



## THE HUMANISATION OF ART

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Per Ung is being honoured with a retrospective exhibition for the first time. Throughout more than half a century he has created a lifework, the cumulative result of which can be said to represent a break with a majority of the edicts laid down by modern aesthetics. This is not a small claim, for as opposed to what the public often imagines there is hardly any other area in the life of our society that is subjugated to more doctrinaire conventions than art in our time. Now that we are able to view his works as a whole, it is striking to see to what extent he has worked on the sidelines of the norms of his times; you could even say, on the sidelines of art itself as it is defined by these norms. From its antagonist position, Per Ung's art is thus better qualified to put the modern art aesthetic into relief than the selfsame aesthetic is equipped to shed light on the significance and craftsmanship of his works. What is it about Per Ung that challenges conventional aesthetics?

Per Ung expresses human emotions via a plastic modelling of the human body. This occurs without ironic distance to the pre-modern tradition that he adheres to, nor to the themes that he treats. He imitates nature in order, in his own words, "To allow the external world and the symbol within to jointly create an artistic expression as an unbreakable unity". He is not a political artist and his art is devoid of any direct reference to social issues: "I am not an artist because I believe I can change the world through what I create. I work for the salvation of my own soul." He does not believe in the progressive development of art; that it is in a continuous development towards something better or superior: "Modernism's demand that art reflect its times has haunted the Norwegian art world like a nightmare. For an artist, the opposite is required: to lift one's work out of time and place".

The modern art aesthetic has hung up a sign in front of each of the gateways leading

into creative enterprise with these words: Entrance forbidden! Per Ung has consistently challenged these prohibitions and the result can be seen in a production that for the sake of lucidity can be divided into two major groups. The first consists of what we can call "free figures", that is, works that have sprung out of Ung's own imagination and out of his personal attraction to the motif. The other group consists of naturalistic executions of commissioned works, when the artist was asked to create a monument over a historical event, a specific milieu, or a person. The following discussion will concentrate mainly on the first category – not because the other doesn't deserve our attention but because it is clear, at least to this viewer, that it is in the free figures that we come closest to Per Ung's unique character.

We can observe this relationship in two sculptures, where the first literally contains the other. When Ung models in clay he always begins with the naked human form. Only when this is complete does he "put on the clothes", thereby adapting the model to its environment or function. During the work on the commissioned piece *Marinegast/Marine Sailor*, he had the naked figure cast in bronze before he began dressing the figure. In this way two figures emerged: *Marine Sailor* and *Ung Mann/Young Man*. *Marine Sailor* is a heroic presentation of a stalwart young tradesman bursting with life. Yet in the uniform he is, and will always remain, a sailor bound to his profession the choice of which, for all we know, can be due to pure coincidence. In its naked form, the figure gains a more powerful expression – it becomes the symbol of young manhood independent of any age or culture.

The child motifs constitute a conspicuous element, albeit a small one, in Per Ung's artistic production. His presentations of children are not sentimentally childish or anecdotally ingratiating. Childlike activities are not what attract the artist's interest. He portrays his small models with gravity and empathy. Their trusting open nature suggests vulnerability and allows us to experience them for what they are – young human beings who will soon abandon their innocent state in order to carry on with their lives. Their facial expressions suggest that somewhere deep inside their childlike minds they are aware of this. In the portrait of his son *Axel* it is as though the model, sitting on his base balancing with his arms stretched out to his sides, allows us a glimpse into the oriental wisdom of Yin and Yang: the balancing act of life. When the child grows up, physiological changes take place that present the artist with other sculptural challenges. The skeleton and muscles grow in volume. The soft body of a child must give way to more articulated forms. In *Gutt med katt/Boy with Cat* and *Brødre/Brothers*, we can see how Per Ung has been inspired by this phase in the life of a human being. We can feel his pleasure in modelling the youthful human body in strained, expectant postures as well as in free motion.

