

# Introduction

In 1983, Douglas Bentham visited the John East Ironworks, one of the oldest foundries in Saskatoon, dating from the turn of the century and then coming to the end of its years of operation. There, he found piles of discarded foundry equipment: long-handled 'shovels' for skimming the dross, ladles for the molten metal, pouring spouts, sprues, vents and all the pieces broken from a product after casting. The circumstances of Bentham's discovery of this treasure trove are reminiscent of the history of the American sculptor David Smith, two decades earlier, in Voltri, near Genoa. There, in abandoned factories of the Italian national steel company, Smith seized upon scrap iron, obsolete tools used in hand-forging processes, and unfinished steel products, cooled and arrested mid-way through their forging. This material provided an array of new formal ingredients which Smith immediately took up in his sculpture.<sup>1</sup>

The analogue of Smith is not without significance to the origins of Bentham's works in the present exhibition. Bentham has described the shock of recognition he felt sifting through the piles of foundry debris at the John East Ironworks and seeing the sculptural potential of the abandoned tools.<sup>2</sup> In these unlikely objects, he sensed a new direction for his art. With time, the steel tools used to manipulate the molten iron had undergone fantastic change. As the cups of the ladles, the heads of the shovels and portions of the handles were repeatedly dipped into the molten metal, they were coated with iron which then cooled and steadily accumulated in successive layers about the underlying form. The original profile of the steel tool was sometimes barely discernible beneath deposits of iron. Bulbous encrustations terminated the lengths of the handles. Intricate volcanic surfaces were created. Eventually, the ends of the tools became misshapen and they or the entire implement were thrown away.

Bentham recognized in these objects the formal means for linear sculptural composition, *drawing in space*. These were of a more-or-less consistent thickness and had richly textured masses of various shapes. At the same time, he responded to their expressive character, to the suggestions of gesture in their linear configurations, and to the delicacy and fragility of their surfaces. They were, as well, evocative of time and the processes behind their eventual form.

The highly original use of the industrial found-object in Smith's art is an important precedent for the works Bentham began to make.<sup>3</sup> Smith had undertaken delineation in space with found objects; tools constitute line in a singular way, through a process which Rosalind Krauss has characterized in his art as "drawing with the found object."<sup>4</sup> As Karen Wilkin has observed, it was primarily "the formal properties of the object rather than its original function" that mattered to Smith.<sup>5</sup> In his most successful works, she points out, "found objects are exploited for their peculiarities of shape and form, as drawing and mass, and are completely subsumed by the whole."<sup>6</sup> Objects shed their functional associations and were assimilated to the sculptural image.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, they are undisguised and readily traceable within the final composition.<sup>8</sup>

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tions. These were followed at once by the still more open drawing of *Mudra I*, the first work in the present series. Bentham had discovered in the debris of the foundry a means of restoring the use of line to his sculpture. But now, line itself had volume, a constant thickness. Moreover, he was presented with a line having tactility. Thus he was able to create a linear sculpture from which expressive texture was not necessarily expunged.

Bentham consciously sought a line which had a constant weight. Some time after he had begun the present works, he recognized this ideal in an illustration of a Bambara (Mali) antelope headress. These objects were carved in wood and characteristically furnish a stylized, linear representation of the animal.<sup>15</sup> The image was composed along a two-dimensional plane, offering from the sides — the most complete view — the appearance of a fretwork silhouette. The effect was analogous to a kind of drawing in which line does not enclose the shape of the subject but constitutes that shape, filled-in. This notion of drawing has become, for Bentham, a metaphor for the sculptures in the present series. The thickness of line varied within limits in the Bambara work, but, at every point, line seemed to carry a constant visual weight.

