

FINE ART

Greek ideals and classical illusions

Despite the arguments claiming painting's superiority, the sculptor's work — including pieces made from found objects — is impressively valid

Sculpture is what you bump into when you're trying to get back far enough to see the paintings.
— U.S. painter Ad Reinhardt

By ANN ROSENBERG

Prejudice against three-dimensional works — the stuff set on podiums in the centre of gallery floors — runs deep in the history of art. Even Plato had some thoughts on the subject. The ancient Greek philosopher tried to decide whether painting or sculpture was capable of more closely approximating the ideal form of an object.

It's less important to know which medium Plato thought superior than to realize that, from the earliest times, there was concern with the differences between illusions created on flat surfaces in paint and images carved from stone or cast from bronze.

In the Renaissance, theorists were still debating which activity took more skill: to create a painted illusion on the three-dimensional surface or to sculpt in the round. Leonardo was, on the whole, an advocate of painting whereas his contemporary and rival — even as he frescoed the Sistine Ceiling — signed his letters: Michelangelo, sculptor.

These days in critical circles there is no discussion about the relative superiority of painting or sculpture. A commonly held view is that anything presented as art is art — a dictum that applies equally to all forms of expression and allows for every experiment in material and technique.

This all-embracing approach doesn't help a person distinguish between good art and bad, skilful art and non-skilful. Rather it promotes the acceptance of Picasso's low-tech Bull — an animal head composed of the handle bars and seat of a bicycle — as an expression of contemporary culture as significant as Michelangelo's Pieta was for the

Renaissance civilization.

The Bull, assembled from found, manufactured parts, is a work that comments on early modern attitudes toward the machine. Pieta was painstakingly carved from stone. It reflects a Catholic attitude toward Christ's immortality and Mary's virtue, a subject of great import in the 16th century.

Both sculptures offer standards that are remembered and built upon in the present.

Metal casting, stone and wood carving — techniques invented in ancient times and perfected in the Renaissance — are still used by sculptors. These methods are also the ones with the longest history in Eastern and native cultures.

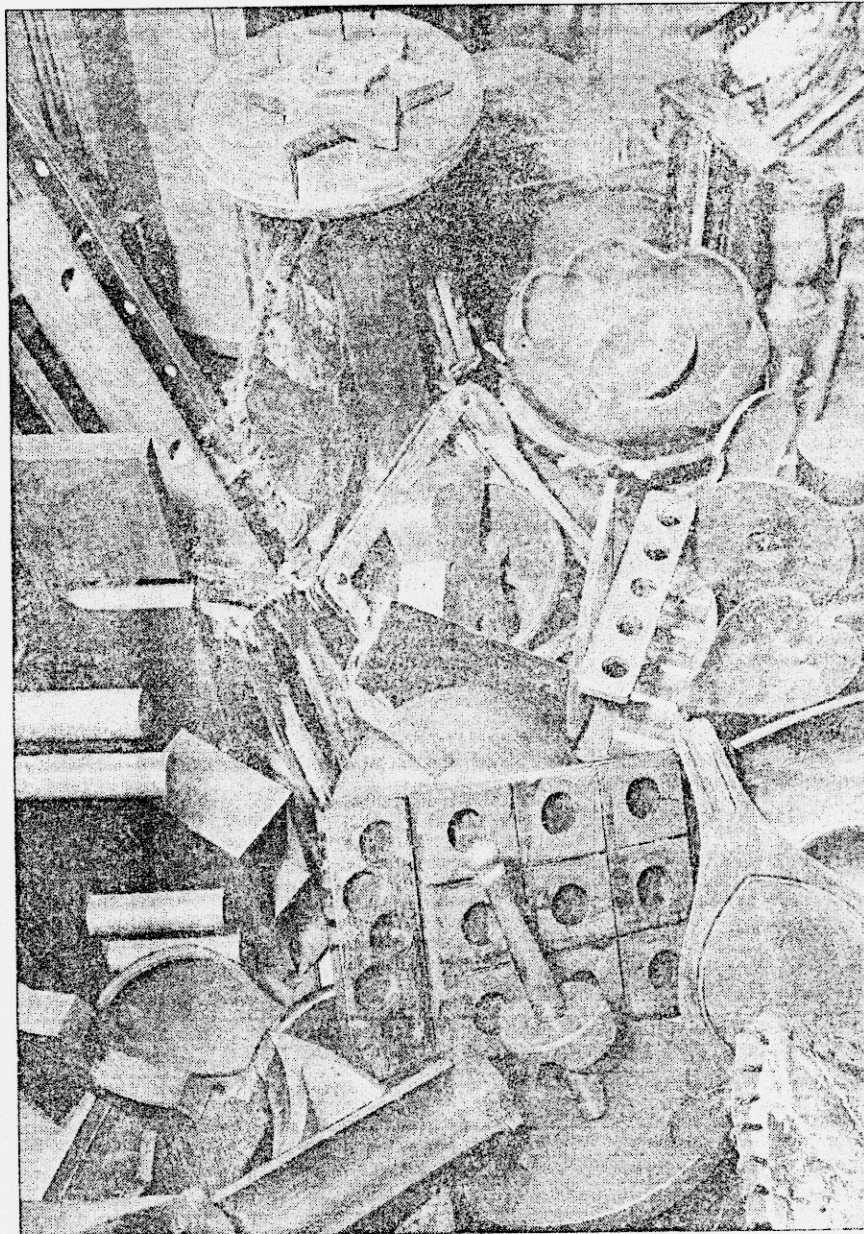
Current techniques are made possible with high-tech tools (the blow torch) and industrial methods (rolled steel). New alloys like aluminum and substances like polyester resin and fibreglass have enriched the contemporary sculptor's repertoire.

