Shaping wood/Naming shapes

Robert Thomas Leverich

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SHAPING WOOD/NAMING SHAPES

by

Robert Thomas Leverich

Date:

16 October 1990
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It is good, at certain hours of the day and night, to look closely at the world of objects at rest. Wheels that have crossed long, dusty distances with their mineral and vegetable burdens, sacks from the coal bins, barrels, and baskets, handles and hafts for the carpenter's chest. From them flow the contacts of man with the earth, like a text for all troubled lyricists. The used surfaces of things, the wear that hands give to things, the air, tragic at times, pathetic at others, of such things—all lend a curious attractiveness to the reality of the world that should not be underprized.

In them one sees the confused impurity of the human condition, the massing of things, the use and disuse of substances, footprints and fingerprints, the abiding presence of the human engulfing all artifacts, inside and out.

Let that be the poetry we search for...

from Toward an Impure Poetry by Pablo Neruda (Neruda 1974, xxi)
I propose to make a series of sculptures, primarily of wood. I am trying to create pieces that are immediately my own, that involve the shaping of form, the translation of meaning and the confluence of a work with its name.

I conceive of these pieces in wood because wood lends itself well to shaping, invites handling and is imbued with its own meaning.

Drawing is a fundamental means of expression for me and will be an important part of creating these works.

I plan to seek out and research techniques of wood construction, shaping and finishing as the pieces require. While making them, I will continue to investigate the history and theory of sculpture and wooden forms, and to reflect on the origins and refinement of forms and content in my work.

I will document my work and present the results of my research in my thesis report.

It was my intention from the start to make sculpture in my graduate studies at R.I.T., and to use wood as a sculptural material. Still, I labored for a long time to express that intent in the thesis proposal above. I was trying to leave myself room to develop conceptually and technically without being vague or glib. In retrospect, I see that what I wrote identifies a number of issues that I was concerned about in my work over the past year.

The first concern was how to make sculpture that was "immediately my own." When I began to work, this concern
evaporated, and I never really thought about it again until I began writing this report. The issue was not how to make work that was identifiably mine, but how to make work that manifests its own identity.

My second concern was how I shape form. I tend to think of shaping as a reductive process. I like gouges, spokeshaves, drawknives and scrapers because they afford the most direct and tactile sense of shaping and surfacing. I wanted to try to maintain that sensibility with other tools and techniques, including additive or constructive processes.

My third concern was with the translation of meaning in my sculpture. How do I convey in form the original sense of my idea?

My fourth concern was with the relationship of a work to its name. I wanted to title my works, but I was worried that these titles were limiting my conception of the pieces.

My fifth concern, though not directly stated, was with drawing. I was worried that my facility with and reliance on drawing might be hindering my exploration of other means, and that drawing, like titling, might be limiting my conceptions.

These five concerns—identity, shaping, translation, titling and drawing—were what I set out to deal with in making sculpture for this thesis. I'll discuss drawing, shaping and titling in the next three essays, and I'll have more to say about identity and translation in my conclusion.
She draws the threaded line from my Dark Hand's spooling fingertips, and weaves it across my eyes.

from *Muse*, a poem by the author (1982)

I draw to express myself and I draw to understand what I see. I draw for the pleasure of movement and marking, and for the challenge of composition. I draw out of curiosity to see what's there.

When I was a kid, I drew a lot of figures. I did this to figure out sex. I was pretty embarrassed about it at the time, so nobody ever saw those drawings. Drawing gained the power to express things I couldn't verbalize. For me, there is an erotic quality to the act of drawing, though seldom overt, and the human body remains a fundamental motif in my graphic work.

Drawing engendered a fascination with construction and then with composition, first with the body and then with objects and the world at large. The balance of intimacy and abstraction in drawing captivates me, the combination of furtiveness and daring implicit in Degas' remark that "one must commit a painting the way one commits a crime" (Paz 1979, 82).
In my training and experience as an architect, drawing was a means to illustrate buildings as clearly and expediently as possible. In making sculpture, I have tended to use drawing in a similar way, as a means to record and study ideas and processes. It was in life drawing courses that I really began to value drawing as an end in itself. In this thesis, I wanted to consider my drawings for sculpture as ends in themselves, as well as the role they play in my working process.

Most of my ideas for sculpture in this thesis originated as small drawings in my sketchbook. I enlarged those that I wished to explore further. (The drawings in my M.F.A. show were some of these.) The pieces that I chose to make I drew at full scale, that is, the scale that I conceived them to be. I try to honor not only the first complete conception of a piece, but also this first expression of its actual scale. These loose, full-scale drawings were usually the working drawings for construction of the pieces. I considered exhibiting some of them because they tended to be records of the process---torn, cut, used as patterns, walked on and spattered with glue.

The two large colored drawings and eight smaller charcoal drawings that I included in the show were a representative sample from the thirty or so that I did in the fall of last year (Figs. 3-12). I liked the immediacy of the large pastel drawing of a sculpture to be called Indebtedness (Fig. 12). The spirit of the piece comes across despite a lack of specificity in the drawing concerning materials or surface.
The large drawing for *Black Scythe* (Fig. 11) was my favorite drawing in the show. It is more allusive than illustrative and doesn't propose a clearly resolved form for the piece. The drawing shows a number of orthographic views which are not identified or separated from one another. Blurring this convention increased the expressive quality of the drawing.

The black and white drawings were chosen from a set of investigations of sketchbook drawings done in part for presentation to my committee, and also to develop those ideas. These drawings work well as a group. Most of them are straightforward illustrations of forms using light and shadow, though they are less clear about material. The ones which are the most interesting as drawings are those in which the sculptural subject is the least resolved, notably *Breath and Death* (Fig. 7) and *Embarcation* (Fig. 3).

I've observed a number of things about my drawings over the past year. First, my drawings were often not nearly as readable or literal as I assumed, except when I was employing drawing conventions that other people understood. I could see the trail of my thoughts in the lines, they were a record of movement, as well, but others made their own interpretations.

Second, and along those lines, my concern about doing drawings that were overly descriptive was unfounded. So many questions of shape and material and technique and construction arose when I made the pieces that I quickly realized how unprescriptive my drawings were. If anything about my drawings
was prescriptive, it was sometimes simply the initial image. Some of these came out on the page with a sense of rightness or appropriateness which didn't brook any changes. I think of my first drawing for a piece called *Lumberjack*, for example. In other drawings I tried ending the legs in different ways, but the first image remained the "right" one.