Bentham's works cannot be accounted for solely in the formal terms in which the artist has, in retrospect, charted his progress towards them. Consideration must be given as well to Bentham's attention to the imagistic and to the expressive and affective realms of sculpture. He was intrigued by the way in which an image could be brought forth through an abstract drawing. If the Bambara headress impressed him by its formal resources, he was equally taken with its overall impact. The illustration suggested something which read linearly and had a strong presence as an object. For all its abstract refinement, the immediate effect of the object was not one of carefully contrived formal balance. Bentham found comparable formal and expressive qualities in some early European modernist sculpture. The attributes he discovered were, essentially, consistent with his existing sculptural concerns and confirmed directions he was undertaking. Matisse's bronze figure of 1909, *The Serpentine*, remains for Bentham an exemplar of what sculpture can be. The torso and limbs of the female figure, and the post against which she leans on one elbow, are all fashioned with a sameness, creating a continuous flow. Bentham admired the way the piece operated formally and was struck by its engaging 'awkwardness' and the immediacy with which it presents itself. In addition to Matisse, the linearity of Alberto Giacometti's early work inevitably interested him. The pitted surfaces of Giacometti's later sculpture, accomplished to a great extent through his surface handling, must also have appealed. In his own work, Bentham was concerned with expressive surfaces that preserved a sense of their formation. The figurative and animate qualities of even Picasso's most abstract constructions cannot be overlooked. The works which Picasso made with Gonzalez at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the '30s suggest

piece titled *Bambara*, open ends of the hollow pipes, into which it is possible to see, are of decisive importance. In the same way, the ends of the lines in all of these works have been carefully considered. The sculptures have a variety of scrunched, pinched and played ends. In other places, the open end is sealed off and the line is terminated with a club-like end or made to support some other massive form. In some pieces, holes that had been bored through the pipe remain unaltered. These are small cues which nonetheless affect the viewer's understanding of the object, stimulating an awareness of the interior space of the metal pipe, and hence of the volumetric property of Bentham's line.

The texture of the line similarly preoccupies Bentham. The lengths of the handles are interrupted in places by sections of encrusted iron which he insists to gain texture. Bentham proceeds with each piece judiciously, trying a succession of parts — different shovel heads or club-like ends to a line — to attain a precise visual effect.

Extension is, for the artist, an indispensable part of these works. He has observed that it was a major concern of Smith's *Agrícolas*. Bentham has resisted suggestions that he should crop these pieces to make rigorously edited formal arrangements. While he feels this would align them with formalist tenets by which all the activity of the sculpture is confined within its outline, it nevertheless would curtail extension and, thereby, gesture. Furthermore, cropping would diminish the distinctively animate character of the sculpture. Throughout all this formal endeavour, Bentham is anxious to preserve lyrical, awkward and primitive qualities in the sculpture. These qualities are all the more effective for being advanced in works created by a sculptor so highly conscious of the purely formal resources of his art.

Scale is always an important consideration in Bentham's art. The viewer's response to the works in the present series is profoundly affected by their scale. In a sense, each work finds its own proper scale, based on the length of a handle. With the given length of any handle, it is not possible to span the distances open to sculpture using I-beams. For Bentham, it is important that the materials of these sculptures are tools which were held in the hand and used by hand. This imparts a scale, and a character, to the works which relate them to human proportions.<sup>21</sup> Bentham understands all of his sculpture, irrespective of size, as having this relation. And, tellingly, his works always derive from ways of working by hand. A hand-held quality, and the sense of something which has been assembled by hand, were part of the attraction of the *I-Pieces*. The works here extend horizontally; they fall below eye-level and the viewer looks down upon them. This, the artist feels, makes them eminently approachable. Such size, relative to the viewer, enhances their nature as animate beings. It is, as well, of consequence formally. From an elevated vantage point, the interior relationships of the parts of each sculpture become important.

Bentham converts another of the given properties of his materials into an asset of his sculpture in a remarkable way. The encrustations on the tools, built up with deposits of iron by forces of heating and cooling, have an extraordinarily expressive character which is purely adventitious. The fragile surfaces have an almost hand-modelled look. Although it has been discovered in a found material, this intimation of personal handling enlarges Bentham's earlier surface concerns. Such sensitivity to the unaltered state of materials is in keeping with what the art historian and critic Robert Goldwater characterized as a "primitivism of materials."<sup>22</sup> This approach, which earlier in this century underlies the work of artists such as Constantin Brancusi and Henry Moore is, as Goldwater notes, part of a "romanticism of materials" that emerges in the found sculpture of the Surrealists and in junk sculpture in the 1950s.<sup>23</sup>

