





NEW WORK: DESIRES & OBSESSIONS  
THE SCULPTURE CENTER  
APRIL 21–MAY 23, 1987

# ANN SPERRY

A TWELVE-YEAR SURVEY  
NEWHOUSE GALLERY, SNUG HARBOR  
APRIL 25–MAY 24, 1987

WITH ESSAYS BY APRIL KINGSLEY AND JOHN PERREAULT



## ANN SPERRY, SCULPTOR-ALCHEMIST

APRIL KINGSLEY

*"In the heart of the fire, death is no longer death."*

George Sand

Ann Sperry *loves* her material—steel.<sup>1</sup> It is not a symbol of destruction to her, the way it was to David Smith, but a generative substance. The "found" steel elements she incorporated in her sculptures are all remaindered from agricultural life—disc harrows, plows, winnowers, balers, threshers—and the sculptures she produces with them are vegetal and organic. She marveled at the *sensuousness* of the medium from the moment of her first weld, and at the feeling of power it gave the wielder of the torch.<sup>2</sup> From solid to liquid and back to solid again like the alchemical process, she recalled, from black to red, then pink and finally to white heat, until the color sequence reverses itself and the fusion is complete. When it's hot you can bend steel like spaghetti, draw lines with it in space, but then those

lines remain where you've put them, fixed forever. In many myths, many cultures, the person who uses fire to make art is a magician. Heat is life, and as Gaston Bachelard has said, it is the core of animism:

What I recognize to be living—living in the immediate sense—is what I recognize as being hot. Heat is the proof *par excellence* of substantial richness and permanence: it alone gives an immediate meaning to vital intensity, to intensity of being. In comparison with the intensity of fire, how slack, inert, static and aimless seem the other intensities that we perceive. They are not embodiments of growth. They do not fulfill their promise. They do not become active in a flame and light which symbolize transcendence.<sup>3</sup>

Ann Sperry's recent welded steel sculpture series, *Desires & Obsessions I–VI*, 1987, is a narrative sequence which specifically concerns the concept of transcendence. It is the story of the triumph of desire over obsession told through abstract forms. But, like all important art ideas, it is a tale told on many levels, with multiple *sub rosa* and subconscious meanings. One interpretation might focus on the concept of ecstasy, of sexual passion and

the compulsive attraction of opposites producing a union of male and female—the spark of life. With this thematic approach, the male can be seen as the geometricized, faceted cone, the female as the serpentine coiling tubes and spiral. But these snake-like units may also represent the Devil in the Garden of Eden who tempted Eve into the first ecstasy, that primary union of opposites which simultaneously symbolized Man's Fall From Grace and humanity's acquisition of knowledge. If this were the case, then the slow, step-by-step movement of the cone shape to the upright position might simultaneously symbolize humanity's achievement of liberation from animal posture and passion and, again, the acquisition of knowledge. Over the years love, gardens and serpents have been consistent occupants of Sperry's image world.

As the artist sees the series, the gradual righting of the cone is central to the narrative, and the interaction of the forms is a constantly changing dialectic. In *Desires & Obsessions I* the two kinds of form are practically one. The curvilinear shape is only

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Opposite:  
HAMOA, 1982

Below:

DESIRES & OBSESSIONS I, 1987

Opposite, left:

