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The Unveiling

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THE UNVEILING

by

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A Thesis Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
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Portland State University

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INTRODUCTION

The method I use in creating abstract sculpture presented the question that became the subject of my Master's thesis. Only occasionally will I create from a pre-conceived concept. The sculptures evolve through a process of addition and subtraction of material to something that simply pleases me. This method, really no method at all, seemed contradictory to my original intentions. My artistic goals were purposeful; I wanted to create sculpture that would provoke a reaction first, not a judgment of features. I wanted the viewers emotional and psychological involvement to be the basis for content and meaning in the work.

In spite of the indirect approach, I felt there was some success in achieving my goal. Discovering how this occurred was important because I was at a loss to understand the content of my own work. Did the sculpture I was making hold any deeper meaning for me?

My thesis proposal advanced the question of how sculptural form expresses content. A more accurate question is, what does it mean? I had faith that I was indeed making art that was more than a pleasant arrangement of forms. Confident that there was also meaning, I proceeded to explore and analyze the relationship of creative process to

sculptural form and content. While writing a draft of my thesis, I realized the question was beyond a definitive answer. This was a personal investigation of a fundamental question. My expectation was that insight and analysis would provide the answer I needed.

CHAPTER II

UNVEILING THE ARTIST

In my undergraduate years I learned one lesson well; anything and everything could be labeled "art." In order to create, it is absolutely necessary that art defies definitions or absolutes. Without definitions there are limitless possibilities, but also the hazard of chaos. One of the concerns of modern art has been the testing and analyzing of what is acceptable as art. Social history has also seen the re-examining of values and beliefs. The effect of this examination has been confusion and a lack of conviction of what constitutes good or bad art. "Good" and "bad" are irrelevant because they are subjective.

Being new to the "art world", I also lacked conviction—a conviction that my work was significant and purposeful. How can one make decisions, given myriad possibilities? The "doing" part of abstract sculpture seemed easy. My doubts were whether there was any deeper meaning to what I was creating. If there was, would it have significance for others?

Content and intention have often been difficult to identify in abstract art. Part of the fascination with abstraction is the mystery of its meaning. When the

intention of the artist's work is unclear it becomes a compelling puzzle. The need to find meaning is inherent to human nature. It is natural to question the purpose and existence of creations. The farther abstract art moves away from what is identifiable, the more nebulous became content and meaning.

In my own creations I felt that content was also mysterious. I gave careful thought to composition, form, and space arrangement, but I had not yet seriously considered what these sculptures meant to me.

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

This is possibly the most frequently asked question about abstract art. The question either produces disagreement or is considered irrelevant. If content is meant to be intelligible to initiates only, the question is treated with disdain. I had my own glib answers when asked by those with little experience in aesthetics. I did my part in upholding the mystique surrounding art.

It took a scientist with well-honed analytical skills to attack my quasi-philosophical answers about intention and meaning. A scientist attempts to understand the world by asking questions and facing facts wherever they might lead. I needed to do the same. The outcome left me feeling uneasy. I could not satisfactorily explain the source of my own creations or what they meant to me personally. My

explanations were peripheral. I described individual elements as expressing general feelings and relating vague intentions. After five years of majoring in art, I could do no better. My methods and ideas needed closer scrutiny.

The question, "What does it mean?" became valid. If I could not reach the essence of my own sculptural abstractions, then by my own standards why should anyone else find them worthy of consideration?

Working without specific concepts, I felt that content evolved from the subconscious realm. Creating a sculptural image was a conscious, purposeful act, the message or meaning was not. This does not mean the intellect is somehow disengaged. Both logic and reason are applied in aesthetic decisions.

Abstract content, I believe, is significantly influenced by the structure of thought. Thought structure is in turn influenced by our customs, beliefs, activities, language and relationships. On one level my thoughts are predominately personal. I have memories, experiences and desires that are unique and individual. However, all of us have similar lives, experiences and relationships. It is from this universal quality or similarity of lives that I believe meaning for abstract content is derived. I am connected as an individual to both society and nature.

The conscious content of abstraction is interpreted through complex inter-relationships of cultural and personal

paradigms. Form associations, identification of symbols and gesture establish meaning. Gesture is understood in the same way we read body language. Contours, forms and posturing relate to the human figure even though the configuration may be far removed from any anatomical likeness. Through association we can recognize forms that resemble plants, animals, human or manufactured objects. Fat, thin, horizontal, or vertical, hard-edged and soft, forms reveal content from personal experiences and memories interwoven within a cultural context.

Symbols are understood in a comparable manner. A visual symbol is an object that is invested with subjective meaning. Usually symbols do not have a single definition, rather they express a variety of related meanings. In some respects the total sculpture constitutes a single symbol.

Symbols have conscious and sub-conscious meanings. For instance, in many of my sculptures there is recognizable bird imagery. Consciously, birds represent flight, freedom, spiritualism and a host of other related personal and cultural associations. For myself the largest and most meaningful emotional association was made at a subconscious level. At one point during my thesis work I was asked why so many of my pieces resembled birds. I have never had an interest in birds and at the time I didn't have an answer. A few weeks later I had a dream filled with birds in cages. In that dream I wielded a bat like object and was smashing

all the cages, setting the birds free. From that dream I began to understand what the symbolism within the bird imagery meant. I was both the birds within the cages and the person freeing the birds. Until that dream I did not know why birds were a recurring image.

