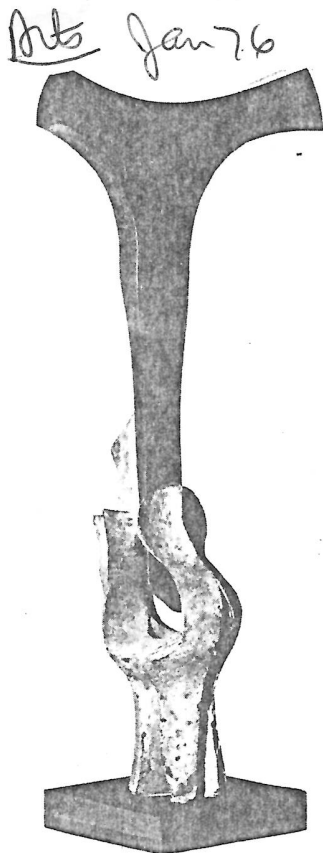


OPENING AND CLOSING: FRITZ BULTMAN'S SCULPTURE

APRIL KINGSLEY

Leaves unfurling in a nighttime garden, whales spouting at sea, tendrils, tattered cloth, animal horns, female genitalia and sprouting seeds—these are some of the things Fritz Bultman's sculpture is about. Strange for an old friend of Tony Smith to be working in a polyhedral sculpture/building designed for him by that forerunner of Minimalism? Perhaps. But not so strange for an Abstract Expressionist continuing to circle the movement independently while holding its central concerns dear. Bultman's sculptural method is classical—metal rod and wire mesh armatures for plaster pieces to be sand or lost-wax cast in bronze—but his freewheeling intuitive approach to the process of creating each work parallels the "action painter's" interaction with the canvas. Bultman is one of those rare artists who is equally at home in painting, collage, drawing, and sculpture and works continuously in all three. Some of the characteristics of one medium inevitably affect his thinking in another, and, in fact, some of the pieces in his current sculpture retrospective at the Martha Jackson Gallery were conceived with paintings behind and around them.

Bultman was born and raised in the lush, languid atmosphere of New Orleans and left it for the rigors of the Bauhaus in 1937 to study architecture at the age of 18. Finding that Alexander Archipenko alone upheld the creativity side of the overly disciplined art-making factory called the New Bauhaus in Chicago, he moved on to study with Hans Hofmann in Provincetown and New York. By 1941 he was painting on his own, but, instead of becoming an active participant in the New York art scene as one might have expected, he moved to Provincetown in 1945 with his wife Jean to raise a family. There, working in his garden, walking on the beach, living on a hill overlooking the sea, he developed quite independently of the New York style. His contact with it was limited to winter visits to the city and the summertime art col-



ony. He retained ties with the New York School emotionally, and to some extent ideationally, but for the evolution of his personal style he followed Hofmann's dictum and looked to nature.

During these years, before his return to New York in 1951, Bultman concentrated most of his efforts on painting with only occasional forays into collage and sculpture (working in clay was never very rewarding for him), but he established the practice, which is now his working method, of shifting media when he felt blocked. Now, in both his New York and Provincetown studios, he keeps unfinished paintings on the easel, drawings and collages on the walls, and sculpture in various states of growth or decay on the floor. This way all his options are continuously open and he can re-enter any number of different pieces at will. He conceived most of his paintings during this period in the forties as studies for sculptures (though they worked completely as paintings), and he currently feels that his collages "resolve a dilemma—how to deal with sculptural forms and the full transparent density of plastic space," as he stated in the catalogue for his 1973 collage

exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery. It wasn't until he learned, during his trip to Europe in 1950, the method of sculpting in plaster over an armature that he began to feel successful enough in the medium to work in it continuously.

