

# THE OBSERVER AS INTRUDER:

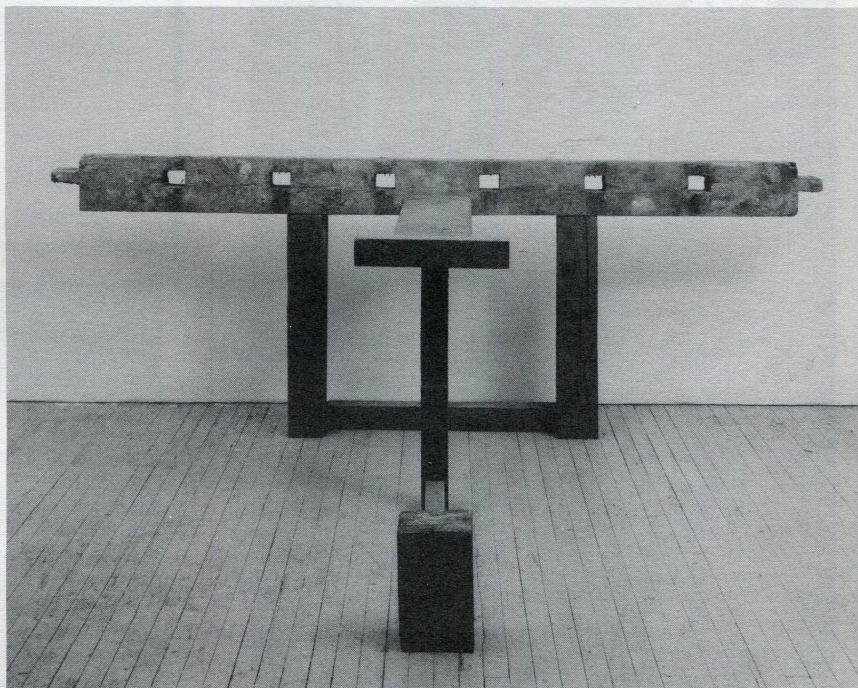
## BUDD HOPKINS ON SCULPTURE & UFO S

*A Conversation with April Kingsley*

Yes, I am his wife, but this interview provided a chance to step out of our conjugal roles and go back to our premarital ones of artist and critic. Formal occasions to be analytical don't present themselves often. Here we had an opportunity to sit down on the beach, without ringing phones or meals being prepared, and just discuss the work. When you share a workspace with an artist for years, watching the work develop on a daily basis, you end up knowing too much about it in some respects, and not nearly enough in others. You know the facts, but not the feelings; the moves, but not the ideas behind them. It could be said that a critic in that position understands method and effect rather than operative cause, which doesn't do a whole lot of good for either the artist or the art audience. I have witnessed numerous sculptures "coming together" under Budd's hands; I have even "found" some of the units that eventually wound up in his pieces. I knew how he made them, but not why—and these works *are* decidedly mysterious presences about which one does want to know why. What do they mean? I have also been close to the developments in his UFO research, which parallel, both in time and in certain aesthetic respects, his artistic development into three dimensions. In all of this, it wasn't until we sat down to do this interview that either Budd or I began to get a grasp on the work as a whole aesthetic statement.

**April Kingsley:** Nineteen-seventy-eight was the year you started writing your first book concerning UFO abductions, *Missing Time*, and it was also when you began "Hera's Wall," the first of the *Temple, Altar*, and *Guardian* complexes.

**Budd Hopkins:** There's probably no direct connection except that both were major steps forward for me. But in the *Temples*, one of the main issues was the reflected light and the charged space it made on the wall. This light



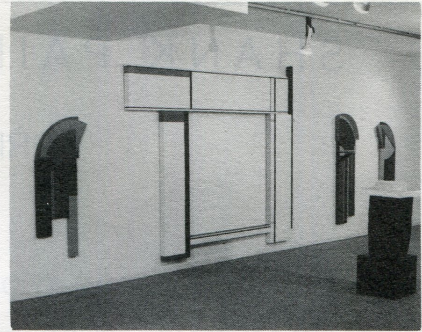
"HORIZONTAL ALTAR" 1985

space was central to my thinking, as was the fact that the center had to be a perfect square, symmetrically flanked. The use of reflected light at the heart of the piece was a major step away from having the object, the painted surface carry all the meaning. Earlier paintings like "Mahler's Castle" had ironic force and function. The object itself contained the meaning; the magic was in the painted surface. In "Hera's Wall" and the later *Temples* the negative space is the most highly charged area. There's a parallel here with the work of James Turrell, who's also very intrigued with UFOs. One can talk about his work in terms of perceptual play, but if you look at it emo-