DESIRES & OBSESSIONS II, 1987

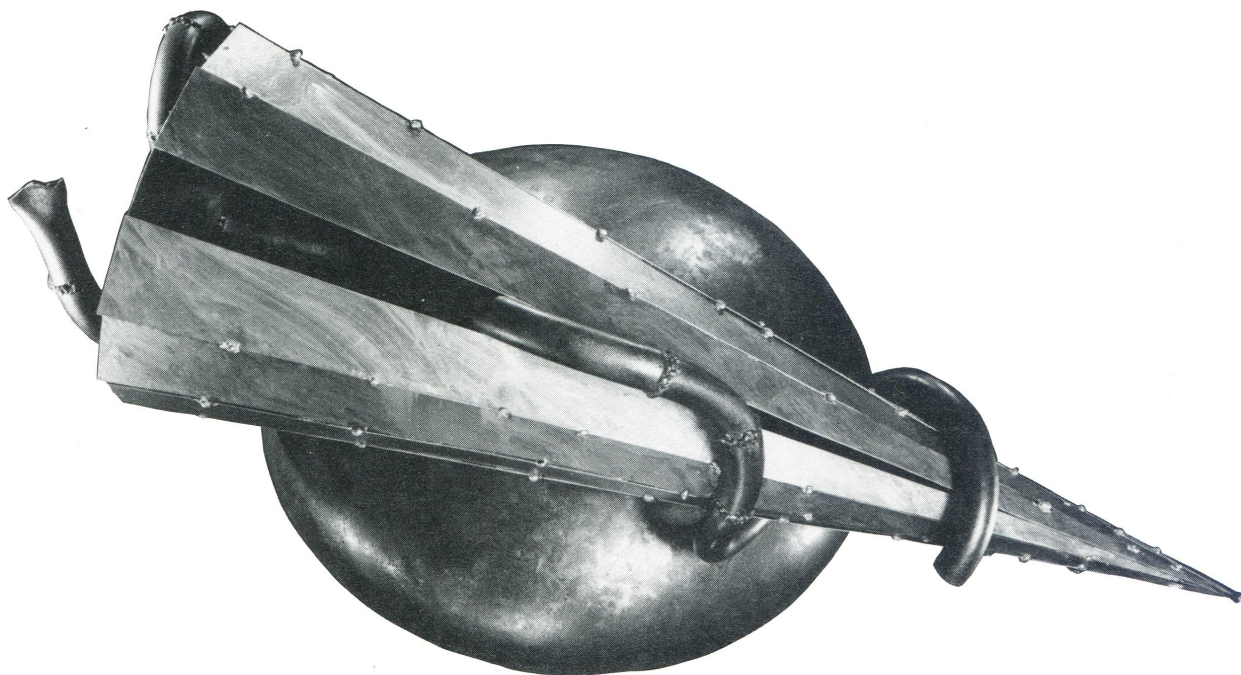
Opposite, right:

DESIRES & OBSESSIONS IV, 1987

beginning to break out of the confining cone; the cone is only slightly raised up from a prone position. (Is the coiling form Eve emerging from Adam's side? Is it the serpent initiating the temptation?) The interacting forms mean different things to each other in *Desires & Obsessions II*, Sperry says. Here the tube-serpent is almost all out of the cone, and it has taken on a new shape at the top where it is flattened into a spiral. The cone resembles a vessel, possibly an alembic in which the alchemist creates gold. (Is it heated by the coils of copper tubing encircling it?) As the vessel comes closer to being upright it takes on a suggestive resemblance to Marcel Duchamp's central "figure" or "bride" in his 1912 pencil study for the *Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors*. Alchemical references abound in Duchamp's work, but they are focused

in *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915–23, (The Large Glass), for which this drawing was one of the preparatory works. Desire, obsession, the union of male and female, and the attainment of enlightenment are but a few of the themes Duchamp subsumes within alchemical iconography in this work.

Struggle is yet another theme of Sperry's series—the struggle to free oneself from obsession, to liberate desire, to stand alone, or at least equal, and proud. *Desires & Obsessions III* is free of the wall but still struggling to be upright. The cone and spiral desperately need each other for support—the spiral clings to the cone as if for its life, while the cone is literally held off the floor by the spiral. The physical struggle of the artist with her material, her use of fire to dominate it and bend it to





her will, is a corollary theme here. Hidden within this meaning subset is the artist's developmental struggle to transcend the personal, procreative, then vegetative analogies by achieving greater universality and thematic multiplicity. But finally, nested within the last theme, like one of those wooden dolls-within-dolls, is the idea of the artist's literal struggle to move up in scale from modestly sized, easily handled pieces to major, even environmental work, a development which proceeded from a literal dependence upon a supporting pedestal or table top to the wall itself and finally to the floor and complete self-support.