It is nevertheless the life of the mature human being that constitutes the mainstay of Per Ung's work. Here the figures have abandoned childlike and youthful expectation. They have been thrown into a melting pot of emotions; longing, desire and ecstasy, devotion, pain and hope. The figures are driven by an inner restlessness, by a tension that first explodes in the ecstatic union between man and woman or that finds temporary rest in sleep and dreams. In *Omfavnelsen/The Embrace*, *Adam and Eve* and *Gruppe/Group* we can see how the artist's craftsmanship is challenged by these dramatic themes. The expression is more "raw" than in the portraits of children and youth. He digs more deeply into the surface of the figures in order to increase the contrasts between light and shadow. In this way he achieves a brutality of expression that imbues the figures with eruptive force.

Among the sculptures, two figures stand apart and more or less constitute the thematic extremes that shed light on the works that exist in between them. One of them is *Korsfestelse/Crucifixion*, which was exhibited for the first time at the National Annual Autumn Exhibition in 1971. The other is *Pan*. In *Crucifixion* we recognize the artist's own countenance. In order to understand the strain a body is subjected to in this type of execution, Per Ung hung himself up on a wall. In this way he could experience first hand how the weight of the body pulls and tears the muscles. Ung believes that this sculpture represents a breakthrough in his work. It showed him the significance of accentuating contrasts via the form's depth, a method that he has since followed up. Despite the fact that the motif refers to the crucified Christ, Per Ung's version is not associated with any specific religious denomination. He wished to convey suffering as a state of being, expressed via a figure experiencing a maximum of internal and external tension. In choosing, as in this case, to use his own self portrait and occurring as it does within a context that is so central to our western world of imagery, it tells us something about the artist's whole approach to life – and as became evident later – about his relationship to his creative process.

We meet the other extreme in the burlesque *Pan* figure; not only in Per Ung's imagery but in our own concept of humanity as it has been ingrained in us for more than two thousand years of European cultural tradition. Pan is the god of the forests, a Scandinavian Dionysus – a symbol of Eros in nature and of nature in man. Pan knows how to entice and bewitch. Per Ung has placed him comfortably on a tree stub with his flute in hand. He stares at us with a roguish grin. His body is bursting with energetic lechery. The hooves and the horns on his head reveal its seducing nature. The very nerve of Per Ung's artistic expression is to be found in the dichotomy between this uninhibited nature deity and in the acknowledgement of suffering as it is expressed in *Crucifixion*.

"They (Per Ung's sculptures) reach back in time as in the agonizing *Crucifixion* 1970,

not only in its form and artistic expression, but also in the intention Ung had with them – to portray “The human being with a maximum of inner tension, pain and joy”. Crucifixion is not so much a portrait of Christ as it is of Ung himself. He alludes both to Gauguin and Munch, who both allowed the artist to be crucified by a public that did not understand them or the innovative and unfamiliar art that they presented. Ung, on the other hand, has always been understood and appreciated by the public at large – it is the critics he has a problem with. And the reason for this is that he has made use of a traditional aesthetic without the ironic distance necessary to prevent it from becoming a tame pastiche. The result is that we cannot quite bring ourselves to believe in his works.” (Norges Kunsthistorie, Samlaget Press, Oslo 2001)

The above quote is taken from “Norges Kunsthistorie” (The History of Norwegian Art) and is written by Professor Gunnar Danbolt of the University of Bergen. The text is interesting because it represents a way of thinking and a set of issues that have dominated a greater part of the 20th Century up to the present. We find the quintessence of this thought in the influential essay “The Dehumanisation of Art” written by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset published in 1948. Here we find the idea that “the new art” is for a predetermined elite, a chosen group that for reasons that are difficult to explain are equipped with special abilities for understanding its exalted nature. Art is not a matter for the masses; these simple beings that only seek to have their petty daily lives confirmed by it. Ortega y Gasset considered the Naturalism of the 1800s as nothing more than a pathetic capitulation to such demands. In modern art he saw the possibility for its revival. But the cure he prescribed was potent. Art must free itself from the grasp of history. It must not under any circumstances imitate natural forms, but rather turn away from anything physically or emotionally recognizable and from all inherited conceptions. It must above all be without pathos. Art must turn away from the human sphere. Artistic thought should instead turn to itself in the search for a pure, spiritual world. Art’s only legitimate point of contact with nature and tradition should be achieved only with the help of metaphor and ironic reflection. Art must not provoke an emotional reaction – it must be uplifting. Art should be autonomous. Taking the example of René Magritte’s painting of a pipe, for instance, we can see how ideas about the relationship between the painting and reality develop as a kind of philosophical game among modern painters. The painting is entitled This is not a Pipe. But soon enough the ideological grip is tightened. The idea that the human being must deny its physical nature in order to achieve a higher state of spiritual being, has deep roots in the history of European culture, which – in a frightening way – found very good conditions for growth during the age of ideologies. When art’s task was to liberate itself from the human experience in order to become pure, then something had to be defined as impure. The Austrian philosopher Hermann Broch and the American art critic Clement Greenberg are among the many who made substantial contributions to this segregation

