

# State of Ohio Sculpture

**Jay Bolotin**  
**Stephanie Cooper**  
**Paula Dubaniewicz**  
**Stuart Fink**  
**Joe Fruce**  
**Donald Harvey**  
**Robert Mihaly**  
**Paul O'Keeffe**  
**Todd Slaughter**  
**Mark Soppeland**  
**Brinsley Tyrrell**  
**Reid Wood**

**SPACES**  
Cleveland, Ohio

**The Sculpture Center**  
New York, N.Y.



## State of Ohio Sculpture by April Kingsley

To secure a place in a moment of history, the artist must be tied to a formal principle and faithful to a self-conscious sense of personal style. When this individual bias is echoed by others in the community—the Paris of Impressionism or the New York of Abstract Expressionism—one's life as an artist is considered successful. But when one is literally, geographically, outside the central community of one's time, the work one produces is often judged inferior on the “provincialism principle,” a rule of thumb that measures reduction in quality on a sliding scale relative to the artist's distance from that art center. The basic idea of provincialism goes back to the time when it really took a long time for news to get around, in the art world as in all other areas of life. Today that information is shared almost instantaneously, a fact which hasn't seemed to penetrate the barrier of this prejudice, one that is now long overdue for eradication.

The state of Ohio, and the state of sculpture in Ohio alone, is ample proof of the fallibility of the “provincialism principle”, because the artists' work maintains a high level across a broad base. Located all over the state in active, supportive epi-centers with private and public patronage that artists in any of the “other 49” would envy, the Ohio artists have a community (they all know what each other is up to and what's going on elsewhere in the country) without having to commit their personal styles to it. The alternative, seen

in Chicago and California, is to turn so far inward that only the happenstance of numbers congregating in one area makes the local style visible. No one can speak of an “Ohio style” in that sense. And yet no one can say that the work of these twelve sculptors—since they are the paradigm under scrutiny—is derivative, a “remaindered”, delayed-reaction response to major center art. Further, space limitations being strict, the selection was limited to artists not familiar to the New York situation, which meant the elimination of Athena Tacha and Susan Dallas-Swan, for instance, who are well known to Soho gallery goers, as well as Susan Zurcher, whose marvelous wire-bound branches which fuse suggestions of landscape, body, and tree are currently on view at the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, P.S. 1. The same lack of space eliminated artists working on very large scale, either outdoors like Robert Huff, John Spofforth, Scott Senseny, Robert Ressler, Barry Gunderson, Dennison Griffith, Allyson Mushovic, Gene Kangas and Frank McGuire, or indoors like Deborah Horrell, Barbara Chavous, Mel Durand, Stuart Delk, Carol Kerber and Tom Macaulay among many others of high quality. Two or three exhibitions twice this size could be mounted of Ohio sculpture today without running out of work as good as that in this exhibition.

B rinsley Tyrrell normally works on a scale that would have been prohibitive in the present context, but recently he's been working in the medium

of hydrocal reliefs, partially in preparation for their being cast in bronze and assembled into large commissioned sculpture complexes. These reliefs, however, function as complete works in themselves. As always with Tyrrell, the theme is vegetation in the form of trees and tree roots intricately applied to the surface in shallow, relief-like Art Nouveau decorative detailing or gnarled, upended, and intertwined in an intensely expressive manner as though they were acting out human emotions. Even when he works with the human body as he has been doing recently, the forms are covered with biological-vegetal markings that are reminiscent of the striated surfaces of his “trees”. Interestingly, a number of Ohio artists are involved with tree imagery, and with other organic phenomena such as bones, and even slugs. Robert Mihaly's characteristic images of Arp-like biomorphic solids oozing out of cabinets and over the edges of tables, for instance, can seem either humorous and charming or disturbing and threatening depending upon one's feelings about the living creatures they call to mind. At first sight Todd Slaughter's wall works seem like bunches of painted reeds or twigs that were blown against the wall and miraculously remained affixed there. Prolonged viewing however, brings about an awareness of human shapes drawn in wire lines, shapes that seem to be emerging from or disappearing into the whiteness of the wall. His is an Abstract Expressionist, supercharged imageworld deployed in terms of post-sixties process art.