The light, flexible wire mesh armature that Bultman has been using since the sixties enables him to add to and remove from the work in progress with almost total freedom. (He's been known to axe parts out of a piece that wasn't right.) Additional changes are then made all along the way as the piece's mold is cast, before the wax is invested, and, finally, when the finishing and patina application is done. Any later casts from the rubber mold would probably also receive individualization through addition or subtraction at the wax stage as well. It is essential for Bultman to feel that he can get back into a piece often, that the process is open-ended. When he draws from the model he tacks additional sheets on any side of the original one as the need arises, and his collages are generated completely outward from a central core piece of painted paper. Even the paintings break out of the rectangle to curve laterally or vertically or

into a "T" configuration, and within the given exterior shape endless changes are wrought until the forms "feel right" and "seem full." Whichever medium he's working in, Bultman's working methods parallel the construction/destruction processes of Kline, de Kooning, and Pollock. This is an especially important option for sculpture which has traditionally been *either* additive (construction or modeling) *or* subtractive (carving).

Like most modern constructed sculpture (David Smith, Gabo, Pevsner, for instance), Bultman's pieces tend to be comprised of single-curve planes, warped and twisted from one orientation or axis to another. He does not tend to utilize the double-curved or round form common to the organic sculptural idiom of Arp, Moore, and others. Bultman's shapes are bounded by sharp-edged flowing contours which thrust in all directions. They resemble leaves and trees more than rounded rocks, eggs, or amoebas. And yet his work feels inherently organic. *Opening and Closing* (1975) is a perfect example of this. It pulsates with inner life as it surges upward, opening outward. Circumnavigate it and it literally opens and closes before

your eyes, both along its outlines and internally as shallow depressions deepen into cavities which penetrate to emerge on another side.

The upward thrust of a Bultman sculpture, together with its lack of mass, conveys a sensation of lightness (bordering on elation) which is only held in check by our knowledge that the material is really heavy. *Coat of Male* (1961-62) and *The Barrier* (1970) with their wide lateral counter-thrusts are the only major pieces to depart from this general tendency. Interestingly, both works refer to solid bodies (human, animal, or bird) more insistently than do any of the others. *Coat of Male*, inspired by a tattered coat flapping in the breeze, is more jagged and full of aggressive incident—projections, cavities, half-open tubes—of proportionally equal interest than any other piece in his exhibition. *The Barrier* (or Big Bird, as it's sometimes called) is highly asymmetrical, despite its two wings distributed on either side of a vertically vented (wounded/eviscerated) torso. On the left side and on both legs an impression of feathering is conveyed by irregular scalloping; on the right, large intersecting bone-like units penetrate one another.

All of Bultman's other pieces defy the pressure of gravity to divide, interrupt, and envelop space but do not seem massive or greatly space-occupying. *Portage* (1972-73), *Garden at Nightfall I*

(1975), *Hope* (1973). *Good News I* (1963), and *Good News II*, a three-unit piece of 1966, all soar vertically and stretch out into space, welcoming it within their province. Their solid volumes are adjusted to the maximum fullness capable of retaining the closest possible reciprocal relationship with negative surrounding space and still holding their own. Their space-curved contours create beautiful silhouettes. Each in its different way reaches out into space like a metaphor for optimism.

With only rare exceptions, all of Bultman's sculpture receives a dark, charcoal gray-black patina which conjures up recollections of petrified tree limbs, charred bones, or the fossilized coal within the earth's crust—all organic forms affected by time. The lost-wax cast pieces seem to pick up more light along their surfaces than the ones cast in sand, making them seem slightly more activated. Bultman likes the fluidity of bronze the way he likes the fluidity of wax and plaster; all three materials go from a solid state to a liquid one and back to a solid one again. But, he says, bronze, "unlike them and even steel, is as durable as mankind and stronger when thin and hollow." These fluid media encourage the organic development of ideas from one piece to the next, a flow of familiar forms within a given time sequence. Two small pieces, *Wishbone* (1971-72) and *Whale Crater* (1972), with real whale-