process. Countless writers, composers and artists were placed under the scrutiny of art in accordance with Ortega y Gasset's ideas and subsequently removed from its province. The criterion for exclusion was always the same: the presence of pathos – that is emotions, association to tradition, copying plastic form, imitation of emotions, all expressions of "romantic yearning"; in short, everything that might connect artistic expression to the common human experience. All of this impurity needed to have a name. It was called kitsch.

Much has been said and written about Adolf Hitler's oppression of modern art – Entartete Kunst – and it has contributed to prolonging the myth of modernism's martyrdom. Yet the Nazis were mere dilettantes compared to modern aesthetes. The motivation of Hitler's attack on modern art was nothing more than petty bourgeois vindictiveness. His physical annihilation of paintings had limited consequences compared to the systematic eradication of the humanist experience and thought that has occurred in the wake of the modernist aesthetic. Had Hitler known what possibilities for the display of power lay in the aesthetics of modernism, he would undoubtedly have behaved differently.

Once art had broken with tradition and become "dehumanised"; that is, removed the human dimension from its expression, it lost its references to nature and to the universal world of experience to then disappear into the black hole of formalism. As with all iconoclast epochs, it became dependent on external theory making based on an institutionalised hierarchy in order to justify itself. The directives no longer emerged from the artists' studios, from an interplay between idea and craftsmanship, but rather from the universities and museums of contemporary art. Consequently, art did not become autonomous as Ortega y Gasset had imagined. It became isolated. But even more so, it became authoritarian!

One hears an echo of this way of thinking in Professor Gunnar Danbolt's review of Per Ung's artwork. Certainly, the professor is mistaken when he claims that the figure in Crucifixion alludes to Gauguin and Munch "who both allowed the artist to be crucified by a public that did not understand them or the innovative art that they presented." There can exist only one prejudiced foundation for such an interpretation, because Per Ung's sculpture is devoid of any indictment of the public, or against the critics, for that matter. It is rather an expression of a state of agony that must be attributed to the artist's struggle to achieve an artistic idiom; an agony which is thereby ingrained in his world view as a whole. Of greater interest is Danbolt's assertion that "we cannot believe in his works" because the artist has made use of a traditional aesthetic without the ironic distance necessary in order to prevent it from becoming a tame pastiche. But even as a rhetorical cliché, this form of thinking is powerful enough to gain impasse in a work such as "Norwegian Art History".

Had Per Ung portrayed Eve handing Adam a condom in his work called Adam and Eve, he would have undoubtedly satisfied Professor Danbolt's demand for ironic distance. The sculpture would have gained a different significance; it would have transformed itself from being a visual expression to being a visual commentary. It would have been embraced by contemporary tastes and thus been considered a valid expression for our times. It would have been an easy gimmick that could have won Per Ung many friendly claps on the shoulder. The demand that art should reflect its times is one of the many doctrines that seek to make the art historian master of art. It is true that art of every age consists of an overabundance of works that do not contribute much more than reflecting their times. We are referring here to museum art in the correct sense of the word: art which is primarily of historical interest and whose significance can be measured in accordance with the degree it sheds light on the times of the artist. It is a type of art that appeals to the historian in us. It is often impressive on the strength of its respectable craftsmanship, but it doesn't move us. It is too bound by contemporary conventions of taste to be able to do that. If we listen to Per Ung's colleague who recently passed away, the sculptor Josef Grimeland, we realize that this is not a good point of departure for a work of art. Grimeland claimed, "Good taste does not exist – only poor taste!"

