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City as Sculpture Garden: Seeing the New and Daring

By MICHAEL BRENSON
Published: July 17, 1987

THE outdoor sculpture season has begun to reflect the state of sculpture in general. The amount of outdoor sculpture continues to increase: there are currently four large shows. But as the cost of living and working in Manhattan continues to rise, more outdoor sculpture is being made and exhibited elsewhere: this season there is a significant shift toward other boroughs, particularly Queens. Thus, while this is a very good moment for sculpture, hardly anyone restricted to Manhattan would know it.

The most revealing exhibition is at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island. With the 10th anniversary show of the Organization of Independent Artists, it is clear that outdoor sculpture exhibitions in New York now have a history. Once again, the organization has provided an indispensable forum for emerging artists, such as Bill Albertini, Petah Coyne, David Schafer, Jeffrey Schiller and Heide Schlatter, who have been developing largely outside the gallery system.

But the exhibition also underlines a problem that has plagued large-scale sculpture for some time. Much of the best work is appropriate neither for galleries nor for public settings. Ms. Coyne's lumps of earth, hanging from stakes like amputated limbs, or Mr. Albertini's trough and shrine, in which nuts and bolts salute like soldiers and sparkle like mosaic glass, are not easy to imagine in a commercial environment. But these works are also too independent to be able to remain indefinitely in a public space. One strength of these sculptures is that they do not easily fit anywhere.

One of the key developments this season is the re-emergence of outdoor sculpture at Wave Hill in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. From 1977 to 1983, Wave Hill organized group exhibitions that helped put outdoor sculpture on the art map. This summer the focus is Robert Irwin, whose show is part indoors, part outdoors. The California-based artist is attracted to light rather than mass, and he is determined to define sculpture in terms of its environment.

But here, too, there are questions. The indoor part of the show, where Mr. Irwin uses scrims to increase our awareness of place and light, is far more effective than the outdoor part, where his landscaping of the grounds and deployment of stone markers is precious. Mr. Irwin has been used as an example of the possibilities for sculpture that takes its clues from, and works seamlessly with, its environment. The danger of this kind of work is that it is too genteel and too conspicuously discreet to provide an answer to anything.

For answers, try Queens, where something big seems to be happening. The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum opened last year in Long Island City; P.S. 1 in Long Island City is well known for its responsiveness to sculpture; the Queens Museum's timely exhibition of sculpture by women closes Sunday. Creative Time's Art on the Beach has just moved from a landfill in Battery Park City to a landfill at Hunters Point. The Art on the Beach program begins July 24 and provides another forum for sculptors outside the gallery system.

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The most heartening sculpture development this year is the emergence of the Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City. When it opened last fall, the park was almost bare; its inaugural exhibition was hasty. Scattered grass and weeds are now knee-high. With its array of architectural sculptures, all encouraging physical participation, the second exhibition dramatizes the possibilities of the site. Sculptors such as Richard Nonas, Alan Sonfist and Mark di Suvero - the expansive spirit behind the park - came of age in the heroic 1960's, and they are comfortable on a monumental scale. The show reaffirms the need for large sculptural ambition. ORGANIZATION OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTS 10th Anniversary Outdoor Exhibition Snug Harbor Cultural Center 1000 Richmond Terrace Livingston, S.I. Through Oct. 4

The 10th anniversary show of the Organization of Independent Artists was organized by John Perreault, the director of visual arts at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, and Elizabeth Egbert, a sculptor and associate board member. It includes a work each by 20 artists. Except for the brick-faced, chimneylike structure by Brit Bunkley, all the work is new.

The show points in several directions. Among some younger sculptors there is a brash and occasionally nutty approach to materials and craft. On the black asphalt pedestal of Curtis Mitchell's "Memorial," a heroic figure with a copper dress, yellow raincoat and white salt-lick head, tilts imperiously backward like Rodin's "Balzac." In Bill Albertini's "For What We Now Have - and for Those We Must Thank," with its suggestion of naval guns and coffins, the rhythms of the nuts and bolts, and the play of wood, Astroturf, ceramic tile and aluminum, have such flair and conviction that they essentially become the content of the work.

Jeffrey Schiller is one of several sculptors trying to rough up Constructivism. The aim of this foreman of a Staten Island shipyard is to bring an impulsiveness and earthiness to the pristine achievements of sculptors like Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner. Mr. Schiller is one of very few sculptors working intuitively with metal. "Circe" rises from a formal base and becomes dignified or goofy depending on the point of view. Sometimes it is an introspective head; sometimes the head suggests a steel doodle. Always the top of the work seems to be questioning its support.

A number of artists are playing with the idea of play sculpture. Wenda Habenicht, who, like David Schafer, another sculptor in the show, has been an assistant to Alice Aycock, has built ramps on which children can run and compartments in which children are invited to sit. But the ramps can be too steep to climb, and the compartments can suggest clamps, or they can be screened off so they cannot be entered. While adults may experience the sculpture as a menacing maze, the tension appears to make the work irresistible to children.

