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Sculptural abstraction of landscape

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A SCULPTURAL ABSTRACTION OF LANDSCAPE

BY

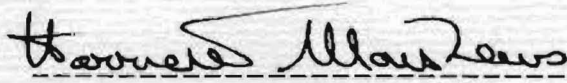
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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE
SENIOR SCHOLARS PROGRAM

COLBY COLLEGE

1998

APPROVED:



TUTOR



READER



READER



CHAIR, INDEPENDENT STUDY COMMITTEE

ABSTRACT

The purpose of my Senior Scholar project was to create a series of sculptures that are based on the interaction of natural forms within a selected landscape setting. I hope to convey a sense of how I view and interpret the landscape and to create works that stimulate a sense of wonder in the mind of the viewer. This fascination, perhaps even obsession, with the power of the landscape has kept me going throughout the year. As a source of ideas and imagery, the landscape can never be depleted. There will always be new combinations of landscape elements, different light conditions, and changing seasons to provide me with fresh ideas. Research for the project took me to many different places, be it my trip to Monhegan Island or driving to New York City to study the cityscape.

I began the year working in steel and plaster, combining the two in works that explore the interaction between living tree roots and inanimate rocks. This led to a series entitled *Landscape Recollections*, comprised of welded steel forms housed in protective wooden boxes and lit from inside. After visiting New York City, architecture began to play a role in my work, as seen in the two *Roadcut* pieces and the *Cathedral Woods* series. *Roadcut #1* and *Roadcut #2* explore the relationship between a man-made road and the landscape that lies beneath and around it. The *Cathedral Woods* pieces incorporate architecture in a more abstract manner, using imagery derived from Gothic cathedrals to convey a sense of quiet peacefulness. The soaring verticality of Gothic architecture integrates with the tall tree forms in each piece, enabling me to intertwine these two elements into one another and create a harmonious relationship between architecture and nature.

Throughout the year I have kept a sketchbook in which I draw from life, jot down ideas, and take notes on how the project is progressing. I have also completed several large charcoal drawings of my sculptures in which I explore different ways of viewing the steel forms. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to undertake this project, as it has been a very difficult but rewarding process of observing, interpreting, and manifesting the landscape according to my personal vision and experiences.

The purpose of my Senior Scholar project was to explore various methods of portraying the landscape and its features in a manner that manifests my interpretation of the natural world. The title, *A Sculptural Abstraction of Landscape*, is based on the premise that through the discipline of sculpture I could create objects that are derived from the actual landscape but abstracted from reality through my personal vision and feelings for a particular place. Each sculpture contains references to landscape elements, such as trees, land, and rocks, in varying degrees of abstraction as well as imposed architectural forms that represent a certain mood and feeling but are not actually found in the landscape itself. I began my project in early August by researching how other sculptors have approached the landscape as subject matter. Three passages in particular caught my attention, and I have returned to them repeatedly throughout the year. Mark Roskill, in his book *The Languages of Landscape*, says that:

The two most fundamental features of landscape art, over time and across different cultures, are that it works by dint of compression and distillation, and that it sets up a quality of resonance in the viewer's mind. Compression and distillation entail singling out from a vast expanse or range of possibilities in nature those elements that effectively bring into focus key aspects of experience. Resonance causes the viewer to search in the memory, through the personally charged associations and paths of recollection that are evocatively set up.¹

Roskill's statement helped to clarify how I wanted to approach the landscape by focusing my attention on refining and clarifying the most important and

symbolic elements. It was never my goal to recreate nature, since this would result in a cheap and unconvincing imitation of reality. Instead, my aim was to develop a vocabulary of forms that represent, but do not replicate, the real landscape. To do this, I examined my own history of interaction with the landscape, from family trips driving across the country to viewing the ground from an airplane to camping out in the wilderness. Because hiking and canoeing offer me the most direct encounter with nature, I chose to focus on these experiences as a starting point for my project. In mid-August I went on a nine day hiking trip to get out into the wilderness, search for possible subject matter, and study how I interact with the natural environment. The sculptor David Smith said the following about nature, and how one should approach it as an observer and student:

The artist has been the element of nature, and the arbiter of nature; he who has sat on a cloud and viewed it from afar, but at the same time was identified himself as one of nature's parts. The true artist views nature from his own time . . . The artist views nature expertly before making his statement . . . the artist's creative position to nature is much the same as that of primitive man. He does not take the scientific view of all important man and view nature as "it". He is the compassionate emotional man who is unquestioning, who accepts himself as a part of nature viewing nature as "thou".²

Viewing nature as "thou" has always been my approach, but it wasn't until my last series of sculptures, the *Cathedral Woods* pieces, that I discovered how to depict this relationship visually. The *Cathedral Woods* series was also influenced by the sculptor Constantin Brancusi's statement that:

Simplicity is not an end in art, but one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself, in approaching the real sense of things. Simplicity is at bottom complexity and one must be nourished on its essence to understand its significance.³

I didn't want to let the sculptures get too complicated or detailed, and every element had to be there for a reason and serve a specific purpose within the overall piece. By doing so I aimed not for simplicity but for the essential forms that convey meaning to me in the landscape.

The development of ideas throughout the year progressed from general but refined landscape scenes with limited viewing, to increasingly specific and personal forms presented in a more open manner. In the first pieces I searched for the overall feeling of the landscape and the various forms of which it is composed. By distilling the form of a tree into a slender pole and the earth into curved planes, I examined the interaction of the flowing organic land with the static geometry of the trees. I wanted to present these landscapes as very precious and valuable memories, stored away for safe keeping inside a protective wooden box (Fig. 1). The box format is most commonly associated with the work of Joseph Cornell, an artist who collected the discarded objects of modern culture and reassembled them inside boxes to create surreal compositions that are familiar to us but removed from our everyday experience.⁴ Cornell's work, however, relies on direct references to the outside world through the use of found objects, whereas my box pieces are more abstracted and distanced from real life. The steel forms are anonymous and operate as triggers for the memory of the viewer, who interprets the forms according to past experiences. The boxes also create a space in which the forms can interact and operate, separate from outside distractions. They provide a contained environment that can be lit from the inside with

concealed colored lights to highlight the steel forms and further separate the enclosed space from the surroundings. The resulting series of sculptures, while all closely related to each other, have a sense of individuality. Observing each piece should be a personal experience, a point that I emphasize by limiting the views of some pieces and making it impossible for more than one person to look at certain pieces at a time.

This control of the individual viewer enabled me to use the act of looking to augment the feeling of the actual piece being observed. Thus, depending on the type of landscape experience being portrayed, I was able to prepare and cue the viewer mentally for what he or she was going to see. The earliest boxes have one or two open sides, covered with glass, through which the piece is observed. Originally I intended to balance the form of the box with the piece inside of it, so that the two operated together as a unified whole. The first boxes were too powerful though, since the thick linear edges that frame the interior focus the eye on the external shape of the box instead of the steel forms. When I switched from 3/4" to 1/4" plywood, the edges became cleaner and less distracting. The boxes evolved from heavy, solid objects into light and refined pockets of space (Fig. 2). Each piece in this series is viewed through glass to ensure that the box remains an enclosing device, protecting its contents from outside elements and dangers. The glass also separates the viewer from what is inside the box, so that the steel pieces are visible but just out of reach. In discussing the work of Marcel Duchamp, critic Carter Ratcliff points out that "For Duchamp, glass is the substance of irony, the means by which detachment can be symbolized and effected all at once."⁵ This sense of removal or distance is an important part of my experiences in the landscape. Even though I can see, feel, hear, smell, and taste the landscape, there will always be a barrier between myself and complete

understanding of what makes the landscape so intriguing. I found the large panes of glass to be too revealing, however, and gradually I began to diminish the open space for viewing to the point that some pieces can only be seen inside of their boxes through a small, two-inch square hole. This automatically turns the act of viewing into a private, almost voyeuristic experience, since only one person can look into the box at a time. Such focused vision also enabled me to manipulate the space within the box to a greater degree than before, forcing the viewer to try to figure out not only what is being portrayed but how it is presented with relation to the space around it as well.