It is partially through the character of materials that these sculptures declare their content. As indicated above, in Smith's art, the sculptural setting of tools and machine parts detaches them from a functional past. Found materials in Bentham's art similarly constitute the formal resources of line, volume, mass and texture for an abstract sculptural image. The functional form of the tools is, in fact, often literally obscured beneath the layers of iron. The profiles of the shovel heads remain, and elsewhere the curved wall or hollow interior of a cup is discernible. Even as these become part of a formal drawing, however, the burden of their past is felt in an almost literal way in the weight of the encrustations. Bentham has indicated that such content as he finds there may be in these works emerges through the materials. He has spoken of a timelessness which attaches to them. There is, he feels, a historical quality about them, a sense in which they seem to be artefacts, objects having some past purpose which have now been excavated. He has made reference to archaeology and excavations, and to the physical layering which occurs through time. He has commented on layering as a method of contemporary art, used by artists such as Julian Schnabel, whose paintings reveal depths of accumulated plates and paint. As well, Bentham has remarked upon the prevalence of archaeological interests among artists in recent years.<sup>24</sup> The 'ruined' and 'partially excavated' sites built by Charles Simonds seem particularly relevant in this context. The sense of an indefinite past is persuasive. The crumbling look of their surfaces, and the fragmentary nature of many of their parts, make these sculptures strangely poignant.

In places, Bentham has made a more literal imagistic use of the forms of the tools. *These Hands* and *Jupiter* each stand, at one point, on a shovel head which is cut off and seemingly dug into the ground. The truncated shovel head in *Jupiter* gives the piece a tilt which animates the entire composition.<sup>25</sup>

Bentham has said that these works are opposed to the idea of sculpture as syntax. This opposition is revealed on several levels. The idea of syntax as virtually the essential principle of modernist

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sculpture was advanced by Michael Fried in his analysis of the work of Anthony Caro. In his introduction to the catalogue for Caro's exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1963, Fried stated: "Everything in Caro's art that is worth looking at — except its color — is in its syntax."<sup>26</sup> This he subsequently referred to as "the internal relations (or 'syntax') of the sculptures."<sup>27</sup> Clement Greenberg has phrased it as "the relations of its discrete parts."<sup>28</sup> The idea stems from Greenberg. Defining the tendency of the arts from the late nineteenth century onwards, he saw within each art the progressive elimination of all those attributes which are not properly its own.<sup>29</sup> Thus, painting abandoned the illusion of the third dimension and confined itself to flatness and shape of the canvas. In sculpture, the modernist reduction devalued the tactile, and thereby weight and mass, in favour of a condition of pure visibility.<sup>30</sup> Sculpture, like painting, is henceforward to be for the eye alone. In approaching this visual and pictorial state, actual properties of material, its weight and tactility, are repudiated.

Fried saw Caro's works proceeding on these assumptions. Caro, he suggested, used the materials and methods of the "modernist reduction" (industrial steel) to construct "expressive gestures."<sup>31</sup> The viewer is not made aware of the artist having been "closely or passionately involved with his materials." Instead, "one's attention is made to bear only upon the gesture itself." He added: "It is as if in his first abstract sculptures Caro deliberately rejected...the kind of involvement with materials one finds in his early work, and chose instead to work *through*, not *in*, his means, as through a resistant medium."<sup>32</sup> There is a sense in which gesture in Caro's sculpture is disembodied, dissociated from the particularity of its material constitution, to become pure gesture. It is precisely here that a distinction is to be made between these works of Bentham and Caro's art. Materials, in the works seen here, dramatize gesture, make it specific. For all their pictorial qualities, these sculptures are crucially affected by their materials. Bentham's involvement with these found materials, on every level, formal and expressive, ensures that they operate as more than merely a condition of the sculpture's visibility. This is pre-eminently true of the larger pieces in the exhibition. In these, the modernist tradition of sculpture is not rejected. These works do, indeed, depend on the achievements of that tradition. Without its history, and without Bentham's own work in the modernist idiom, they would be unthinkable. They do, nevertheless, dissent implicitly from several of its assumptions.