Several sculptures in the show are heavily involved with ornamentation. Pedro Lujan's stakes are decked out with shards of mirrors that both soften the work and make the stakes more cutting and sacrificial. Susan Tunick's "Shards for Barcelona" is a painted ceramic-and-wood floor that is something of an homage to the Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi. The dense patterning of the bricks in Mr. Bunkley's "Old Saint in the Forest" could be Islamic. The ornate curves of Helene Brandt's "Carapace" lure us into a piece of devouring furniture.

In most of Petah Coyne's previous work there has been a seductive element. There is none here. Ms. Coyne took three logs from the site, stuck them in the earth and hung on them an assortment of effigies. The chunks of earth suggest burned bodies or hostages awaiting execution. The sculpture looks like a nightmare inspired by Goya's "Disasters of War." This is an artist who is just beginning to realize her rare expressive potential. (The exhibition is financed in part by the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Office of the Staten Island Borough President. Snug Harbor is two miles west of the Staten Island ferry. It can be reached on the S1 bus, which stops at the ferry terminal.) WALK ON, SIT DOWN, GO THROUGH Socrates Sculpture Park Broadway at Vernon Boulevard Long Island City, Queens

For this show, Janice Parente and Phyllis Stigliano, curators at the Nassau County Museum, chose 14 artists - Robert Stackhouse, Jody Pinto, Dennis Connors, Vincent Ciulla and Paul Narkiewicz, Alan Sonfist, Gene Thompson, Richard Nonas, Cristos Gianakos, Ed Mayer, Mark di Suvero, Terry Lee Dill, Rudy Serra and Susan Crowder. Each made a sculpture that invites physical involvement.

Mr. Gianakos's sculpture is a long, triangular ramp with a square platform in the center. Ms. Pinto made a wooden "Watchtower for Hallett's Cove" with a compartment halfway up in which visitors can curl up and dream; Mr. Ciulla and Mr. Narkiewicz made an overblown lifeguard stand so cluttered with Americana that it is not likely to provide a refuge from anything.

The show is filled with references to ancient architecture and the sea. For her "Sakkara," Ms. Crowder built a step pyramid from bales of hay, then set six tiny carved columns on top. Mr. Mayer's pyramid is open in the center and constructed of strips of wood so the walls seem not impenetrable but like a screen. The white planks of Mr. Stackhouse's "East River Bones" look like whale bones or the deck of a ship.

The most effective part of the show is the juxtaposition of Mr. Sonfist's "Time Landscape - Worldwide Sculpture" and Mr. Nonas's "Agriculture (Gate to Gate)." Mr. Sonfist's work is a mound of earth, essentially taken from the site, shaped like a dune and planted with grass and trees. It looks as if the wind could blow it away, but it also looks as if it has been there forever.

If this piece is soft, the sculpture by Mr. Nonas is hard. Seven parallel rows, composed of slabs of brownstone, limestone, granite and marble, are spread across 250 feet. Lying perpendicular across each row, a bit like ties across railroad tracks, are short slabs of stone. Four of the rows seem to lean one way and three the opposite way, which builds into the work a sense of spatial compression. Like the sculpture by Mr. Sonfist, this work seems accidental, yet precise, very old, yet brand new, alien yet completely part of a site that this summer seems more raw and more finished at the same time. (The Socrates Sculpture Park is a 10-minute walk along Broadway toward the river from the Broadway stop on the No. 7 subway line.) ART ON THE BEACH 54-05 Second Street Hunters Point, Queens July 24-Sept. 20

Next Friday, Creative Time's Art on the Beach, in its spectacular new Hunters Point site, will begin its program of collaborative projects. All the sculptures have the potential for performance built into them; that is to say, they either contain platforms or areas that can be used as stages, or an arena was formed around them. The show has one of the most dramatic possible backdrops: the Manhattan skyline.

Angelika Hofmann's sculpture will not only be an integral part of a performance, but it will perform, too. Throughout the summer, hot air will be pushed through the doorways of the small, primitive-looking clay huts, causing sparks to shoot through the roofs. The fire will echo the firing process that brought the huts into being. By the end of September, the artist expects the clay to crumble from the heat and rain: objects that came from the earth will return to it after fulfilling their function.

Anthony Tsirantonakis's small, open theater seems to come out of Russian Constructivism. This network of red, yellow, black and pink scaffoldings, partitions and drapes seems artificial, but the sculpture also includes sand and raw, ritual shapes like circles and squares. As in so many contemporary sculptures, there is a need to be both ancient and modern. The sculpture is an appropriate setting for a performance in which the Minotaur plays a starring role.

Leonid Sokov is a Soviet emigre. When his sculpture is activated, a globe will swing back and forth between two large Expressionist figures. One is American and a symbol of goodness, the other Soviet and the embodiment of evil. On the ground between the figures is a miniature Soviet battleship firing a cartoonish balloon containing a nasty epithet. At a time when the perception of the United States as evil seems all but institutionalized among experimental artists, the presence of this pro-American work in an experimental art show

is unexpected, to say the least. (Art on the Beach has been made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. The six-acre site, made available by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, is a five-minute walk from the Vernon and Jackson Avenues stop on the No. 7 subway line - the first stop outside Manhattan.)