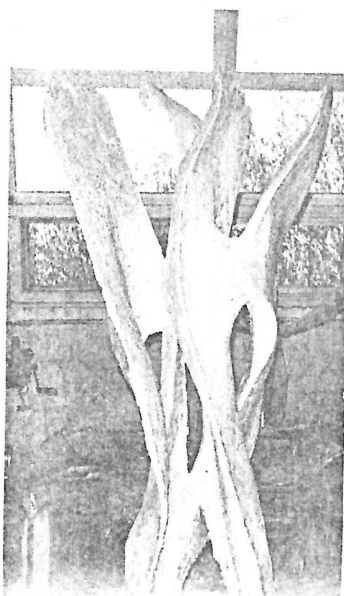
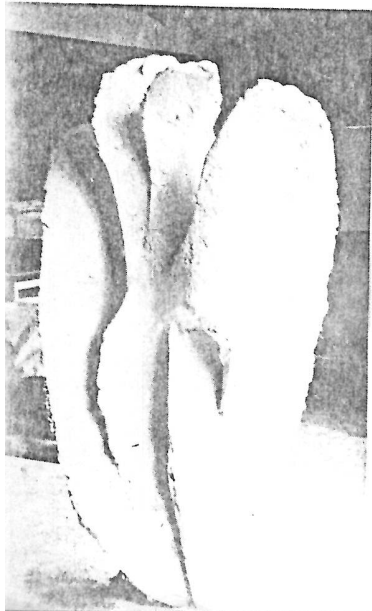
bone enclosed in bronze, for instance, flow into the all-bronze *Portage* (1972) and from there into the three major *Catch* pieces (1974). Similarly, certain "flung-arm" gestures in the *Good News* series are carried over into the *Garden at Nightfall* duo.

Was it Matisse who said a painter had only one painting to paint and he paints it all his life? For Bultman, as for many artists, the intermingling of his formal inventions is accomplished so unobtrusively and so thoroughly that all the work has a family resemblance. *Lunar* (1951) is a 21-inch-high bronze that encodes a large chunk of Bultman's formal vocabulary. The double curving horns (describing buttocks?) are linked to two squared-off bulbous shapes (testicles?) below a double wing "T" located on both sides of a hatchet form (penis?) that ends in a "V" or triangle which is inscribed at the top with a (clitoral?) "U". Variants on these basic Bultman units run like a refrain throughout his oeuvre. For pure sexuality, probably no piece surpasses *Garden at Nightfall II*, his most recently completed work. The body of this exquisite piece is replete with fanning labial forms swirling upward from a point halfway down the base to an elongated arching neck/trunk form which penetrates a flattened female torso "between the legs." This strong, cantilevered thrust into space is counterbalanced by the weighty female flesh falling in the op-

posite direction and ending in a tail. (I, being somewhat prosaic, would probably have named the piece "Leda and the Swan.")

Bultman says that the idea for *Garden at Nightfall II* came from seeing a vine tendril that had pierced through a leaf in his garden, and that image is in the pieces, too—not that he'd deny the sexual implications. (Surrealism is inconceivable without sexuality, and Bultman's work has a Surrealist undercurrent which is slightly more apparent than that behind most Abstract-Expressionist art.) The *Catch* series (which should, ideally, be viewed as a group of three interconnected pieces) was immediately inspired by the sight of spouting whales off the tip of Cape Cod and by pieces of whalebone washed ashore there, yet it too is loaded with sexual overtones. In each *Catch*, a differently shaped, tall, urgent "phallus" is caught in a curvilinear saddle. One senses, kinesthetically, the snug fit of *Catch III*, the graceful tenderness of *Catch I*, where thin looping arms barely touch the overweening bulk of the skin-smooth masculinity it embraces, and the grasping impetuosity of *Catch II* in which aggressive fingers clutch a spreading "T".

In each of the *Catch* pieces, and in *Garden at Nightfall II*, Bultman exploits the contrast between a roughened surface and a skin-smooth one to great advantage. The sensation of weight and a soaring, tensile-strength lightness are achieved simultaneously. Tactile variation is effectively perceived by the viewer internally, intuitively, reversing the artist's process of externalizing his internal sensations in the work. As Bultman phrases it, "To transmute experience into a sculpture is the beginning."



At left:
Fritz Bultman, *Opening and Closing*, 1974-75. Plaster Stage, 7" high.
Courtesy Martha Jackson Gallery.
Opposite page:
Fritz Bultman, *Catch* (#2: Big Tee), 1974. Bronze, 104 x 48 x 27".
Courtesy Martha Jackson Gallery.