

Beyond the Visual

Audio guide

**HENRY MOORE
INSTITUTE**

Stop 2. Track 2.

Barry Flanagan, *Elephant* 1981

On a low rectangular plinth sits a heavy object, the size of a small sack of coal. The object is made of bronze, dark but with flecks that reflect the light, almost like gold. You can't help but touch it. And on doing so, it becomes apparent that this is not just an abstract form, but a depiction of an elephant. Perhaps a young elephant, given its proportions. It has a round, compact body, with relatively small ears, a long trunk and a little tail that dangles down, short and stumpy. It seems to be trying to lift its right front foot from some kind of pedestal on which it balances, conjuring up associations with circuses and performing animals; but the elephant cannot escape the base it's joined to.

Touching the object puts you in contact with the artist's moulding of form. He hasn't tried to smooth the surface but has intentionally left it lumpy. There are indentations and marks from the casting. And lots of big lumpy bits, almost like you want to get your fingernails into some of them, to feel the material. There are scratches engraved into the head going upwards. And the front of the trunk has ridges and is a little crinkly. And then there are those little eyes! They're just holes poked into the wet clay. Yet there's something mournful about those eyes.

The elephant would have been moulded in clay, then a wax cast made; the object seems to recall these previous material states. And the fact that the animal is morphed with its pedestal

makes sense if we imagine it as a negative form, an empty vessel turned upside down, with molten metal poured in at the base and flowing through the feet and legs into the body. The trunk and tail are where the gasses would escape as the hot metal fills the mould. Ingeniously, the channels (called sprues and risers) integral to the bronze casting process have been incorporated into the sculpture, shaping the animal's very form.

Maybe this is why the work is so different from Flanagan's bronze hares, which communicate a kind of joy and weightlessness. Close up, we read the form abstractly, especially when explored through the hands. And knowing that the artist made the work for the 1981 exhibition *Sculpture for the Blind* changes our reading of it. Perhaps he was trying to capture the texture of a full-size elephant? It does feel like the mud-caked skin of an elephant that has wallowed in silty water then been in the sun: that rough dryness, like cracked leather. Perhaps Flanagan realised that it is touch, not sight, that triggers the idea of an elephant's presence.

This is the end of Stop 2, Track 2.

This is a transcript of an audio guide produced by Henry Moore Institute for the exhibition *Beyond the Visual*, on display from 28 November 2025 to 19 April 2026. For more information visit henry-moore.org/beyond-the-visual