The smaller, later pieces shown here, conform more readily to a syntactical approach to the making of sculpture. Whereas the earlier works are more explicit about their imagistic effects, these pieces seem to be devoted more specifically to the manipulation of line. Bentham recognizes a distinction. In the later works, the thinner line of the found materials is allowed to determine the composition in an important way. The pieces are construed on the basis of the relations of parts, undertaking the balance of thicker and thinner elements. The materials are smoother, more abstract, and

therefore less intrinsically expressive. *Tangerine*, *Java* and *Mandarin*, Bentham feels, deal more with formal drawing and are less conscious of image. They lack the assertive stance of the larger pieces. Instead of standing on the points which are the ends of lines, these pieces rest in places on angles. Bentham sees them as tending to recline almost as though they are resting on their elbows.

Seen together, the works in this exhibition — those which tend to be more animated and imagistic, and the more obviously syntactical sculptures — reveal a thoughtful response to the historical situation in which the artist finds himself, making sculpture in the 1980s. The associations with earlier sculptural traditions which are suggested by these works detract nothing from their originality and indeed mark the awareness with which Bentham undertakes his art. The contemporaneity of these sculptures is clear.

The differences between these works and the earlier traditions which they seem to invoke are more profound than the apparent affinities. The vital character and expressive surfaces of the larger pieces recall aspects of American Abstract Expressionist sculpture of the 1950s and post-war British sculpture. But the character of Bentham's works is far removed from the aggressive menace of much Abstract Expressionist sculpture. Their tactility has effects altogether different from the spiky, repellant surfaces typical of the 1950s. The signalling figure of *Victory* seems closer to Joan Miro's sculpture of that decade. The early works of Alexander Calder (his wire animals and the *Apple Monster* of 1938) also come to mind. All of this suggests a wide-ranging and fluid sense of sculptural possibilities as they have occurred in past art.

Bentham is conscious of the immediate background to his own time. The sculpture of the 1960s and '70s was antithetical to the romantic sculpture of the 1950s. Modernist concerns were manifested with unreflected surfaces and anonymous fabrication. Later in the 1970s, artists anxious to recover a sense of personal handling and expression looked back to the 1950s and beyond to the earlier history of modernism. Many artists (conspicuously the Neo-Expressionists) have located sources for their art in a time before the tenets of formalism imposed themselves with the pervasive force they achieved in the 1960s.

Caro's art became enormously influential in the 1960s and '70s. Bentham has remarked that Caro's masterful style of drawing is highly personal. Inimitable, it nevertheless virtually established a trend to which much formalist sculpture, using industrial materials, submitted.

The tendencies of these two decades, Bentham believes, effectively obscured the art of Moore and Smith. For Bentham, it has become possible to find in Smith's art not just formal sources but an expressive and imagistic precedent. Krauss has observed that throughout the 1950s and '60s, Smith's principal works were considered non-representational.<sup>35</sup> More recent criticism (including

Jupiter, 1983

Krauss' own contribution) has seen a meaningful allusiveness in Smith's sculpture. The significance of his art lies, to a great extent, in the fact that his major pieces are, as Wilkin noted, "at once radically abstract and uncannily anthropomorphic."<sup>34</sup> This understanding of Smith's art was more accessible towards the end of the 1970s than it had been in the previous decades.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout his art, Bentham has tested ideas about sculpture, both his own and those received ideas which are contemporaneous. The series of works in this exhibition reappraises the history of sculpture in the first half of this century as it has come to be understood. As well, it involves a reassessment of the tenets of formalism. Working within the sculptural possibilities of his own time, and drawing on the experience of his past work, Bentham has produced a singular and intriguing series. The works represent perceptions of "the condensing of sculpture." More immediately, they are, in themselves, engaging and moving works of art.

