

Douglas Bentham

Recent Works 2009–2014





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INTRODUCTION

Art Placement is pleased to present this exhibition of recent works by Douglas Bentham, a Saskatoon-based sculptor who has maintained an international reputation for more than four decades. His works have been exhibited in more than fifty solo exhibitions at commercial galleries and public museums throughout the country.

His last exhibition in Saskatoon was a solo show, *Resonance*, at the Mendel Art Gallery in 2005. Showcasing mostly large-scale works from two series, *Totems* and *Centurions*, the exhibition was rich with Bentham's signature constructivist aesthetic and vocabulary. At the same time, the work also highlighted some of the artistic interests and capacities for which he may have been lesser known. A range of materials, including bronze, brass, found objects, and recycled components produced forms and surfaces that deviated greatly from the clean lines and planar geometry of Bentham's characteristic works in plate steel. Furthermore, the decidedly narrative and content-rich work was emphatically contemplative, ruminating on the subtleties of context, history, beauty, mortality, and the general fragility of the human condition. Dan Ring aptly described the *Centurions* in his catalogue essay:

"The *Centurions* convey introspection and reflection. Idiosyncratic and anthropomorphic as a group, they have a cubist or even surrealist sensibility: stoic figures marking a transition in time between millennia. At once awkward, humorous, archaic and stately, they are 'more slowly wrought because they emerge from materials with a more inherent history (wheels, tools, implement parts and such), often bolted together.' The age and richly patinated surfaces of recycled clusters of copper tubes from heat exchangers and brass plates with raised cruciform shapes (originally embedded in concrete as supports for old machinery) encourage a symbolic reading." [i]



Limiting our selections for this exhibition to works produced within the last five years was a necessary strategy. Douglas Bentham is one of the most prolific artists I have known and the works selected for the exhibition represent no less than six distinct series, all currently in progress or completed within the last five years. Further to that, each one of these series could have filled an entire exhibition independently. Considering the intimate proportions of our exhibition space as well as the commercial context, it may have been easier to limit our selections to only one or two bodies of work. Weighing all the options, however, focusing on breadth seemed to present the most accurate picture of Bentham's larger artistic practice, in which variation has been one of the most defining characteristics. The dramatic variety in Bentham's work over the last five years is not an anomaly. In fact, this exhibition, presenting only a brief snapshot of his recent work, is nonetheless a microcosm of his larger practice.

First and foremost, Bentham is an innovator, as evidenced by the great diversity of work in the exhibition. Though his work is always recognizable, he has never been content to do what might come easily, that is, to imitate his own successes. Stanley Boxer recognized this back in the 1980s:

"In seeing the beginning of the various attempts one could see, almost in an instant, several things. One: whether the practitioner was engaged in the classical case of self-imitation. Bentham was not, that was immediate. Perhaps that was the original impetus. Each piece in this bed of ambition had its own 'particularness'. Each piece was unto itself." [ii]

With each new series, Bentham continues to push himself technically, materially and conceptually, utilizing a range of scales, materials, and formal and aesthetic approaches that challenge his expectations, as well as our own. After more than four decades, he clearly shows no signs of slowing down.



AFTER ROBERT FROST

The language of abstract sculpture has much in common with modern poetry. Robert Frost's poetry, for instance, unites opposites. Art at its best, in all its disciplines, can be casual in tone but profound in effect; teasing and intense; playful, yet deeply penetrating.

As an individual sculpture begins to declare itself during the making, it also reveals a certain mood that evolves in various forms throughout a series. In these new sculptures this mood emerges, as in Frost's 'Stopping by Woods', from a kind of frozen silence, intriguing yet mysterious. If we are attracted to the notion that a particular place can suggest ideas unlimited by space, it is because we recognize that in nature, as in art, there are those moments that can hold us in a state of sublime mystery—that beauty, however elusive, is enmeshed in implicit truth.

Douglas Bentham





Sound of the Trees. Brass, bronze, 2009, 84 x 30 x 28 in.



Passing Glimpse. Brass, bronze, 2009, 80 x 30 x 24 in.