Third, I saw that drawing a piece in context tended to have prosaic results, unless that context was germaine to the meaning of the piece. Since most of my pieces were discreet objects, the only context I showed was the indication by a cast shadow of the piece's relation to the ground.

Fourth, I noticed that a literal drawing of a piece, despite its merit as a drawing, didn't display well with that piece. It set up a comparison between the two.

Finally, I observed that I had a tendency to regard drawing as somehow secondary to three-dimensional expression, even though I did a lot more of the former than the latter. I stopped doing much drawing as an end in itself when I came to R.I.T., except in my introduction to printmaking. There I found unique effects that cannot be obtained with other drawing media. I could draw and print images very directly and print them very quickly, or I could rework an image many times and see that process evidenced in each print. I learned to values etchings and lithographs not just for the final image, but also for the record of process in them.
In looking at the prints of my friend Lisa Popovic, I realized that the subject of a drawing didn't have to be depicted or contained within it as mine usually are. Instead the drawing could be a piece of a larger continuity or pattern, without an interior focus. Drawing could be intransitive in the sense that it was no longer conveying a specific object to a viewer.

In addition to printmaking, my work and reflection over the past year have suggested a number of ways I might broaden my drawing style. I could use the conventions, tools and media of architectural drawing in nonstandard ways. I could make my drawings and sculpture more interactive, by using parts or pieces as templates for drawings, or by drawing on the sculptures---not as decoration but as part of their making. As I mentioned, most of my sculptures are discreet objects or groupings of objects. I could reimpose the figure into drawings for these sculptures, as a kind of "foreign body," to see what happens, what sort of dialogue ensues.

Drawing fixes a point of view, sculpture fixes a physical presence. It's clear from the work of Edgar Degas, Henry Moore, David Smith, or Michael Heizer that a mature drawing style and a mature sculptural style can inform one another and add fluency and range to an artist's body of work. What's more, they can demonstrate a consistent and distinctive touch. What I'm after is to handle both drawing and sculpture in this way.
Sculpture is shaping the intractable into the ineffable. I'm trying to shape stuff that's hard to work with into stuff that's hard to say. Sculpture should be something you can't sum up in a few words, or even worse, metaphors. I make sculptures because they are palpable objects. They can be understood with the hands. They're physical, corporeal.

I made my first sculptures when I was a kid. I collected wax to make little figures or I cut them out of scraps of tin. I'd play around with clay that I found doing field work. In junior high school I made a plaster reclining figure that didn't quite recline. None of this stuff survived except a ball of red wax.

During my architectural studies I took courses in ceramics with Warren Mackenzie. After years of making functional ware, I began to make sculpture. I taught myself to make plaster molds and casts, then I began taking classes part time, making figures out of clay and plaster, then wood, stone, bronze and combinations of materials. After several years I decided to do graduate study in sculpture. Despite a fairly traditional idea of what a sculptor's education should be, I didn't enter a sculpture program. I entered the wood program of the School for American Craftsmen instead, feeling that I needed a solid technical grounding for my work. This choice has forced me to think long and hard about my idea of...
a sculptor’s education, as well as the role of craft and craftsmanship in sculpture.

My first year’s pieces at R.I.T. all showed a commitment to personal expressive content over functional content alone. I became aware of the potential of furniture forms as a departure point for sculpture, and I gained an expanded view of the history and tradition of furniture making---something architects tend to regard as a footnote to architecture. An ongoing problem during that year was how to balance a commitment to durability and finish with economy of expression, how to avoid overworking a piece and still express the vitality of the technique. A deeper challenge for me was to establish for myself the worth of making sculpture. An architect or designer can rely at least on an external validation of his work, but a sculptor’s validation comes primarily from within.

In the summer of 1989, at both Penland and R.I.T., I began to make pieces without any reference to function. Titles were important components of each of these works. Among the more successful were two done at Penland. The Myth of Wholeness consisted of a stone ring standing on and split by a steel wedge. Ear to the Ground was made up of a spiraling steel bar lying on the ground, with a large ear-shaped stone standing upright at the outer end of it. Out of the center of this stone sprang a steel rod which arced back to the center of the spiral. Another rod arced up from that point to support a small ear-shaped spiral of enameled
steel. The titles of both of these pieces were keys to their meanings.

At R.I.T. I did a piece called *Arc de triomphe* in honor of Bastille Day (the day I thought it up) and the French *Bicentennaire*. It was a combination of crafted elements and artless ones. A steam-bent and scarf-jointed arch, resembling an impossible branch, joined together three chain-sawn cottonwood balls with a stainless steel tripwire (for the triumphant) stretched between them. This piece had a springy quality when assembled that made it seem flimsy—a quality I don't ordinarily associate with sculpture.

In the fall I began a piece called *Little Red Wagon of Ethics*. It consisted of a cluster of four elongated elliptical wheels joined to a wedge-shaped cart with a heavy pull rope on one end. The wheels didn't revolve, the cart didn't hold anything, the rope couldn't pull it anywhere, and the whole thing wasn't really red. Though unsuccessful in some ways, it did present a compact and powerful sculptural image and it raised some important issues for me.

One issue was the degree to which the drawing and the title were driving the piece. After cutting out and shaping the white pine wheels with a chainsaw, I liked the shapes themselves enough to question if I should use them to some other end, but I persevered with the original image I had in mind for the piece. This image existed before the drawings or the title, which I began to realize were phases in its development, just as the sculpture
itself was. The piece should be open to question or change in all its stages because each represents a somewhat different understanding.

Directness became an issue in the way the wheels were joined to the cart. In an effort to be direct in my handling, I made the connection so loose and so simple that the piece threatened to topple over on someone. A more carefully considered connection would have made the piece stronger physically and also conceptually, by contrasting the unworkable wheels with a functioning axle assembly. A piece I did later, *Fifth Wheel*, presents this kind of contrast. Directness is an active quality that arises not from minimal handling, but from straightforward handling of the material.