The demand that art reflect its times robs modern man of the possibility of relating dynamically to the canon of visual art. By canon we mean the works that have had the authoritative energy, and continue to possess the energy, to influence the way future generations view the world. They are characterized by the fact that they do not allow themselves to be limited by ruling contemporary tastes, but have impact both forward and backward in time. When we think of the Bible's account of Judgement Day, it is Michelangelo's frescos that we picture in our mind's eye. This work of art contains the essence of the apocalyptic worldview of the late Middle Ages that was still strong in the society that Michelangelo's lived in, but that it was moving away from. To call Michelangelo a typical Renaissance painter is merely stupid. He formed our understanding of the Renaissance. His spiritual energy was so explosive that it embraces not only his own age but the preceding and the following ages as well. In order to find an adequate form for his artistic expression, he delved 2000 years back in time. In Greek and Roman antiquity he found the only art form that could bridge this enormous time span and provide a valid idiom that expresses both his own and universal experience: the plastic modelling of the mobile human form.

It is this sculptural canon, which spans from ancient Egypt to Greek and Roman antiquity via the late gothic period to Donatello, Michelangelo, Bernini and August Rodin that has been the source of Per Ung's inspiration. With immodest humility he has absorbed the canon's fundamental lesson: that art's influence is always stronger when

its expression evolves out of a meticulous study of nature.

This position has caused Per Ung to be the object of considerable ironic condescension. His understanding of nature has covertly been called naïve, superficial and devoid of a credible philosophical understanding of the ambiguous relationship between reality and art, between language and reality. It is this set of issues that modern aesthetics has specialized in and it is out of this machinery for artistic cleansing that the authoritative modernist doctrines emerge that differentiate between impure art and pristine art. Thanks to this practice a language vacuum has arisen, which serves as a shock absorber between art and canon, between explicit issues concerning art and a universal world of experience. It is the acknowledgement of this situation the painter Odd Nerdrum refers to of when he states that he is not an artist, but a painter of kitsch. Many have found this outburst amusing and believed it to be a coquettish trick to call attention to his person. The assertion obviously does not contain any disparagement of himself as a painter, but is rather a grave acknowledgement of the fact that a distillation of the main criteria of modernist aesthetics cannot grasp the premises of his painting because these very premises have throughout a longstanding practice been purged from art and transferred to the world of kitsch. The language of art cannot grasp his painting other than through negations. By moving over to the world of kitsch he reclaims language and thereby also a free relationship to the criteria that have been the bearers of meaning and significance in the canon of painting.

It is appropriate to treat Per Ung's sculpture with this set of issues in mind. He has wilfully removed himself from art's criteria and placed himself in a reality where his endeavours must be considered in accordance with the standard he has set for himself; that is, nature and the canon he adheres to. We must understand that when the critic describes his works as "parlour room art", this can be an expression of the authorities' need to rewrite emotions and the imitation of natural forms. And when the quality of his craftsmanship is questioned, it is done by persons who by definition have denied the significance of craftsmanship as meaningful tools of artistic expression. When he is accused of imitating his ideals, we must not forget that his models are not accepted as bearers of meaning and significance beyond being exponents of their age. This is of course not an attempt to make Per Ung's sculpture unassailable. Every work of art can justifiably be exposed to formal criticism. Mistakes are part of art's essence. Significant art is particularly full of errors because it has enough ebullience to refrain from being pedantic. It is a mistaken approach to look for errors if one is seeking to uncover an artist's distinctive character.