Joe Fruce and Donald Harvey would seem to be working in relatively "Minimalist" modes. Certainly the forms are abstract. But Harvey is creating conceptual landscapes out of these geometrical units and Fruce's use of linoleum floor covering to surface his pieces brings them into such familiar proximity to daily life that one forgets about their Constructivist underpinnings. Both artists' works allude to things we know about—bridges, trusses, walkways and furniture in Fruce's sculptures, and cityscapes or sections of suburbia in Harvey's, but they don't surrender their abstractness to do so. Stuart J. Fink also seems to be an abstract sculptor manipulating chunky volumes of concrete into dense, stacked masses surprisingly colored and decorated with wavy, curving trim. Only when you realize that these sculptures are torsos does the playful oval become a navel or the scalloped edge become a piece of clothing; the piece operates on two simultaneous levels the way Fruce and Harvey's sculptures do.

One notable feature of some of the best of Ohio's outdoor sculpture in recent years has been a tendency to incorporate the figure or other representational elements within an abstract, traditionally Constructivist idiom. Sometimes this is done more playfully than profoundly, but it always brings in a psychological note that enables the viewer to experience the piece from the inside, as it were, instead of always from the outside, as an organic, living, being standing in proximity to an obdurately inanimate object. This juxtaposition of the purely abstract with the figurative is characteristic of the work of Paul O'Keeffe, a very young, exciting artist

from Ireland whose large-installation pieces pit bulbous, cold cast copper figures against an alien world of rods, beams, and sheets of precision cut steel. The geometrical steel units seem to menace the softly-contoured blue-green figure who tries to come to terms with this intractable hard-edged world in a gently human way.

Paula Dubaniewicz, whose enormous wavy, multi-colored, multi-sectioned ceramic walls, pylons, and towers are too big and site-specific to have become as familiar outside of Ohio as they are inside it, has created a piece that doubles as an archway and as a magnet, depending on whether you read the meaning of the piece out of its configuration and its bricklike, architectural look, or you read the title on the wall label. Many very fine clay sculptors who reside in Ohio are wrenching their medium away from the crafts context in which it has been embedded for so long, but most tend toward a more decorative look than Dubaniewicz. Mark Soppeland's semi-Surrealist interior fragments appear as though they might be made of painted clay, and Reid Wood's decidedly spooky, fragmented, figurative "shells" also seem likely objects for casting in clay, but neither artist uses the medium. Danger stalks Soppeland's scenarios in a quasi charming manner, but Wood's death-mask countenances (or busts really) seem to have been eroded into their ghostly configurations.

Jay Bolotin's figures often have exaggerated expressions which remind one of Mexican mural paintings, Reginald Marsh or even of Thomas Hart Benton. Full bodied, robust to the point of bursting, violent in their gestures, his

characters seem to be acting out age-old scenarios despite their modern dress. The strong chiaroscuro and the nighttime lighting add to their quality of brutality as well as to their mystery. Stephanie Cooper's little figures, on the other hand, seem doll-like and their roughly whittled look makes them seem like the probable products of a naive folk artisan. However, the sophistication of her symbolism and the beautiful play of her forms, particularly of the circular swinging shapes that arc through space, mark her as a consummately aware artist functioning on the same high level as artists in the best galleries and museums all over her state and country.

It seems as though Ohio artists are secure enough within themselves, and within the supportive artworld structure of their state, not to follow the fads in imitation of New York punk expressionism, nor to revert to the cul-de-sac styles of Chicago and the Bay area which are such popular models in most of the other United States. The kind of healthy individualism exhibited by the current state of Ohio sculpture is a much more exciting paradigm for a decentralized American art scene of the future in which personal styles can be developed free of a dominant art-center esthetic.