A third issue *Little Red Wagon* raised for me was appropriateness---what materials are sculptural materials? For some time the piece had three graduated mounds of oak shavings piled on the cart. These came from cutting out the cart shape itself with a chainsaw. I left the piles of shavings off when I showed the piece, more out of convenience, though I liked their softness and smell and reference to process. Now I'd say the shavings were appropriate and really no more inconvenient than the rest of the piece, and I should have kept them on the cart.

*Chinese Chest* (Fig. 13) was the first piece I completed of those that I ultimately included in my M.F.A. show. The sources for *Chinese Chest* were a piece of wood and a picture in a book that I had referred to in my study of Chinese furniture. The book,
China at Work by Rudolf Hommel, showed an illustration of a traditional Chinese coffin---two logs split in half lengthwise to make the top, bottom and sides of the coffin with a panel inset at either end. The piece of wood was a plank of bubinga, three to four inches thick, flat on the inside face and rounded and rough on the other. I used this wood and the coffin scheme to build a stout little chest. My Chinese friends immediately recognized the form, but my American friends didn’t make any associations with it.

I liked the solidity and sculptural quality of this box. The ends reminded me of a restaurant radish. Inside I left pieces of wood whose shapes I liked---a wooden burnisher, spindles and a bubinga scrap with the Chinese character for "long life" written on it. A box should have contents. A coffin is a travelling box, a box to travel in, a trunk.

Tahitian Breadbox (Fig. 14) was the second piece I completed for my show. It came out of the series of drawings I did in the fall of 1989 and was inspired by an article about Tahiti in the travel section of the newspaper. The article said that bakery trucks in Tahiti deliver long loaves of French bread every day to boxes along the roads. I wondered what a Tahitian breadbox would look like.

I looked for palm wood to make the post but I had to settle for poplar. The box is poplar also, and is lapped to shed water. The outside is reminiscent of an overturned boat, while the interior has a basket-like quality when one peers into it. The colors of the piece were inspired by Life Savers Tropical Fruits
candies. The poplar was heavily bleached, then painted with white latex house paint tinted with acrylics, and then rubbed with aniline dyes dissolved in water. These tended to dissolve the not yet cured paint and allowed the grain to show through more clearly. Finally the piece was lacquered with Deft.

_Tahitian Breadbox_ was a clear example for me of how little my drawings actually resolved of process and detail. The slats on the breadbox, the turned texture of the post, and the method of coloring all had to be worked out as I went along. The parts were joined simply and the piece is neither overbuilt nor flimsy.

_Rolling Home_ (Fig. 15) was made from two white oak spheres that were the start of another piece to be called _Connective Tissue_ (Fig. 5). The wood was badly decayed in the center of the spheres, so I cut the top and bottom from one sphere and cut the center out of the other to leave a box shape. Into this I put a smooth, turned ball of maple.

_Rolling Home_ is a paradigm for a person with a rough and tough travelling exterior and a smooth and solid heart. It is dismantled but ready to be pegged or bolted together. I did the piece with my Great Aunt Elsie in mind---a woman who has spent the past forty years in southern California and now would like to return home to Wisconsin. It's about rolling home just as it is a rolling home.

_Rolling Home_ resulted from having a stockpile of forms to work with to make new pieces. Such a stockpile provides inspiration outside of words or drawn images. _Sea Change_ (Fig.
16) came about in the same way. Its name comes from Shakespeare:

Full fathom five thy father lies:
   Of his bones are coral made:
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
       Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea change
   Into something rich and strange.

*The Tempest* I.ii.394

There are no drawings for this sculpture; the configuration is not fixed and none of the pieces were really made to go together. The wood snail was an experiment with the chainsaw and the bandsaw. The fishhook was made from a bending mold (for the hook shape in *Winter*). The weight came from a piece about marriage and the rope was a gift. The bandsawn wedge was another experiment. The pieces together seemed to have a marine aspect, like detritus on a beach. The change of the parts into a unique whole seemed well described by the title. *Sea Change* was the least premeditated of my pieces for the show.

I always thought of the wheels for *Fifth Wheel* (Fig. 17) as round rather than oblong, but I did draw them at first with a flattened pillow shape similar to those of *Little Red Wagon of Ethics*. In making *Fifth Wheel*, the material available determined the size and suggested the surface treatment, rather than the drawings. The process, too, played a part. The wavy, slightly burned cuts of a dull bandsaw blade on the beveled edges of the wheels were fortuitous. I used lumber rescued from pallets for
the axles, trying not to be too judgmental about the quality of the wood.

The piece was constructed of pine and covered with spackling compound grayed out with a small amount of black acrylic paint, trowelled on, and then sanded back to expose some of the grain and surface texture. I took some pains putting the piece together, turning bearing ways in the axles and using maple dowel segments for bearings. These spun beautifully at first, but dust from the spackling compound has made them stiff.

This piece strikes me as a big toy, a somewhat ghostly toy. It began as a drawing and a title but it supercedes these, I think. The first drawing showed the piece black, the next showed it flesh-colored. It is finally the color of bones. It is a fifth wheel that, far from being extraneous, picks up the rest of the wheels and carries them off on a circular path. This piece and Chinese Chest both make a reference to death, but not as overtly as Black Scythe.

Title and image arose together in my drawings for Black Scythe (Fig. 18). It's original title, the title I'd prefer for it now in some ways, is inscribed on the large drawing in the show in my own script: Black Sigh. It began as a calligraphic image of a shape with a line drawn up from it. and I thought of it as a growing thing, like a bean sprout. I wanted a bit of green in the edges and on the upright shoot, to refute or contrast with the death imagery already inherent in the title and the image.

I altered the shape of the upright numerous times as I constructed it. The whole piece took on a bone-like quality and the bottom form, which I found difficult to visualize in a drawing,
became more like a carapace than a seed. I considered gluing together oak or ash splints to make a thick mat, like a bundle of grass stood on end, to use as a base. Instead, I set the piece on a pile of long, thin, ash scraps.

When the shaping was done, I blackened the piece and the pile of scraps with a mixture of tung oil varnish and black oil paint. I had intended to make it much blacker but when I carried the piece outside the shop to get a better look at it, I immediately decided to leave the color as it was.

In many ways, *Monsieur Eiffel en amour* (Fig. 19) was the most problematic piece in my M.F.A. show. Its original title was *Gaiété Parisienne, ou Monsieur Eiffel en amour*. It was intended to have a definite French sense to it, one of elegance and wit, but it was also supposed to convey in formal terms a strongly restrained sexuality. Somehow, I didn't manage to attain the clarity of expression that I was aiming for.

