

MAJOR ALBANY SCULPTURE SITES

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AN ESSAY BY THE CURATOR



Ours is certainly an exciting time in the visual arts: an artist from L.A. named Laddie John Dill is even making TV commercials like a movie star. The current degree of public consciousness about art might be compared to the role art played in 17th century Holland, where there were more painters than butchers, and every middle-income home boasted one of their still-lives. We have gone even further, democratically speaking. Art has burst the confines of home, gallery and museum to enter the public domain on a large scale. Painters are discontent with making small scale easel paintings for private consumption and many sculptors agree with Robert Morris "that the static, portable indoor art object can do no more than carry a decorative load that becomes increasingly uninteresting." They all want a bigger, more reachable audience. The Albany Mall, where tens of thousands of people come into close contact with art every day of their working lives — eating their bag lunches or skating amid sculptures on the plazas and chatting over coffee near major paintings in the vast underground passages — the Mall is one of the prime models for long term public interaction with art today.

In other kinds of art outreach programs, exhibitions are now being mounted in the lobbies of Manhattan office buildings, and large scale sculptures are being leased for display on public

plazas. Summer outdoor sculpture shows are proliferating in parks near urban centers all over the country, and of course there is Artpark, but the mode is transitory in those situations, and artists tend to want longer-term exposure for their works. Here again, Albany is establishing a precedent with M.A.S.S., a semi-permanent extended exhibition of major sculptures sited out-of-doors in the Corning Preserve, a public park on the river's edge in downtown Albany.

M.A.S.S. is not earth art; the park is itself a successful fusion of earthwork and architected landscape which has won wide acclaim for its designer Scott Lewenden. But M.A.S.S. is not just indoor sculpture stuck outside either. Rather it is sculpture that can be located somewhere on a continuum between those two poles. The pieces by Patricia Johanson and Jeanne Flanagan come the closest to "earthworks" because they use earth materials (rocks) which have simply been moved around into specific configurations but they are not at all involved with fortification or defense which the term "earthwork" implies, nor are they "worked earth" in the sense of having been dug into the earth.

On the other hand, pieces such as Ernest Mahlke's colorful column of painted exhaust pipes or Jonathan Kirk's curving cluster of abstract shapes both of which could be perfectly at home on an urban plaza, take on added significance in the context of their particular sites. Mahlke's materials relate to the highway they abut and his colorism against the unrelieved gray of its city backdrop and its grassy foreground seem as exotic as a yellow finch in a pine woods. Kirk's curve picks up the sweeping lines of the (also) human-made pond nearby, echoing them, while the rectilinear units in the piece pick up the urban architecture visible on the other side of the highway. His sculpture functions as an abstract,

but meaningful intermediary between the two opposing realms which meet at the Corning Preserve site: the urban and the natural.

Many of the pieces function similarly. Modern public art — unlike that of the last century which featured people and horses, in large measure because they were commonplaces of everyday life — tends to be abstract and to relate to buildings, trees, fences, and so forth, the commonplaces of our lives.

Horses are now exotic creatures and we don't let "great men" stand very long on pedestals anymore before we knock them off. Also, one experienced life in direct ways then; now one is distanced by telephones, cameras, media, computers and all manner of "abstracting" paraphernalia. We experience life indirectly, even, one might say, conceptually, and abstract art reflects that life experience more appropriately than statues on horseback possibly can.

Even if figures are utilized or implied, as they are in Constance Dodge's *Four Corners of the World*, where four symbolic "figures" rife with multiple mystical and metaphorical meanings, flank a large altar-like rock and Dan George's *Green Street*, where Matisse inspired cut-outs dance in one's headlights to celebrate the risqué high-jinks that made Green Street so well known in its day, they bear no resemblance to the old-fashioned statue. Statues are stationery, single images, recognizable from afar because they are so familiar. Modern figural and abstract sculptures tend to be made of multiple parts and are viewed in time from a variety of angles, their holistic compositions being put together in the viewer's mind from a succession of perceptions. (George carries this idea even further by putting the viewer in a car piecing a "moving picture" together out of separate units mounted on a series of lampposts.) Meanings tend to multiply in modern public sculpture, particularly when, as here, it is situated in a multi-level context — land / water / highway / city-skyline — the natural and

the constructed intertwined. Much of a work's meaning is taken from its site, the piece being planned for it, constructed at least in part on it, and placed there with special attention to the expected pattern of viewer behavior.

