



*Cathedral Evening*, 1969. Wood maquette, executed for The Walker Art Center (Minneapolis) exhibition, "14 Sculptors: The Industrial Edge". Height 11', length 29', width 25' (all illustrations by courtesy of the Fischbach Gallery, New York)

## RONALD BLADEN— ROMANTIC FORMALIST

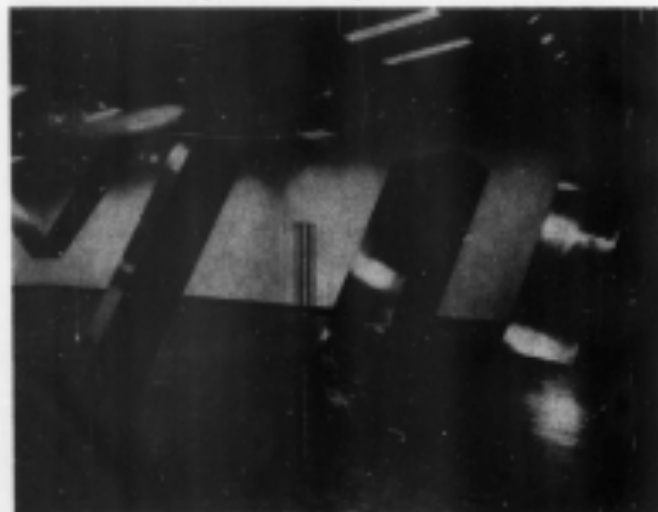
APRIL KINGSLEY

The American sculpture revolution of the sixties replaced the anthropomorphic, expressionist idiom of the forties and fifties as the dominant sculptural mode with a "cool" objective style inspired, instead, by architecture and industry. Ronald Bladen was one of the leaders of that revolution, which has been called Minimalism, along with Robert Morris, Don Judd and Tony Smith. He continues to work within its formal confines, while many of his colleagues have defected to a looser, nature-oriented reaction against them. In hindsight, of course, it is easier to see differences between artists who were lumped together than it is to see their similarities, and one distinguishing aspect of Bladen's work, its intense romanticism, was less obvious then than it is now.

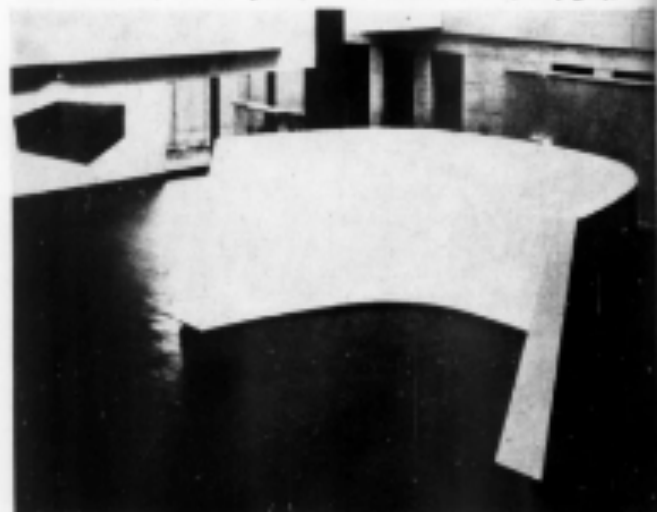
Minimal art, which someone once said might be more aptly termed Maximal art considering the size of much of its

sculptural production, came about partly in reaction to the rhetorical excesses of Abstract Expressionism. It was, in a sense, a rebirth of Functionalism. The general precepts of Functionalism, which involved efficiency and simplicity, were long accepted, in this country at least, due to our obsession with the Protestant ethic. We have always respected the virtues of frugality and economy of means. According to the logic of this position the making of art becomes understood as a reductive, rather than elaborative process. In Greenbergian terms, for instance, a painting may only be what it has to be given its two-dimensional support, non-representational nature, etc., etc. Practicality rules; form must follow function. If a sculpture is a box, it should literally act like a box. We expect it to sit flat on the floor, its surfaces paralleling the six sides of the room in which it is situated. It should suggest inertness, closure, and the stability and regularity of architecture. We understand it to be solid, impenetrable and predictable in the same way that we expect roofs to stay securely above our heads because we trust the principle of the post and lintel. Tony Smith, Don Judd, and Robert Morris have all made such box sculptures.

