Introduction

ACCOMPLISHMENT

It sounds commonplace to observe that Douglas Bentham has been making abstract sculpture for more than two decades. So the observation would be could it be said of other sculptors in this country. But there are few sculptors in Canada, let alone the province of Saskatchewan, and the reality is otherwise. Why is it? Why are so few art school graduates drawn to sculpture in the first place? And of those who are, why do so few continue to make sculpture after graduation? And of those who continue, why do so many concentrate their production on commissioned work? And finally, why do we see so few exhibitions such as this - an exhibition of ambitious new work by a mature, productive sculptor?

There are many answers to these questions and all of them boil down to the simple fact that sculpture is a difficult and demanding art, especially for the abstract sculptor. It calls for industrial equipment and skills, for generous working space, for the investment of time and money. Despite the fact that the tradition of figuration is all but dead today, the demand for abstract sculpture is limited. As a result, many abstract sculptors work sporadically at best. How can one improve if one doesn't produce? How can one store unsold work? Storage is a terrible and exasperating problem. The ambitious sculptor must continually deal with the potential customer who offers to store work in public free of charge. All too often economic reality forces him to comply.

Added to this bleak picture is the fact that Canada has little in the way of a sculptural tradition. Apart from the makers of monuments (most of them long dead), few artists in the past made a career as working sculptors. And before 1970 few if any of these worked

in the West. Few Canadian sculptors of the '70's worked at a high level. And of those hardly any are working today. Bentham is a rare exception. He is one of the country's most prolific sculptors and one of its finest, one of Canada's first sculptors in every sense.

His accomplishment is the more remarkable for having taken place in Saskatoon, far from the major centers of contemporary art - far, that is, from both London and New York. Working in isolation is a complex matter — small advantages must be maximized, major disadvantages must be overcome. Bentham has accomplished the latter by remaining closely involved with the painters in Saskatoon. Contact with a sympathetic community of painters is more useful to a serious sculptor than it may superficially appear. The sympathetic painter has sophisticated "eyes" combined with detachment. He can appreciate sculpture apart from the demands and interests dictated by his own medium. (I should add that painters benefit equally from the disinterested eyes of sculptors.)

Beyond this, Saskatoon is remarkable for the non-provincial attitude that prevails. Considering its remote situation both nationally and internationally, this is a small miracle. The primary stimulus has been the Emma Lake Artists' Workshop. For the past quarter of a century, this unique and most uninstitutional institution has put Canadian artists in touch with the international art world. Situated as it is about 150 kilometers north of Saskatoon, the workshop has been used extensively by artists from the city and has even encouraged artists to take up summer residence there. For Bentham, Emma Lake led to contact with two of the leading sculptors of our time, Michael Steiner in 1969 and Anthony Caro in 1977. The Steiner workshop came when Bentham was just starting out. It sharpened his eyes and heightened his ambition. Eight years later, Bentham assisted Caro at Emma Lake and this helped to focus his own work. Caro is an enormously inventive and productive artist, at home in any style and material. The example of his productivity and invention reinforced Bentham's own working methods.

Emma Lake, as I have suggested, provided entry into an international arena of painting and sculpture. But that was not in itself sufficient to offset the dangers of provincial isolation. The provincial artist must work apart — not only from vital living artists but also from the masterpieces of present and past. As these works are vital touchstones and sources of inspiration and comparison, the loss is hard to make up.

The problem varies from one part of the world to another. In some places the past offers an embarrassment of riches, the present very little indeed. Twenty years ago the Canadian Prairies were cut off from both the present and the past: there was hardly any sculpture to be seen. Today a smattering can be found in Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver, but there remains little to speak of Saskatoon. This problem can be mitigated only by travel, and Bentham has taken upon himself to travel when and where he can. Of course no amount of travel can make up for direct comparison, for seeing one's own work in a context which includes high achievements from both present and past. Those comparisons are hard to come by in the Canadian West, but the situation is little better in London or New York. In this respect provincial isolation isn't as bad as initially it might seem.

The foregoing is by way introduction to the exhibition at hand, an exhibition of five large sculptures Douglas Bentham has worked on over the last two

years. I feel it necessary to give some idea of Bentham's accomplishments over the past two decades to suggest what lies behind them. Above all, I want to stress that Bentham is a productive sculptor, at home with a variety of materials and scales — one of the most productive and exemplary sculptors, I suspect, that Canada has ever known. Needless to say, the works in this exhibition differ from both their predecessors and successors, although they stand behind a remarkable series of works Bentham made at Hardingham Sculpture Workshop in England this past summer.