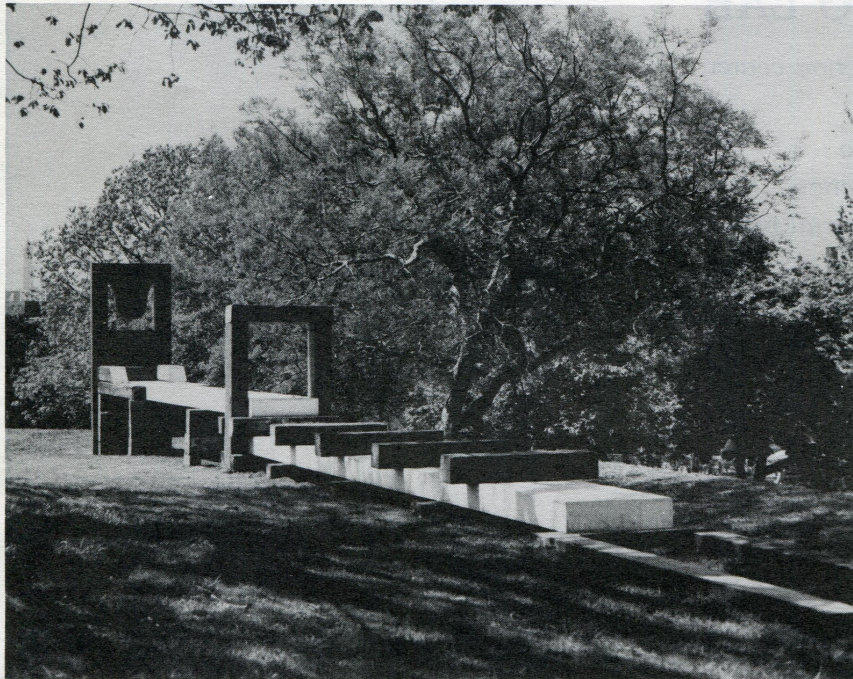
tionally, then his work can be seen as creating magic places with indiscernible light sources. The difference between Turrell's light and Dan Flavin's is that Flavin, with his visible fluorescent tubes, shows both cause and effect. Turrell masks the light source, thereby showing only effect and mystifying the cause. He charges the space through the light, so his work is ultimately more involved with mystery than with process. The process is concealed, unlike the literalism of so much Minimal art. I feel infinitely closer to Turrell obviously, than to Flavin.

**AK:** The *Guardian* paintings, perhaps because of their irregular silhouettes, also seem oper-

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"HERA'S WALL" PARTIAL VIEW 1978



"RITUAL BRIDGE" 1983

rather than closed, partial or intermediary rather than complete, and iconic despite their personage-like aspects.

**BH:** True. The silhouettes of the *Guardian* paintings point toward a place of magic—the charged center of the *Temple*—rather than containing magic in themselves.

**AK:** You once said you found the *Guardian* image by playing around with the scraps of arcs and segments left over from cutting out the circles in the collage studies for your paintings, so I guess their somewhat provisional quality is basic to them. I know you see them as units in a procession. At least that is how you used them in "Sacred Spaces," where you

set up visual congruencies between them and the winged warriors on Assyrian reliefs or the three kingly figures in the right foreground of Piero della Francesca's "Flagellation." But it seems to me that they also can stand alone quite successfully.

**BH:** Even when they are alone they remain directional, directing your gaze one place rather than another. In the context of the *Temples*, the *Guardians* point to something that is not a painted surface.

**AK:** If anything, their colorfulness makes a connection past the white or neutral colors of the *Temples* to the colored light within their confines. The *Temples* then evolved into the

early freestanding sculptures, retaining painted areas within the context of natural wood, something that no longer happens.

