

Coming to Grips With Contemporary Sculpture: Sculpture's Day in the Sun

Brenson, Michael

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ART VIEW. Michael Brenson

Coming to Grips With Contemporary Sculpture

S“SCULPTURE INSIDE OUTSIDE” is the first museum exhibition of contemporary sculpture in a very long time that we really need. It is a show with a point of view. It has as much to say about art in general in the late 1980's as it does about contemporary American sculpture. Its intelligence is such that it underlines the lack of curatorial imagination in major museum exhibitions on contemporary art in New York City.

It comes at a time when there is both a widespread recognition that sculpture is in a very fertile period and a widespread need for American museums to confront the intimidating sculptural diversity and consider what contemporary sculpture means. In one of the most ambitious exhibitions in the 60-year history of the Walker Art Center, Martin Friedman, the director of the museum, and two curatorial assistants, Peter Boswell and Donna Harkavy, have taken the

The show at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis says as much about art in the 80's as it does about new American sculpture.

first step. They have proposed categories and found beneath the diversity of approaches a community of interests. In the process, they have also made a moving statement about desires, themes and conflicts engaging artists now.

Part of what makes this exhibition of around 100 works so welcome is its complete independence from what New York institutions and magazines have determined to be important or “hot.” The sculpture at the Walker is curious, expansive and filled with doubt. It tends to be highly personal. It is not programmatic; it is almost anti-theoretical. It may be wary or questioning, but it is not bitter, resigned or skeptical. With all its self-consciousness, it retains an innocence and faith. The tone is upbeat, even cheery, but there is a deep sense of vulnerability, and no shame in showing it.

With all the confidence and humor, there is also a sense of loss so profound that the exhibition is almost an ache. There is a feeling for nature and a feeling for the degree to which nature, and with it the idea of the natural, is threatened. There is a feeling for pure geometrical form and a feeling that the idea of purity is obsolete. There is a feeling

for domesticity and place, and a feeling that a domestic world, and the idea of home, is farcical, empty or a trap.

There are numerous sculptural skins — that is to say, smooth and to some degree enclosed surfaces — and they all seem exposed. The elongated Fiberglas pants legs of Peter Shelton, the bronze torsos of Judith Shea, the translucent Fiberglas constructions of Tom Butter, the aluminum sheets of Robert Lobe — all are hollow, traces of something that has vanished. What will not vanish is the memory of what inhabited them. When there is such a sense of loss, there is also likely to be a penetrating awareness of change and a pull to memory. Loss, change and memory are what this show is about.

Donald Lipski's “Balzac #55” is an appropriate introduction. It is installed on a museum terrace and is one of the first sculptures visitors see. It consists of 55 ocean buoys stacked in a pyramid. They suggest Claes Oldenburg's giant pool balls in Münster, West Germany. They also have a partly slapstick, partly ribald quality: they could be a supply of breasts for sculptors of building-sized fertility goddesses. The pyramid brings to mind Egyptian architecture, or the triangular arrangement of the Three Fates in the Parthenon. But the sculpture definitely does not seem eternal. There is a sense that the pile could crumble at any moment and the runaway buoys could transform Minneapolis into a giant pinball machine. The

sculpture has a touch of Minimalism and a touch of Pop Art. Its associations reach into ancient art and religion and into popular culture. It is a rowdy blend of stability, humor, gravity and danger.

Meg Webster's installations, one indoors, the other outdoors, are also representative of the mood of the show. Like Lipski's buoys, her rectangular bed of moss inside the museum and her circular flower bed outside are Minimalist in their geometry. The materials, however, are not hard; their surfaces are not sealed. The moss bed, quilted together bit by bit, is soft, seductive. With holes exposing the raw earth beneath the mossy skin, it also seems wounded. The flowers are installed in 10 tiers on an embankment along-