The symbiotic relationship of *Desires & Obsessions III* is expressed as a soft embrace. The edges of the spiral that come in contact with the cone are uneven, and the curve of the spiral is gentler than that of the tubes which seem, in comparison, wiry and as tough as tentacles. Tubes embrace the upright, but wall-supported cone of *Desires & Obsessions IV* with frightening yet sinuous tenacity. The cone is struggling to free itself from the tentacles, Sperry states, yet the wavy, fanlike section cresting its open top appears like a sign of excitement.<sup>4</sup> Of all six units in the series, number IV seems the most erotically charged. In fact, it comes the closest in feeling to a Rodin watercolor of Eve which was one of the inspirations for the series. (She keeps a photograph of the Rodin drawing on her studio wall.)<sup>5</sup>

In the Rodin, a highly eroticized female, her head thrown back in ecstasy, swoons in the embrace of a serpent coiling down her back. She doesn't faint; instead she is able to move away from us fluidly, firmly.<sup>6</sup>

*Desires & Obsessions V* is unlike any of the other sculptures in the series. Split as if by parthenogenesis into two cones connected at top by tubular units, it leans against the wall. In its dualism, it prepares the way for number VI, a huge triumphal arch in which the cone opens up and wraps around itself, as if in a hug, while the spiral shoots wildly out of the top before falling in smooth curves to the ground. The two parts of the piece support each other but without seeming to depend upon one another. Desire—the cone—is triumphant over obsession. Standing tall, it forms an arch on equal terms with the spiral. It opens itself up to the world fearlessly, while at the same time it protects itself within its own embrace. Desire—the basis of all art—has become pure feeling. Its union with matter, symbolized by the serpent-like forms, has produced true spiritual freedom—wholeness and individuation.

All of Ann Sperry's imagery is circular, like the alchemical *ouroboros*, a winged serpent who devours its own tail in a symbolic gesture of regeneration. (In fact some of her images even resemble the *ouroboros*, particularly *Desires & Obsessions IV* and the wall pieces which curve out from a wing-like element.) Spiritual enlightenment is commonly symbolized by circular mandalas or by caduceus, a vertical, elongated,

winged cone, point down, symmetrically encircled by two snakes in crossing spirals. Spirals and circles—the former derives from the pull of gravity on the latter as in a falling stream of water—are basic to all noncrystalline natural forms. The common things of the world are made of water and are acted upon by gravity; thus all living things—from the chambers of the heart to a bacterium—and all inanimate things like riverbanks, clouds and stones, tend to assume curvilinear shapes. Nature's process is circular, and so, of course, is Sperry's. Sperry submits metal to transmuting fire, using the heat to fuse its opposite natures—malleability and structural rigidity—and officiates at its rebirth as art.

1. Italics mine. All paraphrases of the artists words are from a conversation with the author on February 18, 1987, at her studio.

2. Her welding teacher was Theodore Roszak. Because she disliked his characteristically lumpy welds and gloppy, brazed surfaces, she had hidden the welds and kept her steel surfaces smooth until very recently.

3. Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, translated by Alan C. M. Ross, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) p. 111.

4. The Bride's fluttering "draft pistons" in Duchamp's *Large Glass* similarly express sexual excitement.

5. Another source which opens up whole new iconographical territory to explore is Gafurius' woodcut diagram of music of the spheres, *Practica Musica*, which she also has tacked to her studio wall.

6. Unlike Rodin's bronze *Eve*, who cowers in fear hiding her head in the angular spiral of her arms, this Eve is seduced but not ashamed.

Opposite:

DESIRE & OBSESSIONS VI, 1987