Victoria Baster

## Notes

- In a month spent in Voltri in 1963, Smith produced the twenty-seven works which constitute the *Voltri* series. Material from the factories in Italy was shipped back to Smith's workshop in Bolton Landing, New York, where the artist subsequently produced the related series variously designated as the *Voltri-Bolton*, *Volton*, and *V.B.* series.
- All references to statements by the artist are from conversations with the author which took place in January and February, 1985.
- Tools and machine parts had appeared extensively in Smith's art prior to the works inspired at Voltri. Industrial found objects provided the formal, and virtually thematic, link within major series of works, notably the *Agrícolas* (1952-59) which incorporated agricultural tools and parts of dismantled farm machinery, and the *Tanktoens* (1952-60), in which parts of the ends of boiler tanks figured.
- R.E. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith*, MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass. (1971), p. 153.
- K. Wilkin, *David Smith*, Abbeville Press: New York (1984), p. 90.
- Ibid.
- Smith himself has described the process. Referring to the *Agrícolas*, he has written: "Forms in function are often not appreciated in their context except for their mechanical performance. With time and the passing of these functions and a separation of their parts, a metaphoric change can take place permitting a new unity, one that is strictly visual." See *David Smith by David Smith*, ed. C. Gray, Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, Chicago, San Francisco (1968), p. 74.
- On occasion, in works such as *Voltri XIX* (1962) and *Volton XX* (1963), Smith makes more literal use of found objects in a sculptural setting in which their prior functional existence is part of the content.
- J. Gonzalez, "Picasso sculpteur et les cathédrales," trans. in J. Withers, *Julio Gonzalez: Sculpture in Iron*, New York University Press: New York (1978), p. 134.
- M. Fried, reprinted "Anthony Caro," *Art International*, Vol. 7 No. 7 (Sept. 1963), p. 70.
- M. Fried, "Caro's Abstractionism" (1970) reprinted in *Anthony Caro*, R. Whelan, Penguin Books: Harmondsworth (1974), p. 107.
- C. Greenberg, "Anthony Caro" (1965), reprinted *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- See C. Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, Beacon Press: Boston (1961) 1965.
- C. Greenberg, "The New Sculpture" (1948) 1958, *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- M. Fried, "Anthony Caro," p. 70.
- Ibid.
- R. E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, p. 165.
- K. Wilkin, *David Smith*, p. 8.
- In setting these works of Bentham apart from the rest of his oeuvre, the anthropomorphic aspects of his other, seemingly more abstract and formalist work should not be overlooked. The artist associates all of his sculpture with the proportions of the human figure. Works such as *Dark Times*, *Sky Walker* (both 1978) and *Warrior* (1979), are exceptionally clear in their figurative allusiveness.

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10. E. F. Fry, *David Smith*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation: New York (1969), p. 11.

11. The most dramatic example of this is Bentham's *Prairie Landscape* which relates directly to Smith's *Hudson River Landscape* and to other works such as *Australia* in which Smith has organized the elements of his image on a two-dimensional plane. Another work of Bentham's is notable in this context. *Orange Linear* (1969) consists entirely of a continuous length of painted steel tubing which undertakes a meandering course, turning back on itself to outline irregular interconnecting areas.

12. See C. Phillips, *Douglas Bentham: Getting to Now*, Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery: University of Regina (1980). Distinguishing a work of 1970, *Autumn Song*, from Bentham's earlier work, Phillips remarks on "a new concern for the edge of a shape rather than line existing as an entity unto itself. *Autumn Song* retains some of those purely linear qualities...but primarily line is used for solid definition." (p. 7).

13. *Pauline Duster* and *Zephyr* (both of 1977) are remarkable for their calligraphic configurations. Phillips has described *Zephyr* as a "scribbled gesture." See Phillips, p. 28.

14. *Douglas Bentham: Getting to Now*, Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, August 1 - October 31, 1980.

15. A selection of these headresses is illustrated in R. J. Goldwater, *Bambara Sculpture from the Western Sudan*, Museum of Primitive Art: New York (1960). W. Rubin has associated works such as these with the progress of Picasso's early sculptural interests. See "Picasso," in "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art, ed. W. Rubin, Museum of Modern Art: New York (1984), p. 272.