VOCABULARY

Douglas Bentham works in the constructive tradition. That is, he doesn't model in clay or carve in wood or stone, but instead arranges and welds together discrete steel parts. This method was more or less invented by Picasso and elaborated upon by many artists since that time, notably Julio Gonzales, David Smith, and Anthony Caro — some of them working in materials other than steel.

Steel is a wonderfully flexible material. It can be cut apart and reassembled with relative ease. The welded joins withstand severe stress, making it possible for small attachments to secure heavy parts. But because it can't be carved or modeled steel doesn't readily describe or represent. Because of this it inclines to abstraction.

Abstraction, especially in sculpture, has had to work out a new vocabulary, one that uses constructive materials (often scrap steel) in arrangements which are evocative without looking too much like familiar objects. The constructive sculptor's job has been to take more-or-less discrete parts (among them manufactured or fabricated shapes found in the industrial scrap pile) and arrange them into configurations which have the unity and expressive power of art. The creation of this new language was aided by the allusive — some might say the "surreal" character of found shapes. It was impeded by the overpowering conventions of traditional sculpture. Two of these conventions dominated: the anthropomorphic image — mainly the human figure — with its head, torso and limbs; and the conventional means of sculptural display and support, specifically the semi-architectural base, pedestal, or plinth. For many years sculptors struggled with figure-like arrangements placed on plinths and pedestals. Taking cues from painters, by the '60's, some of them — Anthony Caro in particular — discovered ways of making sculpture which sat directly on the floor or table without depending on a base or plinth to hold it up and without resembling furniture or machinery let alone the figure. The key to their success lay in disguising the supporting elements of the sculpture, making them so much a part of the piece that their function as support didn't declare itself the way legs or feet might.

Bentham has built upon these discoveries. His sculpture has developed with that advance behind him.

NEW SCULPTURE

The new works escape from the geometry of architecture and furniture — from the rigidity that governs so much of our lives — into a playful domain of "free" drawing and the arabesque. This is not to suggest that geometry is "wrong" and sinuous curves are "right": what for one artist is rigidity may be for another a dangerous freedom. In these sculptures Bentham indulges his appetite for the arabesque

fully aware of the dangers of incoherence and superficial decoration. His new work pushes abstract sculpture towards the Baroque. Nevertheless, the pieces are organized — governed by their own sculptural architecture. This architecture inclines to cage-like configurations characterized by curved rods and tubes containing curved plates and volumes. The pieces rise off the ground in a variety of ways, sometimes upon platforms that become surrogates for the floor rather than bases or plinths. These platforms don't hold the sculpture aloft in the traditional sense. They're part of the visual universe of each work rather than a separate element. They're something like abstract "stages" which help to separate and isolate the configurations. One can approach the works physically to a point The platforms keep them apart; they insist that the sculpture is designed to be looked at rather than physically entered.

The curved "drawing" which composes them has two aspects: it draws sinuous, "dancing" arabesques in the air and it draws around and contains space. In the first aspect it draws within and penetrates space. In the second it draws "around" space creating transparent shapes and volumes.

These two aspects of linear drawing are augmented by the insertion of plates, cones, and cylinders. Here Bentham gains variety by playing off transparent shapes (drawn with rods and thin pipes) against these opaque solids. These rather musical compositions play upon the relations between the explicit and the implicit, in effect blurring the distinctions between the two. Solids become illusory. Spaces become substantial. The various parts set up echoes and rhythms within the piece, much like echoes and rhythms do in music or poetry. The exchange among them helps to contain and define the sculpture and adds significantly to their expression. In their aspect of free linear drawing the curved shapes are inherently decorative. Because of this the eye slides across and around them rather easily and a simplistic grace can undermine their effect (as it so often does with abstract sculpture cast in bronze). But they do have the virtue of resisting the domination of architecture. Also, because of their curves and tilts, the sculptures tend not to sit four-square on the floor and as a result maintain a stubborn independence from walls and ceilings — and in some cases to the floor itself. This helps the sculptures to establish themselves as objects in their own right.

They have no function apart from the aesthetic. They are not subservient to architecture. Their freedom from architecture relates to their scale, as well. The sculptures are large in an intimate way. While they can stand indoors or out, their presence is not of the kind designed to compete with buildings. Rather their scale, despite their relatively generous size, is geared to human beings. They're meant to be approached and experienced intimately rather than be seen from afar.

This is the key to their "meaning" — or rather to their "expression." By removing the sculptures from their conventional relation to our common environment, Bentham has freed them to be themselves in a new and important way. We respond to them with equal freedom. Whatever meaning they have comes from the intensity with which they elicit and sustain this response. If one is open to the experience, the response evoked by Bentham's new work is strong and deep.

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