PERCEIVING THE GARDEN: ROBERT IRWIN AT WAVE HILL Wave Hill West 249th Street and Independence Avenue Riverdale, Bronx Through Sept. 27

Robert Irwin is so well known that it is hard to believe this show, organized by Jean E. Feinberg, includes his first outdoor sculpture for New York City. He has tried to be responsive to the entire site - the clean buildings, the rolling grounds, the patch of woods, the Hudson River and the Palisades in the distance.

The best part of the show is indoors, and it is called "Door Window Light." Just inside the main entrance to the Glyndor House, Mr. Irwin placed a glass door that makes the entire building seem transparent. The glass opens up a new vista, providing a view from the grounds in front of the building to the foliage behind it, undermining the monolithic quality of the architecture, confusing ideas of front and back.

In two pristine, white-walled rooms, Mr. Irwin has placed his signature white scrims. Here, too, transparency does not make the architecture clearer, but more complex. The scrims partition the rooms, creating the sense of corridors, calling attention to every part of the architecture and the way each shape and surface reflects light.

The two outdoor pieces do affect our awareness of the site. For "Wave Hill Green," Mr. Irwin had a square section of lawn lowered 18 inches and then lined with Cor-ten steel. The landscaping makes a particular area of the lawn a focus of attention and encourages visitors to stop at the pergola and look at the Hudson. It also provides a space for play, performance and rest.

For "Wave Hill Wood," Mr. Irwin placed three granite markers on one side of the grounds, three granite markers on the other, and two granite markers on a winding nature trail through the woods, one of them bearing the words: "Ever Present/Never Twice/The Same." If these works increase our awareness of the dynamics of Wave Hill, however, this awareness adds very little to our experience of the site. The outdoor work is antiseptic. As with a good deal of public sculpture that appears to be about listening and discretion, Mr. Irwin's Wave Hill show seems self-congratulatory. (The exhibition was made possible in part by funds from the State Department of Cultural Affairs, the State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Wave Hill can be reached on the Liberty Lines Express bus and the Hudson Line of the Metro-North Commuter Railroad.)

ALICE AYCOCK Threefold Manifestation, II Doris C. Freedman Plaza 60th Street and Fifth Avenue

Of the temporary outdoor sculptures not in a group show, this one is the best. "Threefold Manifestation, II" is 32 feet tall and made of painted steel. It is about orientation and dislocation. It consists of three miniature, circular amphitheatres, one on top of another, each on its side. We seem to be looking at the same object, at the same time, out of three different lenses. Staring at the amphitheatres produces something of the swimming sensation that actors may feel facing waves of people beyond the lights. If the effect is vertiginous, this disorienting object also has affinities with a radar tower, or observatory - places identified with order. The work also brings to mind a huge, unwieldy steel drum, which, as much as anything in the work, reflects Ms. Aycock's view of sculpture as an insistent, dangerous, festive performance. (The project is sponsored by the Public Art Fund.)

GRACE KNOWLTON City Hall Park Through Nov. 30

Early this week three boulders appeared in the northwest corner of City Hall Park as suddenly as meteors or comets. Grace Knowlton's work suggests both the kind of sculptural groupings that were characteristic of avant-garde sculpture in the 1930's and Claes Oldenburg's giant pool balls. The objects are made of Design Cast and are lighter than they seem. In a setting where politicians insist they are moving boulders all the time,

the work lets voters know what it feels like to move boulders themselves. Two of the three are whitish and grouped together; one is a black sheep, off on its own, not white but pink, silver and blue. If the spheres appear to be heavy and are in fact light, so does the work, but it brings energy to the site, and it does not have to be more than it is. (The project is sponsored by the Public Art Fund.) **ANDY YODER MOTOCROSS** Kenmare Square Lafayette and Spring Streets Through Aug. 15

For this rather grim triangular square in SoHo that is a gathering place for motorcyclists, Andy Yoder has created a work with three triangular sections. There is a floppy green canopy over the gate. A ramp in the middle brings to mind a ramp in a daredevil motorcycle course. A blue, hutlike form at the closed end of the square suggests the obstacle over which a motorcyclist scaling the ramp would attempt to jump. All the associations in this work are hard and loud, but the work is quiet and soft. Even when the material looks like metal, it is plastic or wood. The colors are green, red, white and blue. Mr. Yoder may have begun with Evel Knievel and the Hell's Angels, but he ended up closer to Oz. (The project is sponsored in part by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the State Council on the Arts and Artists Grants/Artists Space.)

Photos of outdoor sculptures by Alice Aycock, Cristos Gianakos, Heide Schlatter and Angelika Hofmann (NYT/Arlene Gottfried); Photos of works by Robert Irwin, Susan Chowder, Bill Albertini, Wenda Habenicht and Jeffrey Schiller (page C30)

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