, Loughborough University School of Art & Design and the AHRB.



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ISBN 0-906688-40-X

Published by Ipswich Borough Council

Photography by Douglas Atfield

Printed by The Five Castles Press Ltd, Raeburn Road South, Ipswich, Suffolk.