**BH:** But still the sculptures, starting with the large, outdoor "Ritual Bridge," instead of being icon-like objects containing magic, are settings for ritual. They're loci for some sort of action to take place. In the "Ritual Bridge" the most highly charged place was the red-lined opening in the upright through which one sighted the twin-towers of Manhattan. As with the *Temples*, the most charged thing again is the negative space—the hole and not the donut, you might say. When I started the smaller *Altar* sculptures, the most important fact about them was their sense of being objects with a function, furniture for a ritual, rather than objects to be worshipped, like a crucifix or a totem. They were literally "place"—empty-top tables for some unknown rites. These empty surfaces are like the open squares in the *Temples*. I can't tolerate someone putting something on the altar surface any more than Turrell can tolerate someone actually walking into one of his perceptual spaces.

**AK:** There is however a crucial difference between the two of you in your stress on the rough wood you use and his dematerialization of the piece's physicality.

**BH:** I'm interested in the spread from the homely physical look of the work to the refined mystery that it supports. The emotional experience I want the work to provide is not physically self-contained, but rather an implied passage from the profane to the sacred. In the "Ritual Bridge," in particular, I wanted a sense of a rite of passage, whereas in a work by Turrell one is often confronted by a closed-off and intrinsically complete ethereal experience. I like the vulnerability and physicality of the wood supporting an ethereal experience. The fact that the wood is old and weathered literally conveys the notion of pass-  
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## APRIL KINGSLEY

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ing time. Instead of an instant immersion in a new experience, it is gradual over time. I want to implicate human history.

**AK:** Turrell wants to sidestep it. But most art people who see your sculptures probably relate them to Brancusi's wooden pieces and wouldn't even think of Turrell having any relationship to your work.

**BH:** Brancusi made votive objects. I don't. The viewer is irrelevant in Brancusi's world of things—even unwelcome. All of my *Altars* demand a viewer, a participator. They are pointed directly at the viewer. When you wander into that roomful of Brancusi sculptures at MOMA, you feel like an intruder, a stumblebum amongst the angels. I want my *Altars* to directly face and challenge and unnerve the viewer. I want that, not cool indifference or moral superiority. In real life, nobody's as pure as a Brancusi. The physical impurity of my wooden surfaces relates to the viewer's own physicality and morality.

**AK:** I've observed a definite purism about the way you go about constructing your sculptures, however.

**BH:** It's important to me that the construction is understated. I want all the relationships to seem not to be the result of mere decorative, manmade decisions. I love the line of Flaubert's where he said that "an artist should be in his work like God in nature: present everywhere, but visible nowhere."

**AK:** So the decisions and methods must be hidden.

**BH:** Yes, and there's also the level on which I want to let the material be. If it looks too contrived or messed with, you see the artist's fingerprints all over it. If I have a piece of wood eight feet long, I try to use it whole, all eight feet of it, and if I have to cut it, I try to conceal that cut. So I remove the fingerprints that way.

**AK:** I see a connection between the way you abut the units in a piece, or have them just about touch, or pass by one another, and the Constructivist strategies of Rietveld and Mondrian.

**BH:** I feel very close to Mondrian because of his attempt to combine the static and dynamic in the same object. Ideally, I would like to take five pieces of wood and make something that has the fixed, hieratic quality of an altar, but that also has a dynamic, modern, even suspended anti-architectural quality. In architecture you want to create the illusion of stability so you overbuild to give that illusion. It is emotionally reassuring to the viewer . . .

**AK:** Except for Baroque architecture, of course.

**BH:** Deliberately creating gaps where things don't meet, or cantilevers, is my way of being non-architectural in the forms and creating the illusion of dynamism.

**AK:** I see a definite relationship between your sculptures and Abstract Expressionist painting, particularly that of Franz Kline.

**BH:** I agree. After all I was, once upon a time, an Abstract Expressionist painter. My forms aren't closed in the ancient, traditional, manner of making sculpture. Brancusi's "Birds in Space," like any stone sculpture has a holistic sense to it. Only the relation of the stone to the various parts of the base is collage-like. I'd rather have the sculpture be like a Mondrian painting—made up of distinctly legible parts that create an active whole.