SPANISH VOICES

In the *Spanish Voices* series Bentham displays a finely-honed capacity for activating literally flat, yet painterly planes, open spaces, linear passages and volumetric solids. Various, often mysterious, industrial fragments appear to have been found, selected and inserted into evolving structures that may be comprised of other pre-existing materials: fasteners, rebars, geometric solids and even actual hand tools. In addition, brass sheets have been cut, and sometimes folded, into defined, curvilinear and rectangular shapes that have been painted with a solution of cupric nitrate under high heat.

This process transforms the surface into an evocative pale blue-green, an intrinsic aspect of the component, which is inserted into the developing composition of linear members, found objects and geometric forms. These various elements are welded into an armature that has then been galvanized to achieve greater visual unity. The repetitions of similar shapes and contours, compatible surface textures, parallel planes, colour affinities and discrete welds give coherent resolution to each sculpture.

Fabricated directly in patinated brass and galvanized iron and steel, possessing an eloquent beauty of subtle colour and formal clarity, these modestly-scaled sculptures are upright, mostly floor-dependent inventions with a formal fluency that rewards attentive engagement. Each of the titles in the series refers to a significant Spanish artist, Bentham candidly declaring his admiration for Picasso, Miró, Dalí, Goya, Gaudí, Velázquez, and the Mexican-born Kahlo...

Song for Picasso, 2012, is comprised of galvanized elements including a single, stable, rectangular mass, pieces of curved or straight rods, and two thick, inwardly curving, planar sections, acknowledging the horizontality of the floor and emphasizing a physical and optical stability. Additionally, these vertical elements rise upward and evoke a figurative presence that is akin to the front and back of the human body.

Simultaneously, the juxtaposing of blue-green planes against the sheen of galvanized components casts a silvery light and creates a metaphoric opposition, as between nature and culture, hinting at external references derived from Bentham's travels in Spain.

An almost musical sequence of alternating curves, diagonal tensions and rhythmic contours reinforces the interplay between the coloured planes and linear gestures. The resultant sense of orderly movement and structure alternates between visual velocity and moments of stasis in accordance with the specificity of each work.



Song for Picasso. Galvanized steel and iron, patinated brass, 2012, 61 x 36 x 20 in. Photo credit: Troy Mamer.

An insistent verticality and bodily reference contrast uncannily with elements resembling the detritus of fading industries, conjuring an ambiguous topography and fictive landscape, melding into an aesthetically causal whole. In the airy and inventive *Dream for Dali*, 2012, Bentham reminds us that poignant, sometimes great art can rise from the depths of the irrational and the unconscious when rigorously distilled into the allegorical or mythic. A number of recent museum surveys and gallery exhibitions indicate a renewed interest in the psychically charged terrains of Surrealism and post-modern pictorial hybridity. Bentham's reference to Dalí evidences the potency of unfamiliar and surprising juxtapositions, as that master of surrealist illusion had done in the best of his early canvases. However, Bentham resists any nod toward illusionism or overt representation. Instead, he expertly explores the plastic tensions to be achieved through a daring, asymmetrical composition of linear enclosures, interacting with strategically distributed coloured planes. When viewed frontally, a grouping of lit and shadowed planes and masses anchors one side of the structure, visually and physically, in relation to the floor.



Light for El Greco. Galvanized steel and iron, patinated brass, 2012, 37 x 22 x 10 in.

It is evident to any regular gallery visitor that ambitious abstract metal sculpture is rarely exhibited these days in Toronto. Such serious sculpture is clearly an endangered, nearly extinct order of practice. However, Bentham has persevered with his personal inquiries despite the attendant challenges, and his disciplined and inspiring new sculptures confirm the continuing viability of rigorous abstraction. These vital, complex and fresh works are clearly the creations of a mature artist of persistent conviction and enormous talent.[iii]

Ron Shuebrook

Ron Shuebrook is an internationally exhibiting painter, writer, art educator and consultant who now lives in Guelph, Ontario. Excerpts from an article originally published in Border Crossings magazine, Fall 2012.



Dream for Dali. Galvanized steel and iron, patinated brass, 2012, 64 x 42 x 23 in.

RELIQUARIES

Significantly for subsequent work, the mirroring involved in this series introduces a viewing situation in which the primacy of the whole is questioned. The importance of relating part to part supercedes that of relating part to whole. Shape, as a unifying element, is no longer the ultimate reference point.