Many contemporary artists have assembled found objects such as pieces of machinery, articles of clothing, household goods and factory-cut pieces of metal or glass into exciting, meaningful three-dimensional works.

These days sculpture is created in everything from bronze to Styrofoam cups. Any combination of material and technique is acceptable. Even a two-dimensional medium like photography can convey ideas pertinent to sculpture, and if considered in a certain way, be sculpture itself.

Beautifully crafted, steel and aluminum sculptures that preserve the past but embrace the contemporary feature in Murray MacDonald's Arcanum exhibition at Burnaby Art Gallery (6344 Gilpin, to July 1).

MacDonald is a Vancouver-born sculptor whose art reflects his training at the University of B.C.'s school of architecture, a degree in art history and extensive travels. His appreciation of the urban monuments from



CAROLE ITTER: Western Blue Rampage

many countries and historical periods is evident in the arcades, columns, plazas, chambers and zigzags he fabricates in sensitively treated metals.

MacDonald's deceptively simple forms pay homage to the concept of *dwelling* as a model for the universe and as a metaphor for inner well-being. A ramp leads to an arch that opens into the sanctuary of a pyramid. Steps bid the viewer to climb up and into a chapel-like structure. The symmetry and order of the compositions affirm the balance within us. The lack of titles leaves us free to make our own associations.

Although some of Mac Donald's

sculptures are not much bigger than a birdcage, they project an aura of strength. It takes only a few to fill a room.

The work is concerned with themes that Richard Prince, Jim Corte, Linda Stanbridge and Greg Murdock handle in somewhat different ways and with different materials. This shows that the symbolic use of architectural motifs coupled with an insistence on fine craftsmanship is one subplot in contemporary Canadian sculpture.

Larry Cohen's sculpture at the Or Gallery (314 West Hastings, until Tuesday) is partly fabricated and partly assembled.

The compositional symmetry of the sculptural elements has a calming effect. But here, rather than being affirmations of psyche, the works suggest how art can make sense of and impose order upon something as crazy as the fluctuating prices of wheat and eggs.

On a wooden table surrounded by a complementary set of chairs, Cohen presents three substances with important historical associations and striking visual properties. Heaps of lemon-yellow sulphur, white bread flour and iron oxide have been covered with sheets of glass and built up into four-storey shrines. An elaborately fabric-

ated table constructed from metal and glass supports is the podium for a sculpture that features a string of eggs sandwiched between vertical panes of glass.

Even more minimalist, and by far more dependent upon found objects, is the exhibition by Keith Higgins at Artspeak (3 — 311 West Hastings to June 30).