I am concerned about the relation of the boxes themselves to their surroundings and their interaction with each other as objects. There has long been a debate about how to best display sculpture: should each piece be on a pedestal or sit directly on the floor? Should the pedestals be uniform white boxes or should they interact with and relate to the piece being displayed? For the majority of the box pieces I also constructed wood pedestals that are the same width and depth as the boxes. The height varies depending on the piece and how it is to be viewed. By making these pedestals as unobtrusive as possible, they become a part of the piece itself and tend to disappear. I fear, however, that they distort the shape of each individual box by making them into much larger objects (Fig. 3). This issue remains unresolved, and I'm not sure there is an answer. Brancusi came close to solving the problem with his sculpted bases, but I feel that not even he was entirely successful. Through examinations of Brancusi's work and conversations with Nancy Bowen, a visiting sculptor, I came upon a solution by losing the box and pedestal as objects altogether.

Building an artificial wall with small viewing holes cut into it at regular intervals, I was able to create individual volumes of space behind the wall that seem to exist entirely on their own. The wall eliminates the external shape of the box and pedestal, so the viewer has no idea what to expect until he or she is actually looking through the viewing hole. These landscapes are still enclosed and lit but, because there is no reference to the outside shape of the box, the space and light integrate more successfully with the steel forms. The viewer cannot relate what he or she is looking at to a definite enclosing structure, which results in a mandatory acceptance of the space and the appearance of the objects despite what they may actually look like and how they are organized. Lawrence Fane, another visiting sculptor, pointed out the conceptual and visual similarities between this piece and Marcel Duchamp's final work, entitled *Etant donnees: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage*, which is viewed through a peep hole that reveals a mysterious, incomprehensible landscape that is both fascinating and frustrating at the same time. By limiting the view into the box, some portions of the work simply cannot be seen, even though the viewer can tell that the objects extend beyond his or her line of sight. I hope to explore this notion of concealing things and not revealing pieces in their entirety in the future. At the end of the first semester, however, I felt I was ready to move on from the box pieces and explore some different sculptural formats.

Part of my project proposal involved exploring different types of landscapes and recording them through photographs and drawings. Two of these trips, one to New York City and another to Monhegan Island, provided the basis for my work during the second semester. The New York cityscape was a drastically different environment than the Maine landscape I had been observing during the first semester of work on my project. The contrast and

conflict of the natural world versus the manmade world made me question their relationship and wonder what happens when one overcomes the other. *Roadcut #1* and *Roadcut #2*, made of welded steel and painted with oil paint, focus on the interaction of a solid, flat road with the living earth (Fig. 4). In these pieces I struggled to balance the strong, uniform, and rigid manmade road with the organic, growing forms of the landscape under the road and the vertical trees growing next to the road. I was searching for a very tight composition in each piece, as if they were graphic designs with strong silhouettes. This desire came from looking at the painter Robert Indiana's work, which is organized around geometric shapes that are powerfully depicted with large areas of pure color. It was a challenge to paint these pieces in a manner that was both appropriate to the forms and visually stimulating. Since neither piece is enclosed within a box I couldn't rely on colored lights to create the mood of the sculpture. I gradually developed a vocabulary of colors with which I was able to identify certain forms as natural or manmade and unify or separate the forms as needed. I applied the paint with brushes or my fingers to work up the surface and get some texture onto the smooth steel, though some portions were wiped down with a cloth or steel wool to remove most of the paint while still leaving a hint of the color. In *Roadcut #2* I left portions of the steel exposed, polished one section to a bright silver, and painted the rest of the piece. In doing so I used the implied visual strength of raw steel to accent the meaning of the piece. Thus, in *Roadcut #2* the natural forms are unpainted and strong, while the manmade form of the road is fabricated and painted a dull black.