Not that this relinquishment of the whole is an end in itself. And not that the subsequent sculptures are utterly shapeless. The words "carapace" and "reliquary" spring to mind when viewing the works. What is pertinent is that they do not invite the viewer to hold the whole with a masterful gaze. Rather, they require a scrambling glance across a broken, glittering surface in an effort to find a way in.

For Bentham, there is a catharsis involved in these works. They are the result of a new intentness at "looking down and in." The desire is to take people to a "quietness within themselves," but only after forcing them to abandon an easy resolution of the whole and instead seek the way in. On a personal level, Bentham speaks of taking cancer treatments a few years ago involving sessions of radiation, during which he experienced the sensation of "being inside my body completely." Similarly these works speak of a felt interiority, a completeness concealed within a broken container.

The sculptures, then, take their shape around a hidden presence. Like armour, they ward off a grasping gaze. Like reliquaries, they enshrine an unseen holy thing, an unnamable beauty within.[iv]

Timothy Long

Timothy Long is the Head Curator at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan.





Reliquary VII, Cadence. Brass, bronze, 2013–2014, 16 x 12 x 6 in.



Reliquary VI, Glimmer. Brass, bronze, 2012–2014, 24 x 12 x 6 in.



Reliquary III, Solace. Brass, bronze, stainless steel, 2012, 22 x 10 x 4 in.



Reliquary VIII, Splendor. Brass, bronze, 2013–2014, 18 x 14 x 7.5 in.



Reliquary I, Spell. Brass, bronze, stainless steel, 2013–2014, 18 x 8.5 x 5 in.

NINE PLANES

As the title of this series suggests, the works began with a simple organizational premise. We might think of it as a kind of formal exercise, a warm-up sketch of sorts. It is a strategy that artists of all mediums often find useful: a set of parameters that negates the need for a weighty conceptual framework. As so often happens, however, a body of work can take on a life of its own, going places the artist might not have initially intended; in this case, becoming much more than the sum of its parts.

Though the title of the series implies a certain simplicity, this impression belies the compositional sophistication and lyrical visual harmonies contained in the finished works. As with the *Centurions*, the component parts—small pieces of metal, found objects and scraps likely cast off from larger projects—retain a sense of their individual histories. Selection is the key factor. There is no randomness; rather, each element is purposefully chosen to establish relationships between the parts, unifying the sculpture as a whole. Linear cuts in the surfaces of various planes in *Enchantment* or the scooped silhouettes that relate to the curling acanthus leaf patterns in *Shimmer* create visual linkages that lead the eye from one plane to the next.

The series is also successful in exploring the contrast between front and back, a dichotomy often present in Bentham's works. Whereas the back side is often secondary to the front, in this case, our exploration of "the other side" is rewarded with the discovery of a support structure that, while functional, is no less aesthetically considered. Bentham likens them to "flying buttresses", an innovation in medieval ecclesiastical architecture that transferred the load-bearing function of the wall outward, thus allowing those walls to be pierced by enormous stained glass windows. The objective was to create churches filled with the spectre of holy light, yet the resulting support structures are no less beautiful or awe-inspiring. Bentham's *Nine Planes* have been similarly conceived. The armatures declare their function, visually bearing the weight of the structure. From the front, the works appear structurally unencumbered; the planes seem to rise with the lightness of a butterfly's gently flapping wings or gracefully descend like leaves from a tree. Taken together, it is the contrast of these two opposing sides that activates the works with a dynamic visual tension.



Nine Planes VI, Spirit, for Jesse. Brass, bronze, 2010–2013, 52 x 13 x 12 in.



Nine Planes XXI, Stillness. Brass, bronze, 2012, 22.5 x 5.5 x 8 in.



Nine Planes XVI, Chant. Brass, bronze, 2010–2013, 20 x 7 x 6 in.



Nine Planes XX, Solace. Brass, bronze, 2012, 20.5 x 6 x 7 in.



Nine Planes XIV, Shimmer. Brass, bronze, 2010–2013, 19 x 6 x 5 in.



Nine Planes XVII, Awaken. Brass, bronze, 2010, 14 x 5.5 x 5 in.



Nine Planes XI, Enchantment. Brass, bronze, 2010–2013, 26 x 9 x 7 in.