Here the installation is set up like a lecture room. Standard university-style chairs, arranged in neat rows within the exhibition space, face a wall on which a photocopied reading list — "Excerpts from Jack London's *Martin Eden*" is one of the entries — has been posted.

To enter this room is to immediately experience the aura and the mystery of academic life. The empty chairs await a classroom full of students and a professor able to expound on great modern thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, who is cited in the photocopy.

On the backs of the chairs there are brass plaques inscribed with excerpts from London's novel *Martin Eden*. These are essential clues to the rationale behind this conceptual art piece, which re-stages an incident in the book. In the novel, two friends argued in a lecture hall over individualism and socialism. The authors cited in London's 1905 novel are writers whose ideas academics and artists still passionately discuss and disagree upon.

One of the most striking exhibitions of this year that, coincidentally, illuminates some aspects of contemporary sculpture, is on display in the Contemporary Art Gallery (555 Hamilton to July 14).

At first glance, Sandra Semchuk's photographs resemble wall reliefs. In each mural, framed color prints are arranged in dramatic configurations that maximize the viewer's appreciation of the unusual camera angles Semchuk used when interpreting a particular subject.

The featured series is called *Moving Parallel: Reconstructed Performances from Daily Life* — the title alluding to the quality of motion apparent in these works and to the fact that the rites presented are parallels to, not mirrors of, the truth.

In *The Offering*, Yuma Arizona, two children explore underwater life. The camera — moving over and through the water like silk — follows the action with an excited but unobtrusive eye.

Like sculptor Carole Itter, with whom she is paired in this exhibition, Semchuk has empathy with nature and an interest and respect for native people and their customs. Hence *Libations*, Queen Charlotte Islands, makes a nice connection with Itter's *Western Blue Rampage*.

A stormy wave seems to roll over the floor toward the spectator, away from the rectangle of blue that serves as the sky-like backdrop to the menacing waters. Closer inspection reveals that the wave is made up of many skillfully arranged found objects and hand-produced elements. The foam of the wave is composed of the intermeshed loops of wooden beaded curtains. The waves themselves are constructed from careful arrangements of salad bowls, turn-of-the-century newel posts, old picture frames and other recycled debris. Set among the waves are Itter's own photographs of the Queen Charlotte rainforests, which are themselves equally evidence of nature's continuance and its transformation through decay.

The bits and pieces of Victoriana out of which the tide has been assembled alludes to the culture that destroyed the way of the first people and continues in the present to attack and render lifeless the sea. As Itter put it in the notes that accompany the installation, "Honor the Land" is what the natives always knew but what the invaders ignored. "Rampage the abundance" was closer to their motto.

Wild Man of the Woods is Beau Dick's first one-person exhibition at the Gallery of Tribal Arts (1521 West Eighth, to July 7). It presents an imposing body of work that includes several contemporary adaptations of traditional ritual objects and one painting.

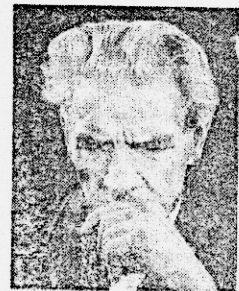
Like his ancestors, Dick affixes found materials — feathers, horse hair and animal skin — to skillfully carved and painted masks. This mixed-media

approach is effective. Feathers fluttered and hair shook when the masks were worn in the ceremonial dances.

In the show, Dick's *Wild Woman of the Woods* has the red mouth and dangerous mien of the traditional Dzunukw'a mask. But the shape of the cannibal woman's lips and the soft modeling of her features seem very personal and contemporary. Similarly, the unusual abstract shape and the stark white treatment of the face in the *Atlakim Wind Mask* proves that Dick is able to simplify and strengthen the design of a historical form.

The painting *Second Skin* is a layered image that presents a vision of a mask hovering over a starlit seascape. In it, a pictograph-like salamander, flames, a fragment of a moon mask and a skeleton conspire.

This multi-referenced piece indicates that Dick is also willing to place his people's traditional symbols in novel, unexpected contexts. ♦



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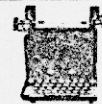
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