Per Ung's character appears when we view him in the light of the tradition that he adheres to. When the artist studiously works to uncover the essence of a tradition, it does not reappear as a copy of itself, but as new version of the themes that nature provides. It is not in his choice of motifs that we discover Per Ung's originality. We have

in a way seen many of them before, yet in another context. Despite the fact that the titles often refer to Greek and Roman mythology, the sculptures are seldom literary. The titles should rather be understood as associative points of departure for modelling the human body in a dramatic context. Ung's position is thus far from the mistaken ambition of Neo-Classicism to blow new life into the imagery of antiquity. Nor are his works born of religious thinking. August Rodin, who worked during the 19th and 20th centuries, was another such artist. It has been Per Ung's lot that Rodin's best qualities have been used against him because one doesn't seem to be able to recognize them in his works. If we overlook the absurdity of such a comparison – and one that would hardly have been made had his models been Marini or Giacometti – we can even claim that Per Ung's works are composed on quite a different keynote than the one we find in Rodin. August Rodin represented more or less the close of a cultural period, the age of the European bourgeoisie, and it was his genius that allowed him to charge his human images with the experience of the times. Rodin's emotional artistic expression embraces the rise and fall of a whole epoch, concentrated to the breaking point of what the forms of his art could bear. It imbues it with a strong element of melancholy and philosophical wonder, not unlike what we experience in Michelangelo. It is as though Rodin's figures rest – not in a theological universe – but in an ocean of time.

Seen from this perspective, Per Ung's works are of an essentially different character. The human figures are not rooted in religion and they are not enveloped by time. They are thus not philosophically retrospective. They are not bearers of anything more than themselves. Their position outside of time and place leads to no other form of resolution than ecstasy and the short-lived union between man and woman. Ung's rendering of the theme is thus more brutal than sensual, more greedy than tender. The figures cling to each other, but also to the moment that brings forgetfulness about what follows. Per Ung's depictions of women happily transcend the reductionist menstruation art that feminism has showered us with in recent years. Man and woman are equal entities in Per Ung's world – even when they embrace and make love. Woman is not depicted as a tempting seductress with diabolical tendencies. She engages in the sexual act with the same greed as man. Yet woman can enjoy the privilege of serenity bestowed by nature when it makes her a mother. Ung has presented this theme in several versions and each time with a touch of the harmony between mother and child that otherwise rarely appears in his works. For in Per Ung's universe human beings stand on shaky ground, they find no consolation in the past and have little more to hope for in the future than a second of intense pleasure – the closest they come to the experience of happiness. Happiness as an inconstant entity is the theme of his latest work. It depicts the Roman goddess Fortuna, whose power lies in bestowing happiness on human beings, and then taking it away from them again. Fortuna's mild appearance promises more than it can hold. The commanding gesture camouflages a fickle inconstancy, as she balances on the least stable of all fundamentals – a sphere.



By severing his figures from a religious as well as from a retrospective chronological horizon, Per Ung has effectuated a personal turn of the canon he adheres to. This is a turn that cannot be seen isolated from the age that he works in. His figures are timeless in the sense that they are driven by forces that have always been present in the human being. Yet in Ung these forces take on a direction, a form and an expression that, formed through his personality on many levels, can be said to be representative of the way people of our age experience their lives – a life that is not rooted in secure ground. We stand, so to speak, in Fortuna's shoes and balance on a sphere.

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It is the year 4004. A group of archaeologists are digging in the ruins of ancient Oslo. They are searching for remnants of our age. But they find little. A few canvases with patches of colour and some stones carved into geometrical shapes. They believe it must have been a destitute age and ask themselves what kind of catastrophe must have struck the world during the twentieth century since all they can find are fragments of primitive works. But suddenly the shovel hits something hard and its sounds like metal. They begin digging carefully. A leg sticks up out of the ground. An arm follows. They lift the sculpture out of the earth and stand it upright on the ground. The earth is brushed away. The sun reflects off the bronze metal. It is a depiction a young man. He is naked and amazingly well formed. They can make out a name on the base. It has three letters. The find becomes a sensation. People come in droves to view the figure everyone is talking about. And they are overjoyed to find proof that human nature has always had a tendency to fight for a role for itself – even in raw and primitive times.

## PER UNG – 70 ÅR

By Toril Smit

Per Ung turned 70 in 2003 and can look back on 50 years of creative enterprise as a sculptor. Such round numbers provide a golden opportunity to collect a broad selection of works and to view the development of his artistic production under one roof. This book provides a wealth of pictures with that end in mind. In conjunction with the publication, the Vigeland Museum has the pleasure of presenting a retrospective exhibition of Per Ung's sculptural universe.