Making the four ash spheres was a long and involved process of laminating and turning and I hadn't really considered how to join the uprights to them. The wrapping was also problematic. I began with wood strips lapped into the legs, but this didn't match the spirit of the drawings at all. After cutting all the joints and gluing all the strips on, I knocked them all off with a hammer and removed all traces of them, in the process slimming up the legs. Then I experimented with paper, leather, fibers, ribbon and lace, until I arrived at the result in the show, which barely satisfied me. The solution was cute and strived too hard to be witty. The black leather lacing, black lace and silk ribbons seemed to please people---they gave the piece a prurient
or risqué appeal. I felt the wrappings detracted from the sculptural quality of the forms and I stripped them all off as soon as I got the piece home.

Winter began as a sketch of the back of another graduate student’s head. It showed a spherical bundle of linear elements, empty inside except for one element curving into the center with a glowing ember at its tip, a wisp of smoke rising from it.

I expanded the sketch in later drawings, adding another shape, a large oval disk, thickened in the center, which I considered as a sort of shadow. I built this shape first. I made a frame of poplar and then planked it with thin ash boards about two and a half inches wide and a quarter of an inch thick.

To make the bundle, I cut and milled fourteen foot long ash strips, then soaked them in water and glycerin and bent them into hoops. The hook shape was made up of resawn ash laminates glued up over a mold and shaped with a bandsaw and angle grinder.

I had some black staples that I used to fasten the ash strips to the hook shape, and I used black steel wire to fasten the strips together where they crossed one another. The black staples and wire seemed consistent with the black sheetrock screws that I used to fasten the planking to the disc.

The next problem was how to join these two elements, the disk and the tumbleweed-like bundle. It was important to me that the disk be tipped up. I was going to set the forms beside one another, but Judd Williams suggested that the disk slide beneath and into the tumbleweed shape. I liked this idea and I developed a roughed-out version of a shape to connect the two in this configuration. It’s a whale-like form of laminated ash, carved
with a chainsaw. The tail end flattens and grasps the edge of the disc like a hand with the fingertips curved down to the palm. The shape is sliced along almost its entire length to allow it to flex open and grasp the hook shape in a pair of notches. The wood in Winter, as in Rolling Home, was left raw, without any wax, oil or sealer.

I found myself questioning every aspect of Winter from start to finish, in part because it remained difficult to convey or study in drawings. Progress was slow and I set it aside for long periods of time. Of the work in the show, Winter is the most evolved away from its name, and it is the most formal, too, that is, the most about form. I like its delicacy and the way it commands a space with a basket of lines.

An important part of my thesis work over the past year has been looking at and reading about other artists' work. After my thesis show I spent considerable time broadening my reading on the history and theory of contemporary sculpture, as well.

Not surprisingly, most of the sculptors that I've been investigating this year work with wood. H. C. Westermann makes craftsmanship in wood a prominent part of his work, forcing the viewer to take note of it. His faith in and adherence to an intensely personal vision of sculpture appeals to me, as does his incisive wit. Martin Puryear's work has served me as a model of how the craft of woodworking can be integrated into sculpture. He attains the spirit of the craft without quoting its forms as directly as Westermann did. I see a balance of grace and austerity in Puryear's pieces that I very much admire.
David Nash is certainly direct in his response to wood, felling a tree and making it into sculptures on the spot, training trees to grow into sculptures, or using wood with water or fire in his work. This elemental, Zen-like approach is often ephemeral and seems to depend on photography and titles. Still it has changed my notion of the minimum content of sculpture. I appreciate Richard Deacon's works in laminated wood for their clear expression of process. They demonstrate to me how process can be allied in the meaning of the piece.

Puryear, Nash and Deacon all make work which could fit within the designation of organic abstraction. Other sculptors whose work I like have also been lumped under this old and un glamorous heading at times, including William Tucker, William Turnbull, Michael Lekakis, George Sugarman, Isamu Noguchi, Henry Moore, Brancusi, and sometimes David Smith (Walker Art Center 1988, 49-60).

I think what unites these sculptors is their general concern for shaping over assemblage. They seek to shape whole objects rather than assemble collages. Perhaps these whole objects are models of an ideal of psychic and physical wholeness, a wholeness which in the past would have been represented by the nude (Stokes 1978, 306). If that is so, then organic abstraction might be construed as a kind of figuration, a way of circumnavigating the banal associations of the figure today to create a different paradigm of wholeness. Despite the worth of these whole object paradigms, I would like to return to the body itself as a source for at least some sculptures in the future---just to see what happens, as I suggested in my drawings.
In my general reading on contemporary sculpture I found many writers who were engaging and insightful, but I have avoided a recitation of their ideas simply because they were not mine, and my ideas are the difficult and small winnowings of this writing. Some writers, notably William Tucker, Rosalind Krauss and Charles Harrison, have served me as models for clear thinking about basic issues of sculpture, but really the only operative opinion when I make sculpture is my own.

I've found that I like sculpture best that consists of strong simple forms, common content, simple means and clear contrasts. I like shaping whole objects. To me shaping a piece means that you understand its entirety kinaesthetically, through the touch of your hands. This kind of understanding has a spiritual dimension, as the great Indian art historian Stella Kramrisch observed in comparing Indian sculpture with Hindu religious experience. In her words:

The rite of touching evokes the presence, at the spot touched, of the principle which informs the shape.

(Kramrisch 1983, 28)
A sculpture needs no title to be sculpture, but what happens when it has one?

In the past the titles that I've given to my drawings and sculptures have been more in the way of classifiers: Figure Study, Torso, Reclining Figure, etc. Over the past two years and especially during my thesis work, my imagery became more personal and I wanted to use more personal titles, as well. I felt that such titles indicated more commitment to the content of the work. As with my drawings, I was concerned that my titles, which often arose at the start or early on in making a piece, might be limiting the conception and growth of the work, as well as its content or significance when completed. I set out to consider what effect titling has on both the making and meaning of my sculpture.