Just about all of the proposals we reviewed for inclusion in this show discussed ways in which the artist wanted the work to interact with its site. Realizing probably that the so-called pure modern art left most viewers pretty cold and wanting profoundly to reach out to the audience, most contemporary sculptors working in public or semi-public situations try to build in systems or avenues of comprehension to help people understand the work. Being somewhat shy — as artists are generally wont to be — and not desiring to "talk down" to their audience, most of the artists make no obvious representations, but they do strive for obvious parallels and allusions, which any interested, intelligent viewer can use to understand the meaning of the work. As an example, the configuration of Allen Mooney's *Rapid River Run / Back Water Flats* definitely looks like graphic notions of waterfalls, and flowing or cascading streams of water pooling into a single space. The artist states that the piece is involved with "Time, Displacement, Movement, Dream" and that it uses "the idea of the Hudson River both above and below Albany and the changing nature of the river as it moves downstate." The downward fall of the three steel units, their blue-black coloration, and the waterside orientation of the piece all speak to and of this rather poetic notion. Jacob Grossberg's piece also makes reference to the river and its shoreline topography. Titled *Taconic Span*, it consists of a post-and-lintel arch or bridge, and three flowing curvilinear units running at a vertical slant across the face of the "bridge" — all clearly related to the river. The artist says of his work: "The image is an internalization of landscape. Landscape as line, form, or edge — as syntax, however, rather than as subject." And this is quite obvious despite the material (steel) and the language (abstraction) in

which it is realized.

Tim Cunard's original proposal was for a *Hudson River Nest* made of native northeastern grapevines in a shape abstracted from that of the mud-dauber's nest. It was to lie along the river's edge like a gigantic log, half-natural habitat, half-abstract object. As realized, and now titled *Solicitor* "Collector - Conductor - Receiver", it continues to carry the same associations but is more complex. The two halves of the "log-nest" are now "collector" cones raised up off the ground which "funnel" energy (from the city?) down into copper-lined troughs which "conduct" it to the "receiving" area, a cobblestone circle quadrant. Presumably, standing on that spot enables the viewer to collect the energy "solicited" by Cunard's piece, but whether one understands the artist's intentions or not, the piece does seem to mediate between nature and the city, nature and art, and nature and natural science. Susan Fitzsimmons Jones changed her original conception even more radically. She had planned to create a termite nest on the edge of the pond which would blend in with its surroundings. Instead she has made a mirroring plexiglas trylon, titled *Mount Narcissus*, which reflects, with some distortion, the surrounding park-scape, skyline and sky so completely that it verges on disappearing from sight as an object. She has long been involved with the interaction of lucite and wood or other rough-textured "natural" materials, and with transparency, whether physical or conceptual.

Patricia Johanson, though very differently, is also involved with notions of visibility and disappearance. She once conceived of a series of "Vanishing Point Gardens" which would be so vast even an aerial view wouldn't be enough to grasp the overall configuration — a map would be needed. "The only way one could really 'see' the garden would be by piecing it together in one's mind," using one's memory and intelligence over a period of time spent viewing its separate parts.

Though she does plan landscape-sculptures that are small enough to be recognized as the flower or plant form on which they were based, at least on aerial view, she has also been designing her earth or rock-sculptures in the configurations of bacteria. Naturally, when such forms are executed in full large scale they have been magnified into invisibility out of the invisibility of the microscopic, a wry twist on her basic theme. *Diphtheria*, the piece in M.A.S.S., is invisible as an abstract representation of the diphtheria bacillus to everyone who doesn't know its title and what the organism looks like. That doesn't really matter though, since some sort of organization of the rocks is apparent, and the boulders are interesting in themselves as objects. As with any art aesthetic experience, deeper, more penetrating perception (including thoughtful research) provides more profound pleasures.

Out in a park setting like this people can interact with sculpture far better than in the context of an urban plaza where the sculpture is dwarfed by megalithic buildings which make it seem toylike, and where people identify the work as "official" instead of as relating to them. The scale of these pieces is human, and one can readily sense in one's body the properties we have in common with the objects — weight, balance, density and distribution. The actual physical and mental activity of the viewer is a condition of perception. Identifying the parts, recognizing the materials, sensing the physical effort involved in its construction, and going all around the work to see how its forms relate to one another and to its various backgrounds, from all its different angles — this is the viewer's job. Reasonable guesses as to what that shape is supposed to be, or what that part is supposed to do are all part of perceiving the piece, factually, but the viewer should also fictionalize a bit. Is Gerald Wagoner's cement slab supposed to seem to be part of a larger geometrical solid that is emerging from the earth or has been flung down into it, piercing its crust? One can read the piece imaginatively, like that, or

one can see it as an inert, minimal sculpture concerned only with matters of density and mass in the manner, say, of Carl Andre. Whenever there is no base intervening between a piece and the surface on which it is supported, one is welcome to fantasize about its possible extension into and through that surface. Gary Lindemann may be trying to focus your attention on the interaction of the sharply pointed (male) metal wedge and the softer, rounded (female) stone in his *Dark Adam Dreams* piece because he is very involved with the erotic and poetic potential of forms, but one can also read the piece in terms of the utilitarian function of the found materials he's chosen, or in terms of its geometry as pure (again Minimal) art, or, surrealistically, as the top visible section of a stone cylinder extending far down below the earth's surface.