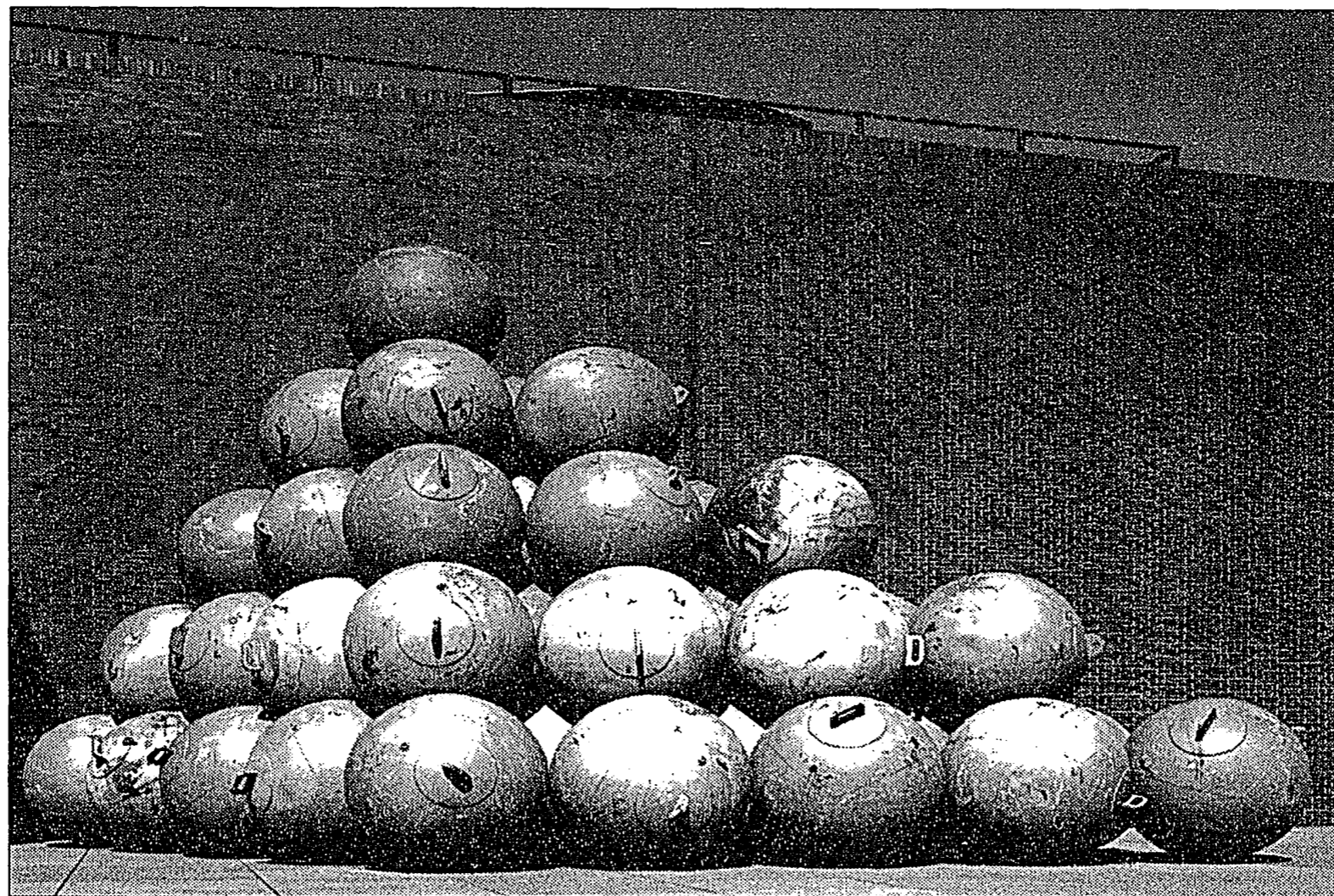
side a main thoroughfare, which makes the bed seem incongruous and threatened. The moss and flowers are literally alive: they will change with the seasons. They promise respite but they need to be tended. They are daring works, but there is nothing macho about them at all.

All 17 sculptors in the show established their reputation this decade. The youngest is 33 years old, the oldest 47. Some, like Martin Puryear and Michael Singer, are familiar. Others, such as Walter Martin and Steven Woodward, are largely unknown. All the work was done after 1980. Some of it — commissioned for the show or on display in gallery shows earlier this season — is new. The selection is so tight that all the artists are more intelligible in the context of the show than they were before.

Most of the exhibition is inside, but it also spills onto two terraces and into the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, which will open Sept. 10. The garden will have one grassy pocket for a large steel sculpture by Mark di Suvero and another for geometric sculptures by Richard Serra, Ellsworth Kelly and Tony Smith. It features Claes Oldenburg's “Spoonbridge and Cherry” — a 52-foot-long gray spoon, holding a fat red cherry with its long black stem spouting water. Eight of the outdoor works, including Puryear's granite columns at the entrance, are part of the show. Siah Armajani's bridge, more than 300 feet long and spanning 16 lanes of traffic, and Jene Highstein's three-part stone piece are the two sculptures commissioned for the show that are not yet in place.

“Sculpture Inside Outside” is not a survey. It does not pretend to be comprehensive. It establishes four categories: figuration, organic abstraction, architectural abstraction and transformed objects. It does not include attempts to work with the human figure in any traditional manner. It does not include the architectural sculpture of an artist like Dennis Adams, whose bus stops are both functional objects and political interventions, or the kind of involvement with the relationship of art and design that is evident in the objects of John Armleder. It does not include the appropriated objects of Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach, which comment on the commodification of art while offering themselves as commodities.

In the category of figuration, the exhibition places sculptors like Brower Hatcher, whose tiny figures are trapped in geometrical webs, as well as Shea and Shelton, who make objects in hard materials like bronze or concrete that are inspired by garments and fabric. It could also include the organic and



Donald Lipski's “Balzac #55” (1988) in the show at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis

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mechanistic sculptures of John Newman, which may lean proudly and wistfully against a wall in a way that suggests the Apollo at Olympia, or recline on the floor, its pod or stinger ruptured, like a Hollywood actor overplaying a death scene in a Greek drama. It could also include the wacky carpentered objects of Steven Woodward. One of them is a skinny door with its hinges outstretched that brings to mind saints in Carolingian and Irish manuscripts.