At the first meeting of my thesis committee, I presented drawings for a number of sculptures that I had in mind to do. I also handed out a list of the ideas—-a title and a thumbnail sketch for each one (Fig. 1). After completing eight sculptures, having my show and spending the summer researching the history and theory of titles, I sat down and looked at this list again. I thought about each idea and tried to recall in what way it had first come to mind. I put them into six admittedly general groups (Fig. 2). Eight of the ideas originated as form alone. Seven originated as a form closely followed by a title. Six originated as a generalized content alone with no fixed title. Two originated as
titles closely followed by a form and eleven originated as titles alone.

I recall having had a good deal of trouble settling on which of these ideas to go ahead with. I was surprised after my informal analysis to see that six of the pieces that I chose to do originated as forms alone or forms+titles. The remaining two are not on the list, having been derived from process. None of the pieces that I did actually began as a title alone. I seem to have unconsciously avoided doing pieces that were programmed from their inception by a title. This suggests to me that I'm not as dependent on verbal images or preconceptions in my work as I had supposed. The ideas that originated as a generalized content continue to interest me, or rather, the themes do. It's just that I didn't feel that I had the forms or titles completely right yet to express those themes.

I could have approached the question of titling more scientifically, researching titles, setting up experimental models of different title/work relationships, testing and evaluating them. Instead I took the more intuitive approach that I have described, listing all my ideas and making an intuitive selection of which ideas to work from. In retrospect, I think I was resisting making the issue of titles central to my thesis as well as to each piece.

My research for my sculptures tended to be of an applied sort, dealing with techniques or looking at how other sculptors were addressing similar problems. After my show I began to research the history and theory of titles. I found that titling is seldom addressed in the general literature of art. A few writers
on aesthetics and linguistics have dealt seriously with titling, and perhaps not surprizingly, some poets. Though this research was "after the fact," so to speak, it has helped me to clarify my thinking and has yielded some insights on the role of titles, and language, in art.

A title has three principal definitions. It can be an identifying name for a book, a play, a movie, etc.; it can be anything that provides grounds for or justifies a claim; or it can be a formal appellation related to rank, privilege or attainment (Morris 1969, 1349). The first definition relates most directly to artwork.

How does a title differ from a name? A name is a word or words by which any entity is designated or distinguished from others (Morris 1969, 871). Common names are general: man, street, school, symphony, sonnet, still-life. Proper names are specific: Michelangelo Buonaroti, Big Ben, Let's Call the Whole Thing Off, Burial of the Count of Orgaz. A title can be either a common or a proper name. Unlike a name, a title is hermeneutical, that is, it serves to facilitate or guide interpretation in addition to naming (Fisher 1984, 288). It reflects the intention of the giver to affect or direct the meaning of the work.

What is an authentic title? Today the consensus would be that the title given to a work by the artist who made it is the only authentic one, but prior to the nineteenth century, most artists did not actively title their works. Titles were often appended to works for convenience, by patrons, clerks, curators or
public acclaim. Many works simply went untitled, leaving them subject to misidentification and misinterpretation.

Are there good titles and bad titles? If we assume that most artists intend to convey meaning rather than obfuscate it, then a good title guides or illuminates and a bad title misleads or obscures. Just about every artist manages to convey meaninglessness at times, regardless of his intent.

How are titles classified? Jerome Levinson distinguishes seven different types in his study of titles, but he returns to three basic groupings, as do most other writers on the subject (Hollander 1975, 215-16; Levinson 1985, 29-39; Welchman 1986, 263-64). Descriptive or denotative titles identify or classify. They tend to be literal and specific. Examples of descriptive titles include the Venus de Milo, Donatello's David, or Millet's The Gleaners. Interpretive or connotative titles imply or suggest in addition to naming. They tend to be abstract. Examples of interpretive titles include Manet's Dejeuner sur l'herbe, Albers' Homage to a Square, or Munch's The Scream. These titles identify the imagery in a literal way and yet imply other meanings, as well. Additive titles add a meaning to the piece that is not apparent in it. Additive titles often have a poetic character, as in Rodin's Je suis belle!, Gauguin's Soyez amoureuse et vous serez heureuse, Yves Tanguy's Mama, Papa is Wounded!, or Jackson Pollock's Autumn Rythym.

Absent titles sometimes make up a fourth classification. The designation Untitled might be given to a work by a curator when the original title is lost or when the artist simply did not name the work. Thus, Untitled may not reflect the artist's intent.
at all and may instead function like the additive titles described above. Obviously, there is a good deal of overlap in these classifications. A title like Picasso's *Guernica* arguably describes, interprets and adds meaning to that painting, all at the same time. These groupings do, however, aid in discussing the history of titles in art and prompt one to consider the ways and the extent to which titles direct meaning. Historically, the changing use of titles is reflected in the growth of aesthetic self-consciousness in art (Hollander 1975, 220; Adams 1987, 9), the rise of the individual artist and the expansion of literacy and print media. Titles are, without exception, verbal expressions, and literacy and printing have greatly expanded the range of reference and debate for titles, as well as the arts generally.

In the debate about art, four major theories have arisen about what art is. The first, expounded by Plato, is that art is representation or imitation of the perceived world. The second, arising in the late 1700's, is that art is expression of emotion—romanticism. The third, arising around 1900, is that art is significant form. The fourth and most recent theory, dating from about 1970, is that art is institutional, that is, art is what the artworld presents for evaluation as art (Morreall 1989, 2-3). It's worthwhile to consider the history of titling in art in the context of these four general theories. Preliterate societies, those with an oral rather than a written tradition, have a sophisticated understanding of making and naming, an understanding that is intuitive and
undifferentiated. Works from these societies don’t fit theories of art or titling very well. They tend to span categories and represent very different value systems. It would be a mistake to see images from such cultures as literal attempts at the representation of nature, or to see their titles as wholly denotative (Vogel 1986, xii). Art itself is a concept that has been superimposed on these cultures, who do not make a distinction or value judgement between art and non-art.

Immitative or representational art (the first theory) has been characterized by denotative or descriptive titles through most of its history. Even though the representational theory of art went unchallenged until well into the nineteenth century, titling began to evolve in the Renaissance from denotative to more connotative forms. Apart from the ongoing tradition of allegorical works, whose titles can have allegorical as well as literal meaning, interpretive titles were limited to peripheral forms of artistic expression, notably book arts. One example is the impresa, an image combined with an interpretive title or motto to form a symbol expressing a rule of life or philosophical principle of its bearer (Klein 1979, 3; Arnason 1986, 643). There were Roman precedents for these, as in the emblemmatic device of the Emperor Titus, which showed a dolphin wrapped about an anchor with the word festina lente ---make haste slowly--- inscribed below (Arnason 1986, 643).