CHAPTER III

ABOUT THE SCULPTURES

The role of the subconscious mind is evident in Morpheus. The model for this was done in two days. From the



Figure 1. Morpheus Dagger, 12" high

beginning it was a figurative piece with a body that tapered to a point. While I was making this sculpture I was feeling

hurt and angry over one of life's injustices. Psychic pain and anger are two clear, unmistakable emotions. By the end of the second day, Morpheus was in the shape of a dagger, its meaning concealed within an art object. Near completion of this piece, I become consciously aware of the dagger-like body. I needed only to enhance what the interaction of conscious and subconscious thought had already produced.

The use of gesture is also evident in Morpheus. The long curved form rising on the left is an arm raised in warning. The head is expressionless and gives no clue to its emotional state. This piece was never meant to be an actual dagger, but through gesture, associative form and symbolism it successfully expressed intense emotion.

The clarity of my feelings while producing Morpheus made me realize that other sculptural works would not be so easily decipherable. All other works evolved over a period of one to three months. Subconscious content and my emotional state would not have been as singularly forceful.

Completed sculptures are single symbols expressing many layers of meaning. They represent conjunctions of external and internal events occurring during the time of their creation.

Morpheus was a key to understanding my method of working. After this experience I was better able to interpret the content in other sculptures.

The conscious meaning in T.F.C. was more immediately

obvious to others than myself. It provoked a range of reaction from laughter to disgust. For some it has a blatant sexual content. At first I saw it as nothing more than a depiction of male and female figures sharing a form resembling the symbol for infinity. This could be a



Figure 2. T.F.C., 46" high

statement about any male-female relationship. There is both pain and joy, individual and dual identities, active and passive expression, along with other opposing elements. The

center area of the sculpture is being pulled apart and held together. This could be a symbolic metaphor for any relationship, but it had specific meaning for me. This is not a romantic expression of love, rather it addresses the struggle for survival within a relationship. The objectionable content in this sculpture may have to do with the contradictory nature of these two figures.

The Orant Figure is familiar yet unlike any known entity. The basic configuration relates to the human body.



Figure 3. Orant Figure, 7' 6" high

There are forms that resemble arms, legs, and a head. Not everyone sees this relationship to the figure but most have

the feeling that the sculpture represents an animate object.

The gesture of this piece relates its meaning. The word "Orant" refers to the supplicants gesture in paintings done by the early Christians in Rome. The meaning of the physical configuration of the sculpture parallels the meaning in the paintings done by the first Christians.

The mouth is open to either receive or give. In this case the giving would be words that nourish the human heart and mind. The receiving would be a form of physical or spiritual sustenance. The idea embodied in this work is the continual search for fulfillment of our needs and desires; our need to both give and receive.

Strider is a curious work. I believe I understand some of the content but I am missing something vital to its message. The forms in this work are animalistic in nature, suggesting sea life and birds. There are also implications of human weapons in the three projecting tubes and the blade/tail/head configuration. To me it typifies our psychic defense system. At the center is a soft, sensuous form, symbolic of the core of our being. This is encased in a harder shell with weapon-like appendages.

It was suggested to me that Strider was androgynous in nature. I believe this is also true. The imagery has a mix of hard and soft forms and specific shapes that connote maleness and femaleness. Each of us has this type of polarity within her (or his) physical and mental makeup.



Figure 4. Strider, 48" high

Tree Birds has the feel of an ancient dance. It is an image whose source could be from collective memory. The association with plant forms is strong. The five vertical stems are connected at the base in a type of root system that becomes claw-like in some areas. Above the vertical stems is a massing of forms that appear suspended in space.

The layering of form and space is suggestive of the way we perceive tree foliage, as an accumulation of volume rather than mass. Bird-like heads rise above the mass to crown each trunk.

The message is an old one. Whatever dance we dance on earth, we do not dance alone. As individuals we are endlessly connected to society and nature. This concept does



Figure 5. Tree Birds, 23" high

not diminish us as individuals; instead it demonstrates how we are amplified. In this light whatever we do has significance.

As a conceivable portent of bio-engineering, A Temporary Stopping Place has an ambiguous nature. It has

qualities which can be ascribed to both plants and animals. The duality of its appearance lends a humorous note to its character.



Figure 6. A Temporary Stopping Place On An Evolutionary Journey, 31" high

Tri-alars is the final sculpture for my thesis show. While working on it, I was consciously aware of the psychological expression I wanted to achieve, though not of the final form it would have. In this work I wanted a light, airy look to communicate an up-beat, elated feeling.

This was my own mental state at the time. Again the image of a bird appeared. Tri-alars is the most bird-like of all the sculptures, yet it avoids being specific.



Figure 7. Tri-alars, 46" high



Figure 9. Hyperborean, 22" high



Figure 10. Ototeman, 26" high

Conclusion

The idea that symbols, form and gesture are visual clues to sculptural content is not new. It was also not a new idea to me. Having a vague understanding when I began my Master's degree enabled me to get by with weak descriptions of my work. Before the experience of the dream and the Morpheus Dagger, I believed that meaning for abstract art was mostly verbal invention on the part of the artist. Content and meaning can be created as skillfully as the object they describe. Art moves on more than one level to reach its audience. The artist reveals layers and depths that are known and understood and others that remain complex and ineffable. Art reflects an image of our internal and external world as being both one and many.

I was surprised to discover how much my work revealed about my own life. These sculptures are all self-portraits. They speak of my thoughts, memories, desires and feelings. My first impulse was to cover them up, though discovering this also reaffirmed my own belief in the primacy of emotional and psychological involvement.

The urgency to know what my sculpture "means" is not as strong. I feel that the work will reveal itself when I am ready to look again. Satisfied and at ease with abstraction as a sculptural language, I intend to explore the myriad possibilities which are yet unfolding.