Paul Mauren's barrier of bright red "X"s can be indefinitely extended in the mind's eye the way one extends the lines in a Mondrian painting, because they are modular units with no hierarchy. Their enormous scale (when you think of them as simple lower case printed "x"s) throws the whole riverfront vista out of whack, as though one had zoomed in close on just that one spot while the rest of the "picture" remained at a normal distance from the lens. They also seem like fragments dynamically charging through a quiet, pastoral scene that is wholly consistent. In short, they are disconcertingly out-of-phase with their surrounding when viewed from a distance, but up close one relives their rugged construction and relates to them almost as though they were figures.

The artist relinquishes the kind of control that's possible in a gallery or museum setting when he or she works out-of-doors. Not only is the work at the mercy of the elements and changing light conditions, but people's patterns of behavior are less predictable. The illusion of a Greek temple with cats on the railings that David Formanek tries to create in his *Mouseoleum for Willy* works perfectly, but only from one spot. From all of the

others its sham construction is obvious. Brower Hatcher's piece, *Stairway to Heaven*, "works" both illusionistically and formally so that the geometric structure functions on at least two interlocking levels of representation, imagistic and abstract-symbolic. Bits of flight-related imagery float inside a three-dimensional openwork from that suggests a nose-cone, the front half of a blimp or, as someone suggested, a flame. But, again the internalized images of circling, spiralling celestial orbits which the artist intends the viewer to "find" in the matrix of aluminum, mesh, metal scraps and toys come into focus only from certain viewing angles.

There is a level of illusionism inherent in John Wineland's twin towers as well. The eye carries the diagonal slants of the two rooflines on up to a point and thereby simultaneously creates a different geometry — a pentagon — out of the perimeter, and an awareness of the negative space between the towers as shape, the same shape, in fact, the two "buildings" become one and their geometry becomes apparent. The two interlocked vertical planes of John von Bergen's *Tear of the Clouds* set up such a complex series of configurations from the various viewing angles that the illusion of the piece as a quasi-building comes in and out of one's awareness. Except as slated sun-screen the piece doesn't function architecturally despite its "roof" section, but it "feels" like a building, of sorts. The rhythmically repeated structural units, which are optically activated by the loosely wavy paint applied to their surface, engender a sense of the predictable that is belied by the way the piece keeps changing shape before your eyes. Audrey Hemenway's *Pavillion*, on the other hand, functions completely predictably as architecture — a seat on the river's edge — and as geometric form — concentric parabolas and the only illusion is that of the psychological suggestion of shade rendered by its scanty roof-covering.

The urge to construct shelters, or semblances of shelter, when working out of doors is all but

irresistable to many artists, and a great deal of work has been done in this mode in other shows and installations of outdoor sculpture, particularly when there are funds available. One senses a nesting instinct at work, as much as a desire to make one's mark on the site. For Sonia Loomis, who might be said to be working in the French tradition of garden sculpting as opposed to Patricia Johanson's English, naturalized tradition, the urge to make a home out of the site led her to augment her triangular field of flower-derived red color with white picket fencing, and a "clothesline" with flapping-sheet banners to "explain" the piece. Also responding to some very deep-seated instinctual need, but content to simply make her mark on the landscape, Jeanne Flanagan had flat-topped boulders placed in spiralling curves that diagram the river's whirling eddies like dotted-line drawings. Paralleling prehistoric dolmens, placed in similarly discernable circle and spiral configurations, her stones can be used however people want to use them — as giant-size drawing, as conceptual diagram, as beautiful forms, or simply as seats from which to contemplate the passing river. Interestingly, the nearby sculptures of Bruno LaVerdiere conjure up the same kind of prehistoric ambience, though out of a very different sensibility. His abstract ceramic units seem figure-like placed as they are facing the jogging path with their back to the river. Since he has titled the piece *Variations on China Game*, a reference to T'ang or Han tomb figures may be implied, or it may simply be that the ancient Chinese ceramic tradition is being referred to.

But meanings are multiple in most of this work, which is as it should be since the park itself presents a multiplicity of prospects and potential uses. Then too, of course, we live in a highly complex period in history, experiencing multi-levelled events every day of our schizophrenic lives. These sculptures offer the viewer a wide range of possible experiences, and the viewer will get as much or little from them as

he or she puts into the process of comprehending and appreciating them. They are a place or locus of interaction between people and their world. Experiencing the work is a temporal as well as spatial process — like normal, "natural" life — and can be equally fascinating.

April Kingsley,
Curator