Imprese became extremely popular among the educated upper classes of Renaissance Italy. Elaborate treatises were written setting out the rules for their making. Figure and motto were to represent a single act of thought, a concetto, and were to
be meaningless if separated, yet the whole was to be "pleasing to look at" and "neither too obscure nor too obvious". As Robert Klein observed, they represent "a remarkable valorization of indirectness" (Klein 1979; 5,9).

The sixteenth century French devise was similar to the impresa (Klein 1979, 3), and in Baroque Italy a number of collections of emblems were published. These emblems consisted of a picture, a title and an allegorical verse (Hollander 1975, 221-22). Music and poetry began to take on interpretive titles in the Baroque period, as well.

In the eighteenth century, interpretive titles began to play a role in conveying satirical content, as in the engravings of Hogarth. While mimesis was still the normative theory of art, it was at that time that the rift appeared between "fine" arts and "useful" arts. From then on art became increasingly allusive, finally claiming ascendance over both technique and function.

As noted, the theory that art is expression of emotion arose with the Romantic movement at the end of the eighteenth century. Artists began to actively title their works in the nineteenth century, but denotative titles continued to be the norm. The use of interpretive titles remained most advanced in printed media, which most artists and patrons regarded as adjunct means of expression, at best. Artists such as Goya and Daumier did explore new advances in print media, notably lithography, and both relied on allusive titles as part of these works. Daumier realized and exploited the audience potential of the popular press, as well, though his reputation as a serious artist may have suffered for it. Art was claiming ascendance over mass media, too.
Interpretive titles entered the mainstream of Western painting and sculpture after about 1850, as in Courbet's *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* (1854), Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), or Whistler's *Nocturne in blue and silver: Old Battersea Bridge* (1872-75). Note that all these titles continue to describe or name the content of the work while while alluding to other meanings, as well.

Additive or poetic titles began to appear in art after about 1875. As noted before, these titles may not describe the pictorial content at all, but add meaning to the piece. Artists directly or indirectly influenced by Symbolist poetry were the first to use such titles, as is Rodin's *Je suis belle!* (I Am Beautiful! 1882), Medardo Rosso's *Flesh of Others* (1883), or Gauguin's *Soyez amoureuse et vous serez heureuse* (Be In Love and You Will Be Happy, 1890). After this brief poetic flowering, titles reverted to denotative forms in Expressionist art, perhaps reflecting the continued reliance of that art on representational means for emotionally expressive ends.

The theory that art is significant form, color or line appeared around 1900. It has its origins as far back as Ingres and Delacroix, champions of line and color respectively, and in Cezanne's analysis of formal structure. It reached its full expression in the Cubism of Braque and Picasso and in the early non-objective works of Kandinsky. This art, with its focus on the "pure" elements of composition, continued to have denotative titles rather than interpretive ones, which would have added extraneous meanings to the work.
Surrealist titles, like those of the Symbolists, reflect the strong influence of a related literature. Whimsical of sardonic, illuminating or irrelevant, Surrealist titles were analogous to those of Surrealist poetry (Hollander 1975, 218), and are generally what I have called additive, as in Meret Oppenheim's My Governess (1936), or Salvador Dali's The Persistence of Memory (1931). Joan Miró made long lists of titles which he presented as poems. He experimented with transcribing these titles directly on canvas (Rowell 1986, 169). Jean Arp thought of his titles as "condensed poems" or "abbreviated little stories," such as Mountain-Table-Anchors-Navel (1925). "In the end," he said, "my interpretations, my names for my plastic works, (give) rise to poems" (Minneapolis Institute of Arts 1987, 70). It was Marcel Duchamp who first fully exploited the power of titling. André Breton praised him for "acting to divert the object from its ends by coupling it to a new name and signing it," as in Fountain (1917) (Walker Art Center 1988, 33).

In what seems like an attempt to undermine any and all literary or formal pretensions in Surrealism, Georges Bataille, writer and publisher of the Surrealist magazine Documents, proposed the concept of the informe. This "un"form was an intentionally undefined term meant to violate rather than transcend the boundaries of forms and titles, and to express shapeless meaning through decay. Bataille likened the informe to spittle or crushed earthworms and was faulted by Breton for the materialism of his ideas (Krauss, Livingstone 1985, 64).

Very generally, Surrealism represents the continuation of the notion of art as emotional expression and uses
representational or objective means. When this expressive tradition was informed by the non-objective art that arose from the theory of art as significant form, line and color, the new movement was dubbed Abstract Expressionism. Reflecting the duality of the this title, some Abstract Expressionists used titles that simply denoted the formal abstraction at hand, as in Hans Hoffman's *Composition* (1942), or Mark Rothko's *Maroon on Blue* (1957-60). Some began to use the designation *Untitled*. Many began to use purely additive titles, as in Jackson Pollock's *Lavender Mist* (1950), a title Pollock chose from a list made up by Clement Greenberg (Fort Worth Art Museum1987, 9), Barnet Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (1959-51), Robert Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 128* (1974), or Anthony Caro's *Early One Morning* (1962).

The expressive content of these works was largely carried in their titles, yet these titles were ignored in the dominant critical literature of the time, which addressed only their formal or technical content. The Minimalist artist and writer Joseph Kosuth condemned such work as "the vanguard of decoration," with no content except that supplied by the critics promoting it (Johnson 1982, 134-35). More recently, the critic John Welchman suggested that additive titles function as prostheses for abstract works, appending meaning or meaningfulness (Welchman 1986, 265). None of these writers admits to the legitimacy of titles as essential parts of composite works combining words and images.

Today the role of titles as active components of artworks is widely exploited. The combination of verbal and visual images pervades mass media, prompting media-critical work such as that
of Jenny Holzer, which consists of titles alone. The British critic Charles Harrison notes that "literary playing with metaphorical meaning, purged from Formalist and Minimalist art, has again become fashionable" (Harrison 1987, 54), and the reduction of art and architecture to a structuralist linguistic model has become a popular Post-Modernist conceit in which "the nonverbal aspect of a work is inevitably secondary to the words" (Adams 1987, 15). Titles have often become "device(s) to add importance to a trivial execution," and have become the obsession of interpreters, who ignore the work itself (Fisher 1984, 294).