Per Ung has attained a unique and prominent position in the recent history of Norwegian sculpture. For decades he has represented an artistic vision with a strong belief in the classical figurative tradition and the great masters, from antiquity to Michelangelo, Bernini and Rodin. Rodin is considered to be the modern age's link to classical humanistic ideals, while simultaneously being called the father of modern sculpture with his expressive and individualised sculptural renderings. Both Vigeland and Ung are in debt to Rodin, yet though their platform was initially the same, they have of course given this tradition their widely differing personal and age related interpretations. Per Ung has held on to the references to our substantial classical heritage with loyalty and determination and carried on its potentials in his own works, in what eventually developed into the characteristic dramatic-romantic style that has become the hallmark of his work.

Per Ung began studying at the National Academy of Fine Arts at the age of 19 in 1952 under Professor Per Palle Storm and continued there for three years. Ung was recognized early on as a gifted and promising artist, and already as a student he won a competition to execute a monument over Johanne Dybwad. The statue was erected outside the National Theatre in 1962 and it represented a breakthrough in his artistic career. The sculpture has stylised and simplified forms and stands in strong contrast to the style of his later work. In 1961 he studied at St. Matins' School of Art in London under the radical sculptor Anthony Caro. But rather than being inspired to work with experimental art projects, this experience caused Per Ung to disassociate himself

decisively from modernism. His attraction to the old European cultural tradition was unwavering. The 1960s were nevertheless marked by experimentation in various directions, albeit within the figurative sphere. The themes were taken from his private family life as in works like *Gutt og hund/Boy and Dog* (1963) or *Gravid kvinne/Pregnant Woman* (1965). Here he demonstrates his sure hand in executing realistic and fresh naturalistic portrayals.

In 1970 he created the key work *Korsfestelse/Crucifixion*, in which he achieved the dramatic-expressive range that he would continue to adopt in his work thereafter. At the same time the format of his works would increase to natural and larger than natural size and the content would switch focus from common everyday themes to visual portrayals of human dramas. Parallel to this, a number of more realistically rendered sculptures appear of mother and child and boy figures. These are subjects that of course initially differentiate themselves from his themes of mythological figures and pairs of lovers in the high style of the 1970s and subsequent years. It is here that he turns his gaze backwards to his old master ideals in earnest and invests his sculpture with a framework that in a way is more classically orthodox than both Rodin and Vigeland. But this is only one side of Ung's sculptural vision. The other side exhibits subjective and existential attitudes that belong to the expressionism of the modern age, far from the old masters' personifications of the ideas and ideologies of their times.

A typical characteristic of Per Ung's sculpture is the powerful athletic figures, in which the tension in the body is driven forth via theatrical postures, movement and gestures. These often give an epic and massively physical impression of suffering, pain, joy and ecstasy – in short, the extreme emotions of life. They are emotions that can also be closely connected to corporeal sensations and experiences and are thus excellent raw material for a vivid plastic artist like Ung. The suffering Christ in *Crucifixion* or sculptures depicting a sensual embrace between man and woman are telling examples of this.

Odd Nerdrum has coined a suitable characterization of Per Ung and their older friend and ideological ally Joseph Grimeland: "Per Ung is in many ways a hedonist, a lover of the body. While Joseph Grimeland is a lover of the classical vision of the body."

The physical aspect of Ung's sculpture is interesting both visually and with regard to content, and has most likely also given rise to critical voices among those who expect more spirit in his works, or to put it another way, a greater kinship to his old master predecessors. One cannot get around the fact that his classical framework almost automatically provokes associations and comparisons with the old masters in the viewer, which can sometimes interfere with a direct experience of Ung's sculpture. His sculpture seems to be very well grounded in a totally different way than in his

predecessors. This extreme volume expresses a unique sculptural vision that is related to an understanding of form. Ung remains true to the classical ideals with a determined will to reproduce or show the body's anatomical structure correctly and thoroughly. There is little room here to break with the correct relationship between anatomical structure and surface, something that contributes to giving the sculptures a taut and steaming physical quality. With his precision he distinguishes himself from many modern figurative sculptors who think more visually than mimetically correct. Perhaps his teacher at the Academy, Per Palle Storm "the inveterate naturalist" has exercised a lifelong influence on his student. Per Ung has himself come with a precise definition of his attitude toward the classical concept of mimesis: "For me visual art means a depiction and re-creation of external visual reality."