16. The scale of these works was then unprecedented in Bentham's art. They range in height around twenty inches.

17. K. Wilkin, *Douglas Bentham: "I" Series*, Mira Godard Gallery: Toronto (1980).

18. Ibid.

19. C. Youngs has argued that, for Bentham, a conscious attempt at a denial of figurative references was an inhibiting factor in the creative activity of his art. He sees the *I-Pieces* occupying a decisive position in the development of Bentham's art: "While Bentham may have been trying to elude figurative associations, some of the qualities inherent in the totemic references were unavoidable. It was inevitable that he would become more conscious, more relaxed, about the work of some of his predecessors." The author adds: "The significance of the *I-Pieces* is that they provided the impetus for Bentham's more relaxed approach to his work, a lessening of concern with the perimeters of abstraction which excluded figurative reference." See C. Youngs, *Douglas Bentham: Articulations*, Mendel Art Gallery: Saskatoon (1984), p. 8.

20. R. E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass. (1977) 1981, pp. 152-53.

21. According to the artist, even the sculptures which seem big derive their scale from the figure; they recline or extend in a "volumetric embrace."

22. R. Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and Random House, Inc.: New York (1938) 1966, pp. 234-35.

23. Ibid.

24. See L. R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, Pantheon Books: New York (1983). Interestingly, the author has taken the concept of layers, literal and metaphoric, as the central image of this book.

25. This is a tactic Bentham has used effectively elsewhere in his sculpture. Notable examples are *Prairie* (1973), *Key Piece* (1976) and the subsequent works in the *Opens Series*, and, more recently, *Empire Piece* (1981-84).

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At the outset of his career as a sculptor, Bentham too was occupied with *drawing in space*. He was aware of Smith's insistence on "the primacy of a *picture plane* as the basis for sculpture."<sup>10</sup> The two-dimensionality and dependence on line for the spatial image which characterize Bentham's earliest independent works explore Smith's idiom.<sup>11</sup> Early in the 1970s, the use of line in itself as a means to establish composition was being displaced in his sculpture by interests in linear and planar elements which defined and enclosed space.<sup>12</sup> Line was reasserted in some individual works of the late 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

When Bentham visited the John East Ironworks, he was perhaps predisposed to a discovery of materials which promised new formal possibilities for his art. He felt a renewed interest in drawing in space. The artist has outlined the origins of the pieces begun there in his thinking about his previous work. A survey exhibition in Regina in 1980 had been the occasion for Bentham to reassess his entire sculptural oeuvre to that time.<sup>14</sup> He discovered then that linear drawing with steel had ceased to interest him. In order to change his vocabulary, he would have to reconsider the materials he was using: I-beams, plate steel and bars. He abandoned these and began to work in thin steel. This, according to the artist, facilitated the re-introduction of volume through the creation of interior space. As the only possibilities for drawing now lay at the edges of these pieces, it literally became marginal. Similarly, the potential for texture was greatly reduced. The material precluded the sensuality attainable through welding, and the artist was reluctant to re-introduce mass as a means of restoring texture. Furthermore, the inherent qualities of the found industrial material which had been part of his vocabulary were virtually dismissed from these works. In its anonymous aspect, the material was close to Minimalist sensibilities. Although not without exceptions, essentially drawing, texture, and a sense of personal handling remained problematic within these works of the early 1980s.

It was with this experience that Bentham came upon the foundry material. He dragged out pieces of cast iron, attracted by their tactility. Two untitled steel and cast iron pieces made at that time attest to the desire for drawing. Heavy planar shapes and curving linear elements, arcs and ratchets were assembled in newly open composi-

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affinities with Bentham's sculpture in their combination of extreme linearity and their anthropomorphism.