In foreground, untitled sculpture by Ronald Bladen. From the exhibition "Primary Structures", presented at The Jewish Museum, New York



Untitled sculpture of 1969. Wood maquette, height 9', length 22', width 15'. In the exhibition, "Art in Space", Detroit Institute of Arts, May-July, 1971



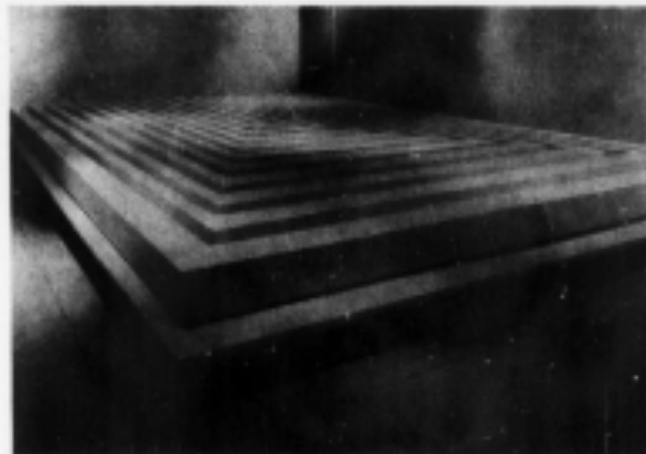


Hoop, 1971. Black painted plywood, 30 x 5 x 10 meters. Sombek Park, Arnhem, Holland

When Ronald Bladen made a box sculpture for the 1966 Whitney Sculpture Annual, it was different. It was raised slightly above the floor and tilted at an angle. A deep, dark crevice was thus created beneath the box, large enough, in fact, for a small child to hide in—which happened. None of the box's planes were aligned with anything in its setting. Its massive, weighty appearance was contradicted by the levitational quality suggested by its location above the floor. The piece defied our expectations of it (while reminding us of them) and took on a life of its own in the process. Bladen made a second box sculpture in 1968 for exhibition in Europe which seemed to be sinking into the floor (or emerging from it) at a sharp angle. A weighted bottom kept it from toppling over and careful adjustments of width from one side to another made the illusion of its "movement" plausible.

Romanticism is involved with aspects of the irrational and unpredictable, just as it is with heroic, even rhetorical, gestures and with grandeur. Bladen's romanticism incorporates all these features. The scale of his conceptions fits the latter, while their eccentricity—both physically and emotionally—

Gibson, 1970. Wood prototype, 30' x 60' x 16'. Executed for the exhibition, "American Sculpture", presented at the Sheldon Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska

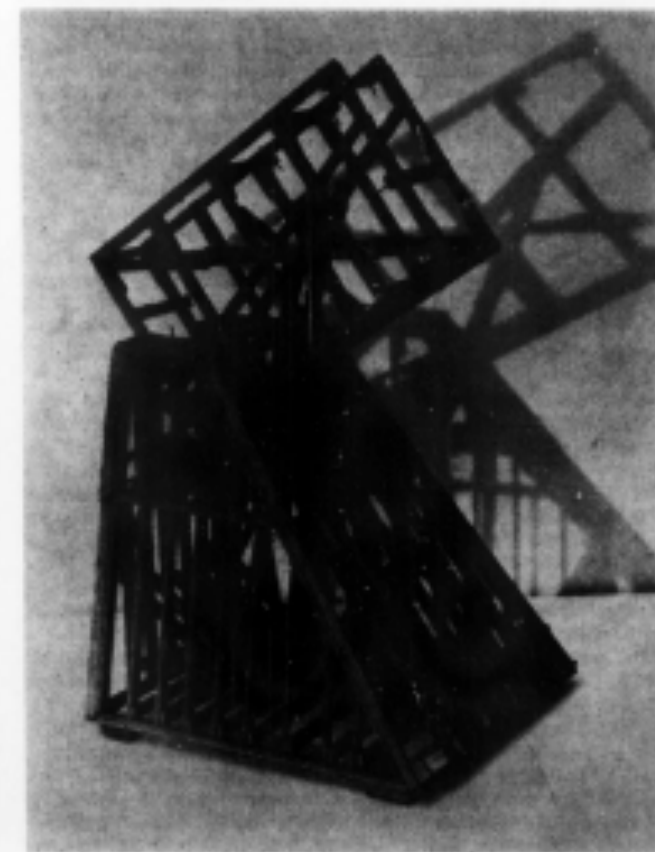


Untitled sculpture of 1971. Wood prototype, 21'6" x 33'4"