Interestingly enough, it might appear that his loyalty to the classical ideals is simultaneously part of the cause of his divergence from them. Combined with his modern and expressive tendency and not least his use of the expressive potential innate in the clay, Ung's sculptures acquire their unique dual style of being both historical and modern. Per Ung is a first class modeller, and his sculptures often show the traces of the artist's hand in the clay's soft organic fabric. This is an important part of the total impression. This hand's evident working of and calling attention to the clay as a material became especially striking from the 1980s onwards. In this respect he came close to the intense and Neo-Expressionist tendency of the time, but without losing the sense of a classical sculptural "skin" and distance. That the sculptures are almost always cast in bronze, which is of course a material that in itself conveys the traditional sculpture's elevated status, is a relevant factor here.

To the extent that Per Ung is a cultivator of the body, it is also visible in his dramaturgical talent, whereby the human body's register of action is played out with the help of exaggeration, or what he calls overexposure. The muscles and the body's natural forms are emphasized by exaggerating the depressions and elevations of the body, so that the contrast between light and shadow contributes to animating the figures. This is one of Ung's major principals, which he has formulated in the following manner: "The deeper an artist can penetrate into the structure and construction of the human body and extract the essence and exaggerate this with light and shadow, the stronger people will experience the artwork as something that lives and that they can enter into and empathize with."

Contrasts are in fact a repeated phenomenon in Per Ung's sculpture, both formally and conceptually. The contrast between an ancient sculptural ideal and modern sensibility or between light and shadow in the modelling of the clay can be supplemented with a number of other contrasting pairs. The physically heavy and grounded element,

especially characteristic of the male figures, has its opposite in the extremely airy motifs depicting acrobatically demanding flight. Examples of this are Eros and Psyche (1983) and Nereid (1976), which exist in several versions. The work Euterpe (1977), the muse of lyrical poetry and music, likewise evokes the element of air as she gracefully swings a long veil in a ring around her while she dances. Europa og oxen/Europe and the Bull is yet another example of a motif in motion.

Bodies depicting motion, tension and action are favoured themes in Ung's work – a dynamic that is emphasized by swinging compositions and figures captured in motion and provocative gestures. They express situations of extreme tension, both physical and psychological. Yet while the body is intimately present and outgoing, the countenance is often lost in an emotional state and captured in a withdrawn and characteristically theatrical posture. They are in the throes of the forces of life. It is not without reason that the word pathos is often used in describing Per Ung's sculpture.

When it comes to portraiture, Per Ung leaves the stage and operatic exaggeration behind, and approaches his subjects with a respectful and detailed realism. In the course of his long artistic career, he has delivered a number of good portraits, in which his exceptional ability to see and to form his subjects in clay is played out in a finely tuned manner. Here too he makes use of the plastic possibilities inherent in the contrast between light and shadow in order to imbue the sculpture with life and intimacy. His statue of the conductor and composer Johan Halvorsen was erected outside the National Theatre in 2003. It is restrained and dignified in the same manner as the statue of Johanne Dybwad that signalled his debut in the genre forty years earlier, yet is also obviously coloured by his choice of a naturalistic idiom as well as the underlying themes of his mythological theatrical universe. These two monuments that are placed on either side of the National Theatre give an unintentional symbolic picture of the artist Per Ung's development from a very young to a mature, experienced artist; from an experimental style lightly influenced by modernism, to pure realism. In his renderings of the two artists connected to the theatre, his own persona steps back in order to shed light on them and their characters. On the other hand, one can say that in his non-commissioned works, he can be compared to an actor of the plastic arts.