A second series of works, based on my trip to Monhegan Island, explores the relationship between an actual landscape setting and imposed, imaginary architectural details that relate to the feel of the space being

depicted. These pieces are all based on an area on the island called Cathedral Woods, and the sacred, quiet environment that is created by the soaring, slender trees and gradually sloping terrain littered with exposed rocks and boulders. Whereas my earlier pieces all attempt to use planes of steel to represent the land, these pieces are completely linear and made of square and round steel rods (Fig. 5). By combining the square, straight architectural forms with the round, organic trees I am able to create works that are both stable and sturdy as well as fluid and alive. The architecture is based on the Gothic cathedral, whose extreme verticality and skeletal structure is similar to the form of the trees in Cathedral Woods. By creating a base derived from the floor plans of Gothic cathedrals, I turn rocks into altars and stress the movement through the piece from one end to the other, just as one moves through both the landscape and a church.

These pieces are loosely based on sculptor Alberto Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, which is a transformation of nature that attempts to overlap the space of reality and the dream.⁶ I studied this piece at the Museum of Modern Art when I was in New York City and was struck by the clear definition of space created by such thin and spare strips of wood and string and the non-linear objects that occupy these volumes. Another aspect of this work that interested me was the fact that while all of the elements are the same color they do not blend into each other and lose their individuality. In the *Cathedral Woods* series I experimented with this idea, painting each piece entirely with black oil paint. The purpose was to integrate the natural and architectural elements while still retaining the feel of the steel underneath the paint. To achieve this, I heated up the unpainted steel with the welding torch and then wiped the paint on with a rag. The heat opens the pores in the steel and liquefies the paint, so that it soaks into the surface when applied.

After wiping down the entire piece to remove excess paint, the surface becomes a translucent silvery-black that conceals the marks where joints have been ground and ties the entire piece together.

My sketchbook played an important part in the development of ideas throughout the year and was an invaluable tool for translating thoughts into sculptures. Nearly every piece had its genesis in my sketchbook, and it contains many ideas that I never had a chance to examine in depth. After developing an idea in the sketchbook, I often made drawings for specific pieces on large sheets of paper. This exercise helped me refine my skill in depicting multiple views of a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface. By doing so I had to construct the entire sculpture in my head before even picking up a hammer or torch, and the process highlighted flaws in design or construction before they became problems. Once the piece is built I sometimes draw it again, either from life or from memory. I find this to be an interesting continuation of the creative process -- from a drawing of an idea to an object manifesting the drawing to a drawing of the object. For example, *Roadcut #2* has a hold on my mind right now and I continually find myself drawing it from different views and in different lighting conditions. I plan to include some of these drawings in the Senior Art Show, alongside the sculptures, with the hope that they will clarify how my ideas develop and where they come from.

The Senior Scholar program has provided an invaluable experience over the past year, and I am grateful for the opportunity to undertake this project. Technically, my welding and woodworking skills improved immensely. There were periods of frustration and success, and I learned how to handle each one appropriately. When things were going well, I tried to take advantage of the situation while not getting carried away with

excitement. I found it's better to hold back a little bit and keep myself in check; otherwise, I would burn out and lose all of the momentum. When things just weren't working out, I realized that it was all right to take a break and get away from the project for a while. It is pointless to try to force an idea out before it is ready, and often the most helpful way to deal with problems was to not think about them at all and work on another aspect of the project. This year also provided me with the unique experience of sharing a studio with Elizabeth Krenicky, who is also a Senior Scholar in sculpture. It was very helpful to have Elizabeth there to answer questions, critique my work, and lend a hand. My tutor, Professor Matthews, shared with me her wealth of technical and artistic knowledge, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with and learn from her. The rest of the Art Department faculty have been especially supportive and I appreciate their interest and encouragement. Professor Marlais and Professor Engman deserve special thanks for being my readers and critiquing my written work. Although this project officially ends with the opening of the Senior Exhibition in the Colby College Museum of Art, I know that the ideas developed over the year and the knowledge I have gained will provide the necessary skills to continue this project well into the future.



