

Sculpture Breaks the Mold Of Minimalism

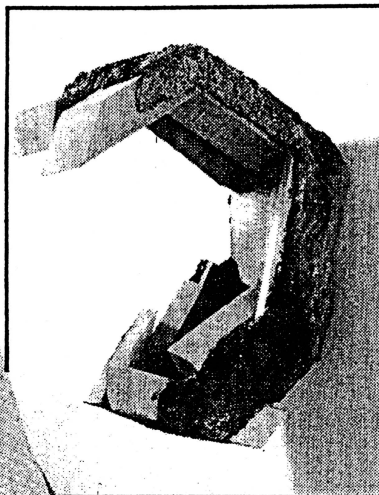
By MICHAEL BRENSON

This has been a November to remember for sculpture. There may never have been as many good sculpture shows in one city at one time. Together they sum up the last 25 years. And they suggest that sculpture in the United States is at its most critical juncture since Minimalism, with its hard edges, seamless surfaces and primary forms, charted a new, American sculptural course and in the process boxed and walled in every alternative. The boxes and walls have opened up. The hard skin has been broken and the currents

and the freedom to know how to use them. It has the potential for abstraction, and it can once again tap human and psychological depths that are only available through the human figure. Right now it is in sculpture that the art world is most likely to find the scope, the lack of dogmatism and the sense of possibility it needs.

The present sculptural situation is far more than just a bubbly, effervescent pluralism in which everyone drinks to everyone else's health. There is a high level of accomplishment in almost every sculptural area. There is also an involvement with big issues — technology and nature, Europe and America, the artist as maker and product. In sculpture

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Lisa Kultima

There may never have been as many good sculpture shows in one city—Above, from left, Joel Shapiro's untitled work at Paula Cooper, Michael Gitlin's "Unembraceable" at John Davis and Carol Hepper's "Three Stroke Roll" at the Sculpture Center.

sealed inside have begun to roar and swell. The skin itself has changed. It is now made of organic as well as industrial materials, and it can be molded by hand as well as fabricated by machine. And, not surprisingly, that skin may once again take human shape.

There is a human and artistic breadth in sculpture that right now does not exist in any other medium. Painting has become so saturated with rhetoric and theory that it is almost impossible for younger painters in New York to think big. Conceptual Art, as indispensable as it is, lends itself to hard, sharp insights that can never be embodied enough to make us feel connected to people and things with which it is concerned. Sculpture has benefited from its isolation. It has been able to follow its own drummer and take its time, and it has no such limits.

Indeed sculpture now seems to have everything it needs. It has the pictorial as well as the sculptural, the physical as well as the conceptual. It has a dizzying diversity of ma-

as a whole, there is the beginning of a will to synthesis that for a long time has not even been the stuff of dreams.

We are a long way from Minimalism. There will always be respect for the Minimalist ability to shift the focus from the sculptural interior that was central to traditional sculpture and define the object in terms of its environment. But the resulting rejection of interiority in sculpture — with all that the interior means as a metaphor for the inner life — has been repressive. And in the internationalism of the 1980's, Minimalism's once liberating repudiation of Europe seems restrictive and even provincial. Furthermore, the 1960's faith in technological salvation, which was reflected in the Minimalist preference for industrial materials, is no longer widely shared.

Steve Currie, who is having his first solo show at the Grace Borgenicht Gallery (through Wednesday), is representative of a number of sculptors of his generation. His reliefs and free-standing objects are attempts to balance technology and nature, respect for the sculptural surface and respect for the life inside it. His "Harrow" suggests both a natural shape, like a crescent moon, and a tool. If his

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"Tusk" has a hard Minimalist shell, it also has an interior; inside the pincers is a miniature amphitheater. One side of Currie's sculptures is usually wood, meticulously pieced together so that the object may fan out illusionistically like a budding flower. But the other side may be lead, which stops movement cold. The freshness of the work comes from the intelligence with which radically different perspectives are joined together.

Joel Shapiro is as responsible as anyone for the shift from a reductive to a synthetic approach — from an approach that defines art in terms of its architectural environment to one that can consider the environment without sacrificing the rich, rowdy texture of life within it. He took the basic vocabulary of Minimalism and bit by bit expanded it to include more and more of what Minimalism left out. Minimalism was abstract. Shapiro made little houses. Then he made people. The wood and bronze blocks in his current show at the Paula Cooper Gallery (through Dec. 6) carry on like acrobats and clowns and gesticulate like revelers and mourners. The show includes references to European art, from Greece on. There is also more experimentation with verticality and a more complex sprawling and tumbling about on the floor. Shapiro uses the building blocks of Minimalism to lead us to the circuses, dance halls and boulevards that are so much a part of modernist history.

The sculpture of Carol Hepper, one of seven artists in "The Sculptural Membrane," a group show at the Sculpture Center (through Dec. 3) reflects a widespread need to get beyond the struggle between the call of the wild and the pull towards a utopian future that has been waged throughout 20th-century art. Hepper grew up in South Dakota and moved to New York last year. Her rolling wooden armatures wrapped in deer hide and fish skin form something of a hymn to restless, frontier movement. But her sculptural shapes also come out of Constructivism, which used synthetic materials and placed its faith in science. Hepper's works wrestle with that faith, but they also hold onto it, unwilling to relinquish it completely.