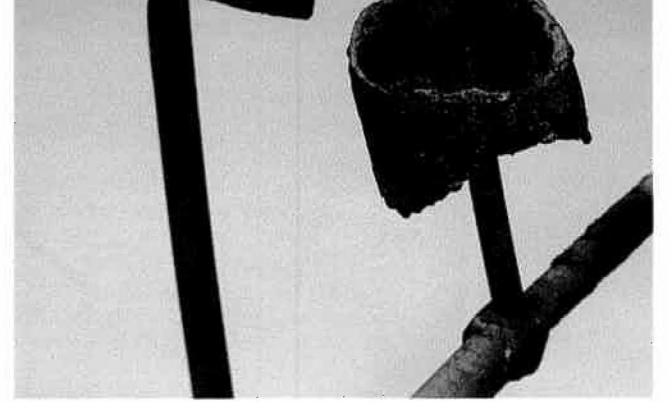
The overt anthropomorphism of the sculpture which Bentham was now making was anticipated by the *I-Series* from 1978-80. These small, upright abstract figures are remarkable for the startling animation with which they confront the viewer.<sup>16</sup> They are constructed out of steel I-beams, bars, fragmentary curved and planar shapes, and bent rods. Wilkin has pointed out the inseparable connection between the intrinsic qualities of these found materials and the mein of the finished sculptures. The works are, she notes, exceptionally "responsive to the character of the original pieces of metal."<sup>17</sup> The figures which emerge through this exchange between artist and materials each have, as she observes, a "distinct personality": "The I-Pieces are animate, in a fashion which, combined with their verticality, turns each one into a lively individual, not simply an individual arrangement of steel."<sup>18</sup> Bentham recognizes the newly figurative aspect of the *I-Pieces*. Nevertheless he was able to arrive at their animated allusiveness without diminishing his formal concerns.<sup>19</sup>

Bentham acknowledges the anthropomorphism of the works in the present series. The spirited sculptures shown here are manifestly animate. This is attributable essentially to their stance, gesture and material nature. The animated posturing of *Victory* and *Titan* is arresting. *Victory* signals the viewer with outflung 'arms'. *Warrior*, with its arched back — a bent camshaft — assumes an almost purposeful attitude. Even a work which takes up a more subdued stance, *Night Watch*, effectively conveys its quiet and resolute bearing, a sense recognized by the title. The suggestions of a furred standard and upright lances may not be amiss here. The titles of the works are oddly telling, adding a referential note to the abstract gestures made by the sculptures. *Mudra* refers to the East Indian dance of expressive hand movements. Bentham has spoken of a tough compactness and a brutish aspect to *Warrior*. Each of these pieces takes up a distinctive stance.

It is important to Bentham that each work makes a gesture, declares what it is doing. They confront the viewer, seeking to provoke a response. In particular, the confrontational character of the larger pieces in the exhibition is part of an ambition to make an object with the affective presence which Bentham felt in some primitive and early modernist works. In this, they parallel Smith's sculpture. Krauss has suggested that: "David Smith's exposure to surrealism in the 1930s and 1940s could have influenced...to a sculpture concerned with a strategy of confrontation."<sup>20</sup>

For all their animate and figurative attributes, the works in this exhibition are, as Bentham rightly insists, concerned with formal drawing, specifically with constancy of line and with extension. Bentham's minute attention to line is revealed everywhere. In the small

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*These Hands* (detail), 1983/4

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sculpture was advanced by Michael Fried in his analysis of the work of Anthony Caro. In his introduction to the catalogue for Caro's exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1963, Fried stated: "Everything in Caro's art that is worth looking at — except its color — is in its syntax."<sup>26</sup> This he subsequently referred to as "the internal relations (or 'syntax') of the sculptures."<sup>27</sup> Clement Greenberg has phrased it as "the relations of its discrete parts."<sup>28</sup> The idea stems from Greenberg. Defining the tendency of the arts from the late nineteenth century onwards, he saw within each art the progressive elimination of all those attributes which are not properly its own.<sup>29</sup> Thus, painting abandoned the illusion of the third dimension and confined itself to flatness and shape of the canvas. In sculpture, the modernist reduction devalued the tactile, and thereby weight and mass, in favour of a condition of pure visibility.<sup>30</sup> Sculpture, like painting, is henceforward to be for the eye alone. In approaching this visual and pictorial state, actual properties of material, its weight and tactility, are repudiated.

