Passages: Forms for contemplation

Douglas Hallberg

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

PASSAGES: FORMS FOR CONTEMPLATION

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by
Douglas J. Hallberg

Rochester, NY
April 1996
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Dedicated to my wife, Patrice Macaluso, whose encouragement and support are unwavering.
"The conflict for realization is what makes art."

- David Smith

The body of work described in this thesis is a result of two years of immersion in the study of art. The pieces I have created hopefully will move the viewer as they have moved me toward a deeper level of insight, calmness and understanding.
Introduction

I considered enrolling in the MFA program at RIT in 1981 - I finally did in 1994. During the intervening years I designed and constructed stained glass windows for various types of architecture. After ten years, the challenge of creating rectangular two-dimensional work failed to motivate me. I could not get excited about serving the needs of clients. I had always been interested in the closely related fields of architecture and sculpture and chose to concentrate on the latter. I entered graduate school with the goal of creating sculpture featuring glass as the dominant material. I was unsure about the content. As I studied the realm of space and form, I realized that flat glass would not be adequate to express certain ideas about continuity so I began to shape it to create volumetric cylinders. These glass forms have become important vocabulary for most of my thesis work. They express ambiguity and contradiction - like forms of suspended water. The relationship of reflected and transmitted light causes a powerful dynamic within each form, radiating energy into each sculpture.

In "Passages: Forms for Contemplation" I have hoped to create works of quiet energy which in some measure direct the viewer toward the higher self.
Influences

Early in my program, I studied sculpture and read critical assessments of David Smith (plate 1) and Anthony Caro, (plate 2). Although their work is very different, I was struck by the similarities of their working methods. Smith writes, "When I begin a sculpture, I am not always sure how it is going to end. I do not often follow its path from a previously conceived drawing. If I have a strong feeling about its start I do not need to know its end, the battle for solution is the most important. Sometimes when I start a sculpture, I begin with only a realized part, the rest is travel to be unfolded much in the order of a dream. The conflict for realization is what makes art, not its techniques or materials. When a sculpture is finished I have to keep it around for months to become acquainted with it and sometimes it is as if I have never seen it before."1

Like Caro, I am formally concerned with vectors, lines of force and direction. I am seeking to exploit relationships of components and their destiny towards integration. The concept of "syntax" used by Rubin to explain Caro’s focus is of great value to me. Rubin explains, "The shapes in Caro’s work are his only insofar as he may cut them down or slightly alter them. His inventiveness is thus forced more into the area of their rapport.

1 David Smith by David Smith © 1968 Thames and Hudson, p. 34.
Some of Caro's best sculptures are limited to three or four discrete elements, all shaped differently and none particularly interesting in itself. It is as if all the pieces had fallen together by chance with the resiliency and factuality of a natural event. Such an impression reflects the fact that Caro arrives at his configurations through improvisation - by literally pushing things around - rather than by realizing a prior concept from a sketch or a model.\(^2\)

Another artist I value is Christopher Wilmarth (d. 1987). I have a friend who knew and worked with Mr. Wilmarth and the reminiscences of him are poignant because he seemed to pass on too soon. I appreciate that he described his works as physical poems. He maintained a clear vision of why he made art. He writes, "Art exists for a reason. The reason is simple and often forgotten. Art is man's attempt to communicate an understanding of life to man. To give in a sculpture what I understand; to imbue concrete things with parallels to human feelings, to do this in a real way; to be believable is my purpose. I make sculptures in which the forms seem to have evolved of themselves. They exist and imply change. My sculptures are places to generate experience. The feeling is intimate, the viewer is acknowledged."\(^3\)

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\(^2\) *Anthony Caro* by William Rubin © 1975 MOMA, p. 49.

In the minimalist tradition I have chosen honest, industrial materials of simple geometric form and arranged them in a straightforward manner. The formal simplicity within this body of work allows the passage of energy in and around the pieces and creates immediate dialog. Out of view, the essence of these pieces lies in the voids and recesses - in the soul of the materials.

Critic Mark Stevens, has written that sculpture is a "remembering art... There seem to be fewer things that deserve immortality or require remembering in a static or monumental way."4

Hopefully these works will be viewed as monuments to the inherent qualities and contradictions of life.