Figure 1.

Landscape Recollection #1
steel, wood, lights, hardware
1997



Figure 2.

Landscape Recollection #6
welded steel, wood, lights
1997

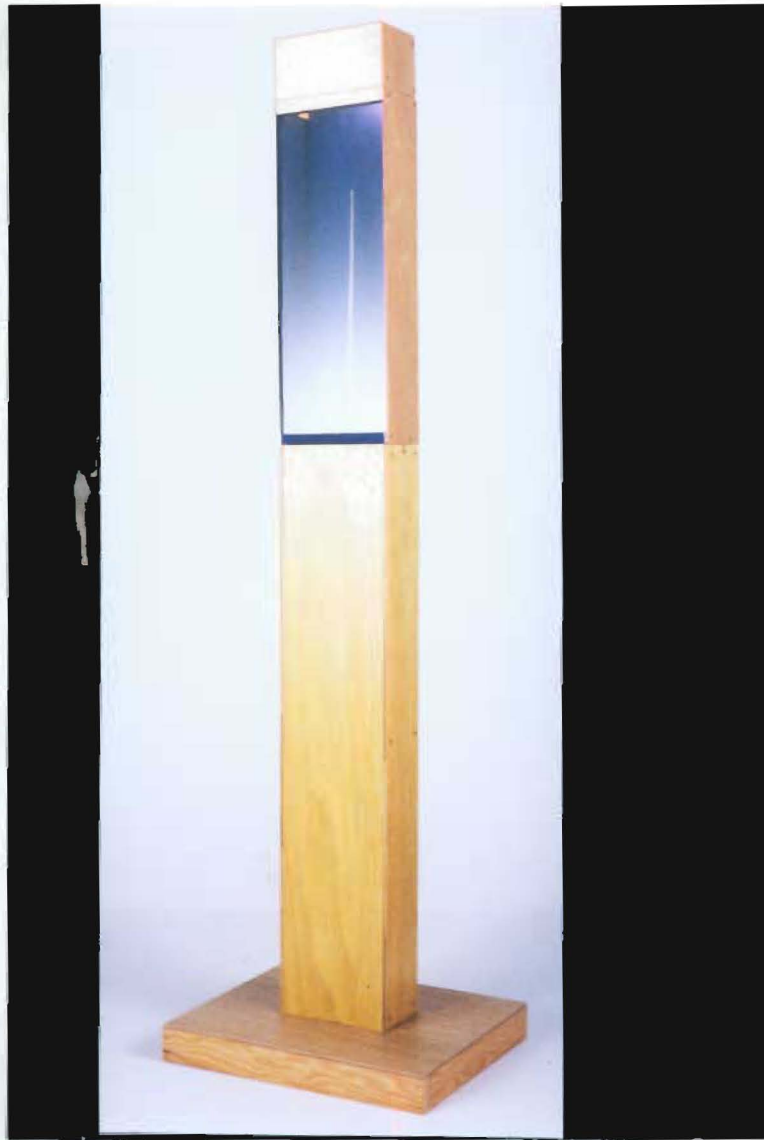


Figure 3.

Landscape Recollection #4
welded steel, wood, lights
1997



Figure 4.

Roadcut #2
welded steel, oil paint
1998



Figure 5.

Cathedral Woods #2
welded steel, oil paint
1998

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- 1 Mark Roskill, The Languages of Landscape (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) 4.
 - 2 I have been unable to locate the source of this statement by David Smith. When I copied the passage into my sketchbook last August I noted that it was by David Smith, but not what book it came from. I have searched several texts in an effort to identify the quote, but have been unable to find it.
 - 3 Eric Shanes, Constantin Brancusi, Modern Masters Series (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989) 105.
 - 4 Carter Ratcliff, "Joseph Cornell: Mechanic of the Ineffable", Joseph Cornell, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum of Modern Art) 65.
 - 5 Ratcliff 63.
 - 6 Jonathan Fineberg, Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc.) 139-140.