

The marvel of Spain's iron man

Xavier Mascaró's sculptures are eerie, timeless and evocative – do catch them at the Saatchi Gallery this autumn, says Alastair Smart



Timeless: Xavier Mascaró's 'Guardians', which are soon to be displayed outside the Saatchi Gallery

By Alastair Smart

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I know that, according to one recent survey, there's a whole generation of British schoolchildren growing up believing that the Spanish Armada is a type of tapas. Yet, for those of us raised with the year 1588 etched in our national collective memory, a new sculpture show at the Saatchi Gallery should prove evocative.

For, Spanish artist Xavier Mascaró will exhibit a fleet of 20-plus iron boats, ranging in size from what look like small caravels to works, 18ft long, that resemble Philip II's great galleons. They're depopulated, rusting, and more precisely skeletal frames of ships than ships themselves – like wrecks discovered by divers after four centuries at the bottom of the English Channel.

Like all good **art**, though, Mascaró's fleet, offers different meanings to different people. Titled

"Departure", for some the vessels may eerily evoke the funerary boats of Ancient Egypt, or ghost ships like the Marie Celeste; for others the sense may be less literal, suggesting, say, the passage through life itself.

One thing surely everyone can agree on, though, is that Mascaró is a proper sculptor. Over recent years, as Conceptual art has come to hold increasing sway, the term "sculpture" has had its meaning broadened almost beyond recognition – such that it can now describe anything from an unmade bed to a multi-screen video work, even a bag of sick.

Mascaró, in contrast, creates sculptures that any age would recognise. He casts iron, in all shapes and sizes, at a Madrid foundry, deliberately playing with the outgoing gases to ensure sculptures of varied and expressive finish, often with the effect of age and ruin. His speciality are large, multi-piece works, intended for display in public spaces – he has recently exhibited along both the Paseo del Prado in Madrid and in the **Palais Royal gardens** in Paris.

His works' appeal lies in their sheer sense of timelessness. Similar to the early 20th-century likes of Brancusi, Picasso and Henry Moore, Mascaró seems to have spent long hours in museums' ethnographic rooms, soaking up the inspiration of sculptures from as far apart as Mexico and Assyria.



Perhaps the standout work coming to London is "Guardians", which calls to mind – albeit in iron – the terracotta warriors of Ancient China. This mysterious quintet will greet visitors on the pathway outside the Saatchi Gallery. Up to 10ft tall, these faceless sentinels manage to look imposing yet protective at the same time.

Again, unlike so much contemporary sculpture, which revels in its ephemerality, these works – you think – could date back centuries, even millennia. They command those old-fashioned artistic virtues: awe, solemnity and respect.

Mascaró is also of interest for anyone with a particular curiosity about Spanish sculpture. His fondness for iron reflects that of his Iberian predecessors, Julio González, Jorge Oteiza and **Eduardo Chillida**. Yet, he rejects the abstract approach so popular during the later years of Franco's regime – a form of

subsumed political dissent – in favour of the figurative.

His other archetypes include horsemen and embracing couples. And, for all the famous artists cited above as influences, Mascaró himself identifies just as much with the anonymous sculptors of ancient times. Why? Because “however much we humans have progressed in terms of technology and machinery”, he says, “our inner selves – our hopes and fears, the things we express in art – are still largely the same”.

For Mascaró, artists have always been the armada and guardians of who we are.

Xavier Mascaró shows at the Saatchi Gallery, London SW3, Sept 3 to Oct 5; saatchigallery.com 020 7811 3070

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