The discourse on "spiritual values, metaphoric content or essential meanings" in art "articulates a culture of reaction, nostalgia and exploitation," Harrison continues (Harrison 1987, 54). Sculpture, art generally, is not simply a metaphor for something else. The poet John Crow Ransom once complained that metaphor may too often introduce totally irrelevant content (Ransom 1941, 208). Metaphoric titles can do the same.

The idea that art is whatever art institutions present as art---the fourth and most recent theory of art---is characteristic of this reactionary culture, also. This view of art exploits images and titles of all types and yet denies their significance in favor of an interpretive elite. In spite of so much mannered debate among this elite (the "valorization of indirectness" once again), most visual artists continue to be conservative in their choice of titles, avoiding those which will engender more discussion than the piece itself.

At the turn of the century, Rodin warned that "by treating... literary subjects,....artists have made the mistake of (making)
works that do not carry their complete meaning within themselves" (Rodin 1984, 72). Nonetheless, he plunged bravely into *The Gates of Hell*, with all its reference to Dante. The literary and purely verbal pretensions of many successful artists today can often overshadow their work.

Robert Thierren's reductivist forms have gained critical acclaim, it seems, because they are so daringly reductive. Rather than simply labeling then *Untitled*, he gives many of them the appellation *No Title*, making extraneous content out of the issue of titling. He provides "the suggestion of narrative through its absence, the sign without a referent," as one critic solemnly explains (Morgan 1987, 22). "I wish I knew more about the ideas I'm working with," Thierren says, and then wishes he could "eliminate all the middle stages" of making sculpture (Saunders 1985, 136).

The British sculptor Richard Deacon is given to using figures of speech as titles for his work. He bases his concept of titling on his reading of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke used the term *Dasein*, meaning the condition of "being in the world," and he asserted that "it is 'saying' or naming which brings things, otherwise inert and indifferent, into the human being-there of *Dasein" (Clark 1988, 43). In turn, Deacon uses his idiomatic titles to bring his work into this state of "being-there." The trouble with these titles is that they tend to reinforce one metaphoric reading of the form, distracting the viewer from Deacon's other accomplishments as a sculptor.

Another British sculptor given to composite works of words and forms is David Nash. His titles are less literary, and yet,
when combined with his rustic means, the results seem more poetic than Deacon's.

In the 1950's and 60's in this country, H. C. Westermann also made sculptures that were interdependent with their titles. Indeed, his titles were so elemental to the pieces and his approach so direct that he simply carved, painted or nailed the titles on to many of his pieces. What is different about his composites is that they do not refer to any generally understood literary themes or figures of speech, but instead to very personal themes or narratives. And even these were not his primary concern. "The subject matter they (the sculptures) assume is irrelevant," he says, "and is only a prop to hang feelings on---very strong feelings" (Haskell 1978, 21).

Martin Puryear has used idiomatic titles on occasion, as in Where the Heart Is (1981), but for the most part his titles are much less directive of interpretation. Tom Butter states simply "I find meaning in form," and tags his work with initials and numbers (Saunders 1985, 112). Roni Horn calls naming "the detour of Identity," and maintains that too much reliance on language (and media) distances us from experience (Saunders 1985, 120).

Titles can distance one from the experience of a sculpture. A piece should not be reducible to a verbal metaphor that allows one to say, "Oh, I get it," and then move on, assuming he has somehow "gotten" all that sculpture consists of. Good sculpture merits a contemplative viewer, but the sculptor's work must be an act of contemplation, as well. He cannot "eliminate all the middle stages" without missing the complete meaning.
In my work for this thesis, the titles were connotative or additive. Some have a literary reference (*Heart of Darkness*, *Sea Change*), some refer to art history (*Monsieur Eiffel en amour, Disagreeable Object*), and a number are figures of speech (*Fifth Wheel, Life and Limb, Pyrrhic Victory*). Among the eight sculptures that I completed for my show, I found titles to be the least problematic in those that had a strong formal intent at the start. I don't think a title alone is enough to sustain sculptural ideation for long, but as I said earlier, I see themes behind a number of the titles that I want to use. One should reserve the right to change the title as a piece develops and pay attention to nicknames!

In my proposal and again in my show statement, I talked about the confluence of a work with its name. I like names that illuminate without being essential, that are an added gift of insight to a strong sculptural expression. When you find this kind of match, the work and its title do flow together in the imagination.
V

MANUAL METAPHYSICS

A thesis, in an academic sense, is a proposition that one advances and offers to maintain by argument. In this report, I've reviewed my proposal---the "proposition" at the start of my investigations, and I've reviewed my "argument"---the drawings, sculptures and titles that made up my thesis show, the work leading up to them, and the research following them, particularly concerning the history and theory of titling.

The main thing I have observed in all this working, writing, reading and reflection, is a sense of continuance. Despite searching so far afield, I come back to till the same ground. I continue to wrestle with the same questions, to find inspiration in the same ideas, and to seek the same goals. Most of these were there ten years ago, but I couldn't see them. The greater part of meaning in life, as in language, is in its pattern, which takes time to emerge. I'm relieved somehow, to think that out of these continuances will come continuity.

The continuing issues that I see emerging in this thesis, when stripped of euphemistic trappings, are pretty basic. A major one is prejudice. I've discussed how drawings, titles and process can prejudice my understanding of a piece and limit its identity. A second one is fear---a reluctance to go beyond my understanding and my abilities. A third one is faith in what I'm doing.
The continuing themes that I've identified in my work and reflection are basic, too, and certainly not original to me. Some of them inspired pieces this time around, others only roused my intentions. The theme of embarkation, voyaging and arrival is important to me, especially the idea of being afraid to abandon the boat and come ashore---being a slave to the vessel of habit. The theme of limitation is important to me, the limits I put on myself, the limited but personal view of the truth that we each get to work with, and the limitations that give a piece clear form and meaning. Dualities are important to me, not so much one or the other thing or idea, but the union of the two. The motif of the human figure in drawing and sculpture is important to me, as a kind of communion with humanity and humanness, and as a challenge to unselfconscious expression. The theme of place is important to me---a place that informs me and my work and that I return to. The wood itself is a continuing source.

