



# Screw Mobile

Kenneth Martin

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## Not on display

**Title/Description:** Screw Mobile

**Artist/Maker:** Kenneth Martin

**Born:** 1953

**Object Type:** Sculpture

**Materials:** Brass, Mild steel

**Accession Number:** 31560

**Historic Period:** 20th century

**Production Place:** Britain, England, Europe

**Copyright:** © Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin

**Credit Line:** Bequeathed by Joyce and Michael Morris, 2014

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The meticulous arrangement of sixty-six horizontal brass strips in this rotating mobile demonstrate Kenneth Martin's growing fascination with using mathematical principles to construct form in new ways. It is an early example of his distinctive Screw Mobile series, which marked an important development in Martin's experiments with creating form through movement.

In 1955 Martin described his process as beginning with a drawing of an ellipse:

'I divided the ellipse horizontally at regular intervals, ruled lines and then cut rods the length of the lines. I set these horizontal rods at regular intervals and at regular angles along and around a vertical brass rod. The result was an elementary helix.' [1]

Martin goes on to outline his discovery of brass strip, which has been used in varying widths and lengths to construct the two adjoined ellipses in this *Screw Mobile*:

'They were like the radii of a simple shape rotating round the central point, which moved at a fixed speed along a vertical line and I realised that the final form, like a spiral staircase, was dictated by the angle between each strip and the width of the strip, as well as its length. I could vary the angle in any way I cared to choose. I found also that the strip was manufactured in a regular scale of widths. And so with these three elements I could compose. The point became a line and the line

mounted and grew and diminished until it had completed itself.' [2]

When turned, *Screw Mobile* twists steadily, reflecting light and creating a sense of rhythmic movement as the rotating forms expand and contract. Martin was interested in how this deliberate, controlled movement could enliven the viewer's experience of their environment, becoming part of what he described in 1956 as 'an expressive architecture'. [3] For Martin, this was connected to a new definition of humanism, based on new concepts, new forms, and new techniques. [4]

In 1957 the artist and critic Andrew Forge noted the shadows created by Martin's mobiles, using an illustration of this particular *Screw Mobile* to show how the 'chances of light' can create a new version of its movement. [5] This echoes Martin's broader approach to manipulating form, which he summarised in 1952: 'It is this real concrete object which is the concern of the constructionist. Its form need no longer be solid or rectangular. It can expand into and pierce space; open space and light can enter into it. It need no longer be still but can move, linking space with time.' [6]

Martin began developing the Screw Mobile series in 1953 and this is one of five works that he completed that year. [7] He exhibited one of these Screw Mobiles in the children's ward at the Whittington Hospital in Highgate, London in Autumn 1953, and the following year, included two in his joint exhibition with Mary Martin at the Heffer Gallery in Cambridge and one in the group exhibition *Artist versus Machine* at the Building Centre in London. In 1954 the critic Lawrence Alloway wrote enthusiastically about Martin's mobiles and 'hanging sculptures' in the publication *Nine Abstract Artists*, recognising them as 'developments of forms in space', which are subtly extended and fulfilled in motion. [8].

Martin continued to experiment with variations of the mobile form into the 1960s. The elements of change and progression were integral to his working process and his understanding of the different ways his work could be experienced.

Lisa Newby, October 2020

[1] Kenneth Martin, 'On the Development of the Mobile', pp.5-7, typescript dated June 1955 for a lecture at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. Reproduced in Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), p.138. For Grieve's thorough account of Kenneth Martin's mobiles, see pp.135-148.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Kenneth Martin, 'On Architecture and Mobile', *Architectural Design*, Vol.26: 1 (July 1956), p. 234.

[4] See Kenneth Martin, 'An Art of Environment', *Broadsheet No.2*, 1952. Reproduced in part in Grieve, 2005, p. 21.

[5] Andrew Forge, 'Notes on the Mobiles of Kenneth Martin', *Quadrum*, No. 3, Brussels, 1957, pp.93-98 (p.98). Sainsbury Centre archive.

[6] Kenneth Martin, 'An Art of Environment', *Broadsheet No.2*, 1952. As Alastair Grieve notes, this

quote was reproduced on the back of the exhibition catalogue for Kenneth and Mary Martin's joint exhibition at the Heffer Gallery in 1954. See Grieve, 2005, p. 140.

[7] Grieve, 2005, p.139. Another example of Martin's Screw Mobiles from this period can be found in the Tate collection. Later versions of the Screw Mobile series can be found in public collections at Tate, the Arts Council Collection, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and at Kettles Yard.

[8] Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists*, (London: Tiranti, 1954), p.13.

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## Exhibitions

Kenneth Martin, Tate Gallery, London, 1975

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 02/10/2021 - 17/07/2022

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Djanogly Art Gallery, UK, 07/03/2023 - 23/07/2023

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## Further Reading

Andrew Forge, 'Notes on the Mobiles of Kenneth Martin', *Quadrum*, No. 3, Brussels, 1957, pp.93-98

Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.135-148

Tania Moore and Calvin Winner (eds.), *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2021), p.19, p.101.

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## Provenance

In October 1984, the University of East Anglia accepted a planned bequest from Joyce and Michael Morris (UEA Alumni). Michael died in 2009 and Joyce in December 2014 when the couple's wishes were implemented.

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