If there is a single polemical gesture that has crystallized the present situation, it is the one made by William Tucker, formerly an articulate defender of a 1960's sculptural esthetic. In his gallery show last year, he took one of the polemical statements of Minimalism, Robert Morris's 1965 "Untitled (L-Beams)," and turned it inside out. Morris's three large L's were large plywood blocks with no sense of weight or interior. Tucker's three L's are gymnasts with surfaces like flesh rippling from the movement inside them. Morris's sculpture was rigorously abstract. Tucker's fills his rigorous geometry with figurative and organic associations.

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In the present sculptural situation, a great many developments and ideas have come together. They include the American tradition of sculptural involvement with the land that was established by Earthworks and Land Art. Both Arte Povera and contemporary English sculpture have offered alternatives to Minimalism, and both have been highly visible in New York during the last two years. The work of an English sculptor like Richard Deacon, who pours, screws and splashes together different materials in simple yet irrational constructions, has clearly left a mark on the new generation. Arte Povera's almost anarchic freedom with materials provides a foil to the rationalism of Minimalist structure. Sculpture in the United States, marked by the American romance with both nature and science, now needs both.

There are three distinguishing features of sculpture now. One is the diversity of, and freedom with, materials. Wood and bronze, which were all but banned from mainstream art in the 1960's and 70's, are everywhere. Scott Richter and Robin Hill are two of the many sculptors who build their simple, suggestive shapes with beeswax. There is a growing interest in glass, which is used in very different ways by Howard Ben Tré (at the Charles Cowles Gallery through Saturday), Christopher Wilmarth (at the Hirshl and Adler Modern Gallery through Dec. 3) and Nicholas Africano (at the Holly Solomon Gallery through Saturday).

The influential Martin Puryear weaves together all kinds of materials in his wonderfully clear yet allusive works, and in his hands each material represents a different thematic and cultural thread. No sculptor has been more successful in taking pure shapes like circles and cones and restoring to them an elemental mystery. In the sculptures of Jonathan Silver (at the Gruenebaum Gallery through Dec. 24) any approach to any material is possible. Almost anything from the plaster and bronze casting process can end up in a work.

No less fundamental is the attack on the authority of the sculptural skin. The machine-made surfaces of Minimalism tended to be smooth and inviolable. In the work of sculptors shaped by the 1960's such as John Duff (at the Blum Helman Gallery through Saturday) and John McCracken (at P.S. 1 through Dec. 21), fiberglass skins are sealed tight around sculptural armatures. For Richard Long (at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum through next Sunday) disrupting the surface of the earth or the walls or floor of a gallery would constitute a moral violation. For almost all the artists who found the faith in

the 1960's, violating the sculpture surface is still taboo.

But if the declaration of this authority was crucial once — a way of freeing art from illusionism, composition and the artist's hand, all of which were identified with European art — the authority inevitably became tyrannical. Long's and McCracken's attention to surface now seems as much a statement of protection as a statement of openness, as much denial as conviction.

In recent years sculptors have been trying to get inside, underneath or behind that skin. What they have found there can be strange and surprising. While Long glides along the surface of the earth, the magical effigies of Petah Coyne look as if they had been plucked out of it. In his "Blind Horn," now at the Sculpture Center, Creighton Michael seems to have gone inside a steel "Curve" of Ellsworth Kelly and found inside both a prison cell and a stained-glass window. After years of maintaining the surface integrity of his forged steel bars, Alain Kirili ripped the top off a forged aluminum bar that he contributed to a recent group show. What he found inside was as exposed and bristling as raw nerves.

Once the sculptural skin could be opened up, different sensibilities could emerge. The imposing surfaces of Minimalism were well suited to a very American, male sensibility. The emphasis was on power and mind. Feeling, however explosive, could only be expressed with the support of a hard, impersonal facade. If this led to works of impressive intelligence and conviction, it also led sculpture into Hemingway country, and a lot of people are not at home there.

The historical figure chosen by the curator Douglas Dreishpoon to preside over "The Sculptural Membrane" is Lee Bontecou. In the 1960's she used the primary shapes of Minimalism, but opened them up and exposed something dark and irrational inside. There are other women sculptors essential to sculpture now, notably Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois. The face of Minimalist sculpture is a mask. The fabrics of Hesse and the plasters and stones of Bourgeois can leave everyone in their presence feeling emotionally naked. With the disruption of its seamless surface, sculpture has regained the potential for sustained emotional and psychological investigation.

The third distinguishing feature is the return of the human figure. It has erupted everywhere. It is there in the recent work of the former Minimalist Ronald Bladen, and it is in the sculpture of Michael Gitlin, whose gestural, rubbed reliefs also evolve from austere, abstract beginnings. The human figure appears in the sculpture of John Monti, one of many sculptors for whom the human figure is viable again because of the example of tribal art. There is a fascinating concern with the human torso that touches the recent work of sculptors as different as Scott Richter, Beverly Fishman, Joel Shapiro and Judith Shea.

One of the few sculptors who has been able to deal with the whole human figure in a way that is neither anecdotal nor academic is Jonathan Silver. One reason is that his figures are at the same time modeled, assembled and constructed. Another is that they are rarely built outward from a central core. They seem rather to have been pieced and added together. As irrational as the figures seem, the parts always somehow cohere.

And as different as its many parts may be, contemporary sculpture in this country may itself be a new whole. ■