Nine Planes XII, Desire. Brass, bronze, 2010, 19.5 x 6 x 8 in.

APOLLO & ICARUS

Composed of various linear and planar elements in burnished stainless steel, *Apollo* and *Icarus* take full advantage of the gallery's twelve foot ceiling. For Bentham, who is accustomed to producing work on a monumental scale, these two pieces are relatively modest in comparison. Nevertheless, at nearly eleven feet tall, they make a strong impression in the gallery space. As their titles suggest, *Apollo* and *Icarus* reference the mythological and artistic traditions of ancient Greece, which are the foundations of our western culture.

In Bentham's characteristic constructivist vocabulary, the works present an abstracted interpretation of the principles of classical figurative sculpture. *Apollo* stands almost perfectly vertical, an ode to the Apollo Belvedere, the class of ancient sculptures in which inanimate materials were first seen to convincingly express the vitality of the human form. Bentham's *Apollo* has a tremendously slender profile with planes projecting to the left and right of its central axis, through which the composition achieves a kind of abstract contrapposto effect. *Icarus* similarly references the figure, but it is a figure clearly in motion, dynamically stretching, almost lunging up and forward, in contrast to *Apollo*'s strong, stoic stance.

Stance is the critical element that gives a classical sculpture its lifelike presence, imbuing a static object with the potential for action. Bentham's two works demonstrate his understanding and ability to use "stance" to activate his sculptures. Differing from the classical tradition, however, he also utilizes his carefully chosen materials to really bring his sculptures to life. With *Apollo* and *Icarus*, it is the play of light on the burnished stainless steel that most animates the works, as the light bounces from plane to plane with a fluttering, dancing motion.





Icarus. Burnished stainless steel, 2014, 116 x 27 x 23 in.



Apollo. Burnished stainless steel, 2014, 122 x 27 x 18 in.

FUGUES

Colour is the most immediately striking element of these two very recent works: *Red Fugue* in a rich and elegant crimson, *Blue Fugue* a calming, somewhat turquoise blue. In close proximity, the satiny surface has incredible depth and richness. Layers of brushstrokes produce a beautifully modulated field of colour with subtle variations in tone.

Aside from the immediate impact of the colour, there is also a substantial weight to these two pieces that grounds the viewing experience. Whereas much of Bentham's past work gives the impression of lightness in contrast to the literal weight of his materials, these works have a squat, contained solidity and tremendous sense of mass that makes them appear even heavier than they actually are. The individual components are distinctly beefy—planes and blocks of steel that are up to several inches thick, rods and spindles an inch or more in diameter. The quality of heaviness is further enhanced by compositional density. Whereas other works in his oeuvre—and many in this very exhibition—are quite visually light with a balancing of solid planes and open spaces, these works explore the aesthetics of a singular, solid mass. While there are some minimal openings within the overall form, in general we are presented with one nearly unified solid, a hulking mass in which surface decoration, patterning, and silhouette come to the fore.

In this case, as in most others, titles provide significant entry points into Bentham's aesthetic and conceptual concerns. A fugue is a compositional technique in music, in which a theme or motif is repeated at differing pitches throughout. The repetition in these sculptural works begins with the repeated links of the chain. *Blue Fugue* incorporates a length of actual steel chain, which transitions to rectangular planes in varying sizes that are oriented vertically and horizontally throughout the composition. A series of stacked rectangular bars, like rungs on a ladder, seem to climb the face of the largest vertical plane, in contrast to the sense of gravitational pull that the chain implies. In *Red Fugue*, the chain motif appears once again, this time alluded to by a series of cascading steel rings that seem to fall with a musical tinkling. The solidity of each sculpture's overall form thus becomes the necessary counterpoint—a sort of container, or grounding—for the rising and falling action of Bentham's dynamic visual rhythms.