concerns the former. The former and the latter, though, operate symbiotically. Without the absolutely enormous scale of his pieces, Bladen's cantilevers, perspectival effects, and suggestions of levitation would be evocatively powerless. Practically all of his sculptures incorporate one or more of these three features. In *Cathedral Evening*, 1969, a huge "V" form is cantilevered high above the viewer for a considerable distance, producing in him a disturbing sense of disequilibrium. Cantilevers are used in architecture for similarly expressive reasons. The ancient Greeks, wanting the opposite effect, went so far as to add extra columns beneath an architrave in order to convey a sense of total support for it and to avoid the impression of tension and possible danger that wide spans between the columns might have produced. Cantilevers seem muscular, they cause a sympathetic somatic reaction in the viewer. Bladen's pieces seem animate because of them. *Cathedral Evening*, in fact, seems to be making a positively heroic effort to remain upright.

Perspective effects, like the rapidly diminishing viewpoint of the dynamic slanting "V" in *Cathedral Evening*, create a sense

Interior structure of Gibson



of drama and urgency. The impression of a rushing movement through space is reinforced by the directional thrusts of the piece's double base. Like the gigantic stanchions that anchor the cables of a suspension bridge, these blocky forms reflect their supportive function expressively. The piece *Bladen* is currently constructing for installation on Hammaröjöld Plaza in Manhattan has its dramatic, diagonal, forward propulsion countered by the thrust of a double base at its rear.

In a typical Franz Kline black and white painting diagonal slashes of black pigment read perspectively in the context of stabilizing horizontals and verticals that reiterate the framing edges and thereby flatten the picture space. Bladen's "compositions" of three-dimensional forms in space operate similarly, creating reciprocal pressures within architectural contexts.

Occasionally, however, Bladen reverses perspective in a piece. The floating slab of concentric squared "U" forms of 1971 is perspectively corrected so to appear to diminish in size as it recedes from us. By flaring the outermost "U" so that its arms widened at the rear and paralleling all the interior "U"s with it, the piece is kept miraculously square despite the directional velocity of its lines. The "U" forms don't converge toward the rear (nor expand toward the front, depending upon your viewpoint). In fact, they give the impression that they would remain parallel indefinitely. This illusion is augmented by an imperceptible tilt of the platform from a height of 8" in the front to about twice that at the rear. The floating platform nearly filled the gallery space at Fischbach pressing the viewer to the wall. But its position as a floor above your feet, plus its air of lightness, and the rhythmic opening and closing, fan-like effect as you move around it engenders a heady sense of buoyancy in the spectator.

Bladen has deployed his materials to create an impression of levitation in a number of pieces. *Untitled*, 1969, an enormous, wall-size curve was raised slightly above the floor creating an unexpected floating sensation. Its wide open arms invited the viewer into a soundless, luminous space that he perceived sensorially. A perceptual orientation like this is characteristic of much of the best sculpture produced in Los Angeles during the past few years by Michael Asher, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin and James Turrell. It is not a New York idiom. Perhaps the "wide open spaces" of the West promote an interest in atmospheric gradations and subtleties of ambience that would be difficult to discern in the claustrophobic confines of Manhattan where there is no real sense of sky, for example.

Ronald Bladen was born in the West—Vancouver, to be exact—in 1918, and he did his studying of art there and in San Francisco at the California School of Fine Arts. He had been painting since he was 10, though while a teen-ager tennis occupied most of his time. He stayed in San Francisco for 15 years after finishing school, working as a welder on ships during the war, making bolts for the railroad, and doing some steelwork. He painted in his free time and associated primarily with the San Francisco poets, contributing drawings to their "little magazines". Although he still despises the coldness of steel as a working material, it is probably what he learned while working with it that has enabled him to create structurally sound steel sculptures today without constructing them to size first in wood. Bladen says he just "knows" whether a piece will work in steel and this knowledge was probably gained during those years.