Discussion of the Sculptures

The four pieces outlined below were completed early in my program and are technical studies rather than substantive expressions of ideas in the later work. I have included them to indicate the development of my thinking.

"Composition of the Sun" 1994 (plate 3), is a collage of refracted light. By removing it from the traditional placement in a fixed architectural context and designing it into an autonomous framework, it exists as a sculptural entity.

"Form Study I" 1994 (plate 4), "Form Study II" 1994 (plates 5,6,7) and "Synthesis" 1995 (plate 8) are efforts to create dimensionality in flat glass. Solid plate glass and grids are kiln-formed over flexible thermal rope to create dramatic reliefs. (See technical section).

"Assemblage" 1994 (plate 9) represents another study in creating volume and relationship with flat glass. The context of a steel box was used to define space.

The pieces described below represent my latest ideas. Occasionally, I worked from a model or sketch and usually, after a long study of possible relationships, an idea would come that I worked to completion. This "struggle for realization" is the most difficult and important thing in art making for me. It
involves a intuitive process of joining created and selected parts. I trust my feelings about the harmony between materials. The relationship among parts is also based on a complex sense of rhythm, balance and counterpoint. The essence of creating sculpture is very similar to writing a poem or a musical composition.

This series, "Passages: Forms for Contemplation", is intended for an environmental context preferably in a quiet garden feeling the sun, wind and rain.

"Fate" 1995 (plates 10,11), on an autobiographical level, is something about my life as a twin. I am comfortable in the world of pairs. In the larger sense the steel platform and ring may suggest bonds of existence, the inevitability of dealing with the future. The sand carved, perforated thick glass forms refer to storms and scars of existence. The rust marks the passage of time. There is a timeless, imposing quality about these pieces not unlike that of existence itself.

"Intuition" 1995 (plates 12,13) consists of a narrow glass cylinder resting in a cradle of inward tilting concrete planar arcs. The horizontality may allude to the reach of awareness. The narrow cylinder compresses the interior space forcing it out in vector-like directions. A dialog about balance, protection and penetration is set up among the different elements.
A series of rocking concrete arcs create the movement required for the monumental stillness in "Sounding III" 1996 (plates 14, 15). The strong perpendicular axes of the base and cylinder to the arcs allow the glass a weightless quality, a materialization of water, suspended in space and time. Massiveness and immobility are in dialog with weightlessness and motion which tend to produce a tranquility within the piece. Much of the meaning lies imagined in unseen voids and recesses. It deals with protection, perseverance and resilience.

The final piece is entitled "Passage" 1996 (plate 16). Like "Sounding III", it has a formal perpendicular balance. The space within the concrete ring has the feeling of being compressed. The glass cylinder appears relatively weightless, suspended by the steel ribbon bisecting the inner space. I hope to express themes of transition and flight opposed by permanence and immobility.
Conclusion

The four most recent pieces in the show hopefully suggest and give homage to the essential quality of existence - the tension between permanence and change. The response I got from faculty and students was positive and made me realize the show transmitted some of its intended meaning.
Technical Section

I have included brief technical descriptions to clarify my methods and to hopefully assist others.

"Composition of the Sun"  Leaded, beveled glass in welded steel frame, sandblasted treated with selenic acid to gray-green patina.

"Form Study 1"  1/4" plate glass slumped over Carborundum 2" diameter refractory rope. Available at Industrial Incineration. Kiln cycle to 1400F straight up and down.

"Form Study 2"  Full fuse mesh of hand cut strips of single strength glass Kiln cycle to 1300F up and down. Slump over 2" refractory rope. 1350F straight up and down.

"Synthesis"  Full fuse 3mm Kimble cane to 1300F; slump over rope to 1300F up and down.

"Assemblage"  Double strength clear and colored glass formed over 28 gauge flexible steel. Two-part poly-bisulfide cast rubber matrix used to secure glass elements into steel box. Available from Cementex Corp, Manhattan, NY.
"Fate"

Preheat thick pipe to 300F, brush on 50% kaolin, 50% silica in a yogurt consistency. Slump 3/4" glass to this program:

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For 1/4" glass or thinner you can go to 1400F straight up-down.
Bibliography