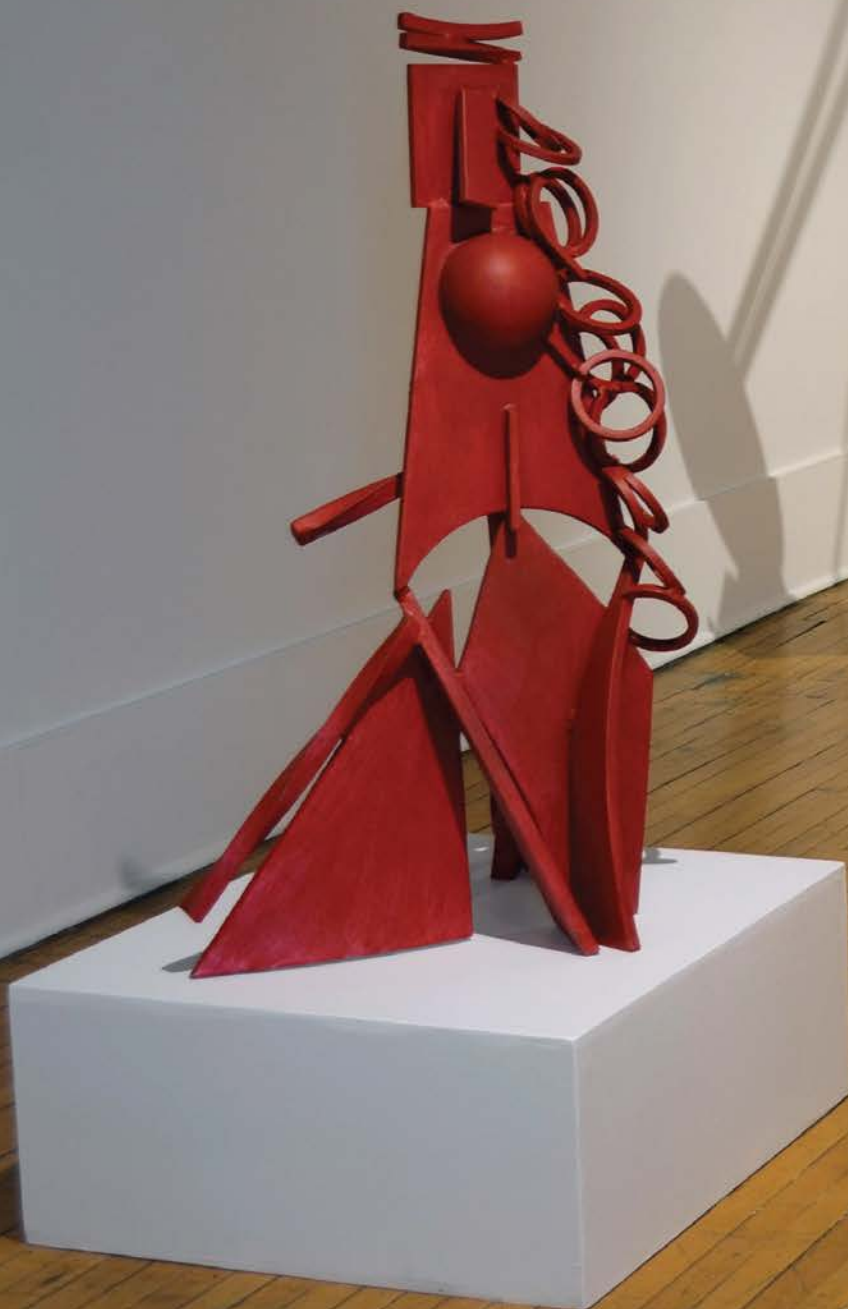




Red Fugue. Steel, galvanized and painted, 2014, 46 x 26 x 20 in.



Blue Fugue. Steel, galvanized and painted, 2014, 46 x 28 x 12 in.











WORKS CITED

- [i] Ring, Dan. "Douglas Bentham: resonance", Mendel Art Gallery: 2005.
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- [iii] Shuebrook, Ron. "Spanish Voices: Exhibition Review", *Border Crossings*: Fall 2012.
- [iv] Long, Timothy. "Studio Series: Douglas Bentham", MacKenzie Art Gallery: 1999.

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The Gallery/Art Placement Inc. is a commercial art gallery located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. It was incorporated in 1978, originally as an art consultation service but, shortly thereafter, as a full-fledged gallery. The business moved to its current location in 1981 and is now the longest operating commercial art gallery in the city of Saskatoon. Our focus is senior and mid-career Saskatchewan and Western Canadian artists, with an emphasis on landscape painting, abstract painting and sculpture.

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