**AK:** Being involved with the Sculpture Center, and with women's sculpture in particular, I've become aware of how much of today's sculpture aspires to material anonymity. Mixed media is the designated medium ninety-nine percent of the time, so that a sculptor working exclusively in one material, the way Livio Saganic does in slate, and you do in wood, is a rare exception. And the mixture of media in most sculpture is usually so homogenized one cannot figure out from the look of the piece what its major physical components are. You are clearly working in a very different manner.

**BH:** No one else seems to be using imperfect, weathered materials within a Constructivist, Modernist vocabulary and idiom.

**AK:** Di Suvero briefly used rough materials in a Baroque manner, but now, when he works in a Constructivist idiom, he uses the material of modern construction, namely steel.

**BH:** The standard thing is to use clean Modernist materials with a clean, Constructivist vocabulary. It goes so well with the decor in a cold, corporate setting.

**AK:** Someday we may feel a sense of nostalgia for the pre-rust belt economy to which such artwork refers. I prefer Greece as a subject for nostalgic longing.

**BH:** Yes, but not necessarily the Greece of picture postcards. When we went to the Acropolis, I was most excited by the Propylea, the gateway. The Parthenon, marvelous though it is, is too much like an icon, a destination. But the Propylea implies ongoing passage rather than arrival. You're different on either side of it. It's not an immediate, confrontational kind of experience, but rather one that takes place over time.

**AK:** I know you've been talking about making some gateway kinds of sculptures.

**BH:** Yes. I've played around with the image before, and I want to come back to it. I also want to make some little sacred landscapes, table-top pieces.

**AK:** Like the plaster pieces on tables you made in the early sixties?

**BH:** Not exactly. They were so primitive.

**AK:** Were those old plaster pieces influenced by Noguchi's playground models?

**BH:** They were sources of the idea. Some were done literally as tables, which still interests me. But now I want to make small sculptures in ceramic that would suggest temple spaces, places for ritual, like the studies I did out of wood for plazas a few years ago.

**AK:** I know you were tremendously affected by the experience of moving through the structured spaces at the Palace of Minos at

Knossos.

**BH:** Greek sites like that imply the presence of people—ancient Greeks—in a way that Gothic cathedrals don't imply the presence of medieval worshippers. Cathedrals are more self-contained. Greek temples on their sites, the Propylea, the organization of the views of the Parthenon from the pathways up the Acropolis all imply the necessity of ancient Greeks—actual people—moving through them to complete the experience. The Peruvian altars in Macchu Picchu also imply the need of human participants for completion. But the Gothic cathedral is so full of icons that it seems somehow too literal, too finished off.

**AK:** People are always looking for literal references to the UFO phenomenon in your work, and you do feel there must be some influence, but are there any recognizable connections?

**BH:** It's a metaphorical thing. My painting and sculpture embraces the *idea* of mystery. What I'm talking about is more the situation of a Rothko, where mystery is stated and information is withheld. It's not a religious thing. Religion involves dogma, a structured belief system, which I find antithetical to my nature. Though the UFO phenomenon is undoubtedly connected with certain preoccupations in my work, my roles in the two areas are contradictory. In art I'm content to embrace mystery *per se* and to deal with it as self-sufficient emotional content. I take wood and canvas and pigment and try to create mystery. But in my UFO investigations I take a mysterious given and try to analyze it, rationalize it, and make it understandable—to demystify it so to speak. The mystical side of my nature comes out in my art; the rational, scientific side comes out in my UFO research. There I become an earthbound detective, a flatfoot. I only fly in my art.

Paul Gauguin's famous painting, "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?," asks a question. Religious art provides answers. The fact that the question has no answer makes it that much more powerful. It's the question that I'm interested in, not the answer.

*This year, Random House published Intruders Budd Hopkins's second book to result from his UFO research. Also this year, one of his sculptures, "Altar" (1985), was acquired by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and this summer the artist will have the first primary sculptural exhibition of his long career. His strange and, yes, mysterious sculptures will be on view at the Long Point Gallery from July 26th through August 8th.*

*April Kingsley is an independent curator and critic. Her most recent book is on the Ash Car School.*