Bladen came to New York in 1957, joining Al Held, George Sugarman, Nick Krushnick and the others at the Brata Gallery with whom his work continues to share an esthetic sensibility on some level. By 1962 his paintings had turned into bas-reliefs and he was making three-dimensional paper collages as he made a slow transition into sculpture. The first piece he made was constructed pictorially, in a sense, of flat planes and interlocking parts. By 1965 and *The Rockers* he was solidly into his own idiom as a sculptor. It seems to have borrowed much from his experience in ship construction. A ship is basically a thin metal skin over a complex interior of ribs and struts heavily built to withstand tensions and pressures from all directions. Bladen's pieces are intricately interwoven and counterbalanced networks of 2 x 4' beams covered by a thin sheath of plywood, unless they are executed directly in steel. A ship's curved hull is carefully engineered to float (balance) at a given angle under various conditions with a predictable safety margin for tipping without sinking. So was *The Rockers*, the one piece Bladen says he returns to over and over again in his thinking. It was comprised of two vertical hook shapes connected through the curve of each hook by a horizontal bar incorporating a third hook that was minus its upright section and served as a stabilizing element. *The Rockers*

was balanced with enough play to have a sense of vitality, but not enough to fall over easily.

As with a ship's equal distribution of weight on either side of a keel, *Triangle*, 1966, was a huge mass balanced on a single edge. Most of Bladen's pieces since *The Rockers* in fact have been precariously balanced by hidden weights, when not frankly cantilevered. Bladen is extremely conscientious about incorporating numerous overlapping safety factors in his designs, however, so that in spite of their apparent instability, none of his sculptures can accidentally harm even the most careless viewer who comes in contact with them. Only one of Bladen's pieces, the wedge-shaped work in Somsbeek, Arnhem (Holland) between 1970 and 1971, lay completely flat on the ground, devoid of any eccentricities, or suggested instability.

When Bladen posed the question, "How do you make the inside the outside?" for his *Primary Structures* exhibition catalogue statement in 1966 and answered it with, "The engine, the scaffold, the weight—the energy", he went directly to the center of his esthetic position. *Goldware*, 1970, and the model for it demonstrate this perfectly. Like all his pieces it is a huge (30' high x 60' long), hollow mass, square in section, constructed with the methods of the building trades and painted a single non-color to read as a unitary shape. Beneath its cool bland exterior, the model reveals a passionate, expressionist heart. Not that the final piece was constructed with the furious abandon of the model with its angry looking nails and rough splintered wood, but the emotionalism exposed there relates to the energetic muscularity, sometimes even velocity, that is particular to Bladen. One thinks of cannons, bridges, jets, crossbows and arrows in relation to his sculpture, as well as of living things. His piece for Hammaröjöld Plaza, for instance, seems designed to surge forward over the edge of the wall on the Second Avenue side like a lunging animal with its hind legs braced for action but still solidly planted on the ground. Even *Cathedral Evening* has a quasi-anthropomorphic vitality recalling the *Finery of Somsbeek*.

Bladen's accomplishment has been to subvert the implications of a "Minimal" formal vocabulary with a Romantic temperament. He epitomizes the best sense of the dictum that "less is more" underlying the Functionalist revival of the sixties. As he once said in response to a question on the subject asked by Bill Berkson in an interview for *Art and Literature* # 12, "If by 'more' you mean 'more of a dramatic quality'—that is, more drama as a result of the reduction, of the greater simplicity of a statement—then I would agree. But the 'minimal' artists don't mean 'drama'. They mean 'less is sufficient'. Whereas what I am after is to create a drama out of a minimal experience—to make use of it in terms of geometrical construction . . . I think 'less' here means that you have taken something out of a particular piece that might have been left there by another sort of artist. You reduce it; you take all the garbage out, all the familiar associations. What you have left are planes, simple shapes—and whether or not you gain something more than the object itself depends on the assembly of these shapes.

What might you gain?

Space, dramatic relationships, excitement."

Model of sculpture for Hammaröjöld Plaza, 1973. Under construction 1979