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The smaller, later pieces shown here, conform more readily to a syntactical approach to the making of sculpture. Whereas the earlier works are more explicit about their imagistic effects, these pieces seem to be devoted more specifically to the manipulation of line. Bentham recognizes a distinction. In the later works, the thinner line of the found materials is allowed to determine the composition in an important way. The pieces are construed on the basis of the relations of parts, undertaking the balance of thicker and thinner elements. The materials are smoother, more abstract, and

therefore less intrinsically expressive. *Tangerine*, *Java* and *Mandarin*, Bentham feels, deal more with formal drawing and are less conscious of image. They lack the assertive stance of the larger pieces. Instead of standing on the points which are the ends of lines, these pieces rest in places on angles. Bentham sees them as tending to recline almost as though they are resting on their elbows.

Seen together, the works in this exhibition — those which tend to be more animated and imagistic, and the more obviously syntactical sculptures — reveal a thoughtful response to the historical situation in which the artist finds himself, making sculpture in the 1980s. The associations with earlier sculptural traditions which are suggested by these works detract nothing from their originality and indeed mark the awareness with which Bentham undertakes his art. The contemporaneity of these sculptures is clear.

The differences between these works and the earlier traditions which they seem to invoke are more profound than the apparent affinities. The vital character and expressive surfaces of the larger pieces recall aspects of American Abstract Expressionist sculpture of the 1950s and post-war British sculpture. But the character of Bentham's works is far removed from the aggressive menace of much Abstract Expressionist sculpture. Their tactility has effects altogether different from the spiky, repellant surfaces typical of the 1950s. The signalling figure of *Victory* seems closer to Joan Miro's sculpture of that decade. The early works of Alexander Calder (his wire animals and the *Apple Monster* of 1938) also come to mind. All of this suggests a wide-ranging and fluid sense of sculptural possibilities as they have occurred in past art.

Bentham is conscious of the immediate background to his own time. The sculpture of the 1960s and '70s was antithetical to the romantic sculpture of the 1950s. Modernist concerns were manifested with unreflected surfaces and anonymous fabrication. Later in the 1970s, artists anxious to recover a sense of personal handling and expression looked back to the 1950s and beyond to the earlier history of modernism. Many artists (conspicuously the Neo-Expressionists) have located sources for their art in a time before the tenets of formalism imposed themselves with the pervasive force they achieved in the 1960s.

Caro's art became enormously influential in the 1960s and '70s. Bentham has remarked that Caro's masterful style of drawing is highly personal. Inimitable, it nevertheless virtually established a trend to which much formalist sculpture, using industrial materials, submitted.

The tendencies of these two decades, Bentham believes, effectively obscured the art of Moore and Smith. For Bentham, it has become possible to find in Smith's art not just formal sources but an expressive and imagistic precedent. Krauss has observed that throughout the 1950s and '60s, Smith's principal works were considered non-representational.<sup>35</sup> More recent criticism (including

10. E. F. Fry, *David Smith*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation: New York (1969), p. 11.

11. The most dramatic example of this is Bentham's *Prairie Landscape* which relates directly to Smith's *Hudson River Landscape* and to other works such as *Australia* in which Smith has organized the elements of his image on a two-dimensional plane. Another work of Bentham's is notable in this context. *Orange Linear* (1969) consists entirely of a continuous length of painted steel tubing which undertakes a meandering course, turning back on itself to outline irregular interconnecting areas.

12. See C. Phillips, *Douglas Bentham: Getting to Now*, Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery: University of Regina (1980). Distinguishing a work of 1970, *Autumn Song*, from Bentham's earlier work, Phillips remarks on "a new concern for the edge of a shape rather than line existing as an entity unto itself. *Autumn Song* retains some of those purely linear qualities...but primarily line is used for solid definition." (p. 7).

13. *Pauline Duster* and *Zephyr* (both of 1977) are remarkable for their calligraphic configurations. Phillips has described *Zephyr* as a "scribbled gesture." See Phillips, p. 28.

14. *Douglas Bentham: Getting to Now*, Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, August 1 - October 31, 1980.

15. A selection of these headresses is illustrated in R. J. Goldwater, *Bambara Sculpture from the Western Sudan*, Museum of Primitive Art: New York (1960). W. Rubin has associated works such as these with the progress of Picasso's early sculptural interests. See "Picasso," in "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art, ed. W. Rubin, Museum of Modern Art: New York (1984), p.