My goals, too, have become continuous. I used to say that my purpose was to make beautiful things. If I can define beauty as insight, as well as a pleasing of the senses, then that purpose still stands. There is a Yoruba proverb that says, "Anyone who meets beauty and does not look at it will soon be poor" (Vogel 1986, xvii). Beauty and insight are gifts, independent of need or knowledge.

I aim for a kind of oneness, a kind of conjunctive singularity in what I make. The separation between what a piece is and what it means is fine for the sake of analysis, but its the kind of pervasive abstraction that puts us out of touch with the
realness of things. We don't care for what we don't believe is real.

I think it's vain to assume that you create meaning. Meaning is old, pre-existing. It's something you find and try to translate or express. In Buddhist tradition, what's at issue is the worth of the translator, not the worth of the text, and Octavio Paz notes that at the deepest levels, translation and creation become indistinguishable (Paz 1987, 21,196). The meaning translated in a sculpture may just exist in contemplation, in the time you spend with it.

I see as a continuing goal the attainment of a kind of grace and wit in what I make, not to be trivial or sarcastic, but direct and good-intentioned. I don't believe this precludes serious work. Sculpture is an expansive activity, a luxurious one. It's a privilege to be a maker of things. My goal is to become the part I'm playing.

I had the idea when I began writing my thesis proposal to relate what I was doing in sculpture to poetry, specifically the verse of a few American and Latin American poets whose words and imagery remain new in my heart. But I didn't want to illustrate poems, and I didn't want to analyze them, either, for fear of offending the grace of finding them. So I left poetry out of my proposal.

I was pleased and gratified when, one day in the studio, Judd Williams suggested that the common thread in my visually disparate bunch of wooden sculptures was a kind of poetic handling. The root meaning of the word poetry is simply the act of making.
Como poeta carpintero
busco primero la madera
áspera o lisa, predispuesta:
con los manos toco el olor,
huelo el color, paso los dedos
por la integridad olorosa,
por el silencio del sistema,
hasta que me duermo o transmigro
o me desnudo y me sumerjo
en la salud de la madera:
en sus circonvalaciones.

As a carpenter-poet, first
I look for the right wood---
rough and knotty or smooth:
with my hands I touch the smell,
smell the color, pass my fingers
over and through its fragrant
fullness,
through its silent cellular system,
until I slip off to sleep or
transmigrate
or strip to the skin and submerge
in the well-being of wood:
in its rings and rippling grain.

Lo segundo que hago es cortar
con sierra de chisporroteo
la tabla récien elegida:
de la tabla salen los versos
como astillas emancipadas,
fragrantes, fuertes y distantes
para que ahora mi poema
tenga piso, casco, carena
se levante junto al camino
sea habitado por el mar.

The second thing I do is to cut
with my sputtering saw
the board I've chosen:
from that board come my verses,
chips emancipated from the plank,
fragrant, strong and distant
so that now my poem
may have a deck, a hull, a list,
rising up beside the road,
inhabited by the sea.

Comprendo que mis experiencias
de metafísica manual
no sirvan a la poesía,

I know that my experiences
with manual metaphysics
don't make a poetics,
pero yo me dejé las uñas
arremetiendo a mis trabajos
y éasas son las pobres recetas
que aprendí con mis propias manos:
si se prueba que son inútiles
para ejercer la poesía
estoy de inmediato acuerdo:
me sonrío para el futuro
y me retiro de antemano.

but I've worn down my nails
learning my craft
and these are the rudimentary
recipes
that I learned with my own hands:
if they prove to be useless
for making poetry
I'd immediately agree!
I smile toward the future
and am gone with no excuses.

First, second and final stanzas of *Artes Poéticas* (1) by Pablo Neruda, my translation (Neruda 1974, 368-71)
ILLUSTRATIONS
Some drawings/Some pieces:

Little Red Wagon of Ethics
Eiffel en amour
Black Scythe
Winter
Heart of Darkness
Indebtedness
Chinese Chest
Proteus
Circular Saw
Life and Limb
Doppelganger
Breath and Death
Connective Tissue
The Concept of Limits
Embarcation
Desperate Collector

Fifth Wheel
Tahitian Breadbox
Tongue and Groove
Ejé
Way Out
Crib
Home
Vue imprenable
Seat of Reason
Conspiracy of Goodness
Vacation Memories
Lumberjack
Disagreeable Object
Pyrrhic Victory
Plank Verse
Moving House

Fig. 1. Ideas for Sculptures (21 December 1989).
IDEAS ORIGINATING AS:

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Fig. 2. Ideas/Sources
Fig. 3. *Embarcation*. Charcoal, 18" x 23", 1989.
Fig. 4. *Doppelganger*. Charcoal, 18" x 23", 1989.
Fig. 5. *Connective Tissue*. Charcoal, 18" x 23", 1989.
Fig. 6. *Way Out*. Charcoal, 18" x 23", 1989.
Fig. 7. Breath and Death. Charcoal, 18" x 23", 1989.
Fig. 8. *Crib/Screw Metaphor*. Charcoal, 18" x 23", 1989.
Fig. 9. *Lumberjack*. Charcoal, 18" x 23", 1989.
Fig. 10. Desperate Collector. Charcoal, 18" x 23", 1989.
Fig. 11. *Black Scythe*. Charcoal, pastel; 26" x 40"; 1989.
Fig. 12. *Indebtedness*. Pastel, 26" x 40", 1989.
Fig. 13. *Chinese Chest*. Bubinga, 24" l., 1989.
Fig. 14. *Tahitian Breadbox*. Poplar, 34" h., 1990.
Fig. 15. *Rolling Home*. Oak, maple; 12" h. x 21" l. x 13" d.; 1990.
Fig. 16. *Sea Change*. Oak, maple, cottonwood, plywood, rope; 17"h. x 52" w. x 36" d.; 1990.
Fig. 17. *Fifth Wheel*. Pine, 30" h. x 28" w. x 42" l., 1990.
Fig. 18. *Black Scythe*. Ash, 85" h. x 42" w. x 48" d., 1990.
Fig. 19. *Monsieur Eiffel en amour*. Ash, oak, leather, lace, ribbon; 50" h.; 1990.
Fig. 20. *Winter*. Ash, Poplar; 52" h. x 72" w. x 72" d.; 1990.
REFERENCE LIST


SECONDARY REFERENCES


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