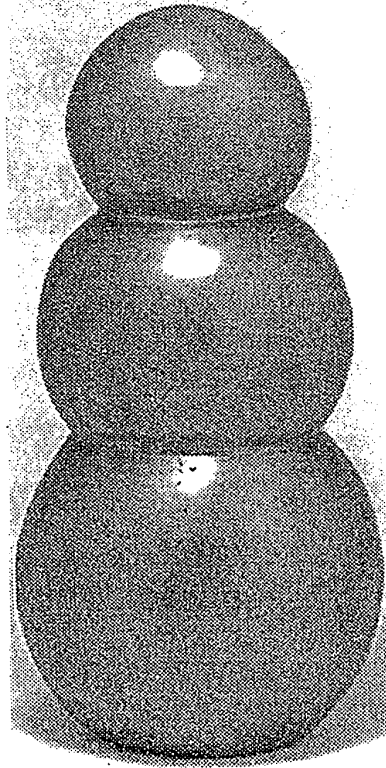
By organic abstraction, the show means the involvement of sculptors with — and often the need to partake of — the forms and processes of nature. This category includes the patinated bronze reliefs of Phoebe Adams, which may resemble vegetables, or which may seem to be dripping wet or caught in a wind; or Highstein's weightless and stony hybrids of earth and industry, or Butter's Fiberglas constructions, which resemble underwater stalks.

The depth and complexity of the feeling towards nature is clear from the work of Lobe, who hammers aluminum around trees and boulders, creating hollow, ghostly images that feel airy and light but which suggest the tentacles and bodies of ponderous snails. The memory of nature is written into their skins. But the body — the earth — has gone, and we are left to consider its absence.



By architectural abstraction, the exhibition means both a concern with architectural forms and a need to make objects that will function as architecture. Puryear's identical granite columns, one installed right-side up, the other upside down, support nothing. Michael Singer's constructions of wood and stone resemble the most precarious shrines. A number of works in the show suggest environments promising shelter and familiarity and delivering fantasy and disruption.

The transformed object is a category in which the sense of loss is particularly acute. It grows out of the Duchampian tradition of the readymade and the continuing artistic involvement with objects in everyday life. Robert Gober's sinks, chairs and beds are not found, however, but built, and a mundane porcelain sink may be crucified, like the central figure in Goya's "Third of May." Walter Martin's grandfather clock, with its lower part hacked or gnawed away so that



Robert Therrien's "No Title," rooted in his belief that snowmen represent many children's first attempts at sculpture.

time itself seems to be hovering near death, also looks like a found object, yet it, too, was built.

While establishing these categories — which are the subjects of essays in the catalogue (to be published in January 1989) by Joan Simon, Douglas Dreishpoon, Nancy Princenthal and Carter Ratcliff — the show nevertheless argues that sculpture now tends to be beyond categorization. Artists can fit in two or three categories. Lipski is a point of intersection for all four.



Themes and interrelationships may be surprising and profound. For example, there is an abundance of tomb imagery. A painting by Robert Therrien presents a red coffin on a white ground, and the coffin looks like a standing figure. One of Newman's abstract sculptures lies on its back like a medieval tomb figure. Shelton

determined the shape of his outdoor piece by digging a coffin-shaped hole in the earth, making a cast, then installing the pebbly concrete, aluminum and steel shell upside down so that it looks like a prehistoric hut.

Gober built two objects like sink supports and stuck them in a plot of grass where they look like tombstones with eyes. Jin Soo Kim's installation, as dense as a tropical forest and assembled entirely with garbage that she gathered in Chicago, is cave-like, and it seems as if it will devour everyone passing through it.

The presence of Oriental culture and ancient art is almost as strong as the longing for, and distance from, nature. Another underlying theme is music. The contrapuntal arrangements of Singer's sticks and stones have been likened to a fugue. One of Martin's works contains a piano. There is an instrument like a trumpet in a work by Therrien. Horns and trumpets are essential to the imagery of Newman. Lobe's aluminum casts of upright hollow trees suggest pipes.

Together, the presence of the past and of music help give the show its strange, almost elegiac mood. There is a song within this show, and it seems to be coming from the heart of contemporary sculpture. It has to do with loss and laughter and faith.

And it has to do with memory, which is emerging as one of the most important of all artistic issues as we approach the last decade of the century. Gober's fantastic crib evokes a pinched, prisonlike childhood. Therrien builds sunny piles of spheres suggesting snowmen, which are rooted in his own childhood in Chicago and in his belief that snowmen represent many children's first attempts at sculpture.

Puryear's wooden cone like an oversized sorcerer's hat, his wooden jumper cables with overlapping handles suggesting a Klee-like couple playing footsie, and his large, billowy gourdlike relief evoking bonnets, sails, conveyer belts and whips, retain the memory of storytelling, nature, bondage and magic.

Artists in this show have discovered that the more sculpture resists categorization, and the more its imagery is open-ended and organic, the more they can build into it. The more their work does justice to change, the more it may do justice to the manifold ideas and desires pouring and tearing through culture now. In this high-spirited show, everything is presented in a transformed state and yet the memory of an original condition could not be more apparent. □