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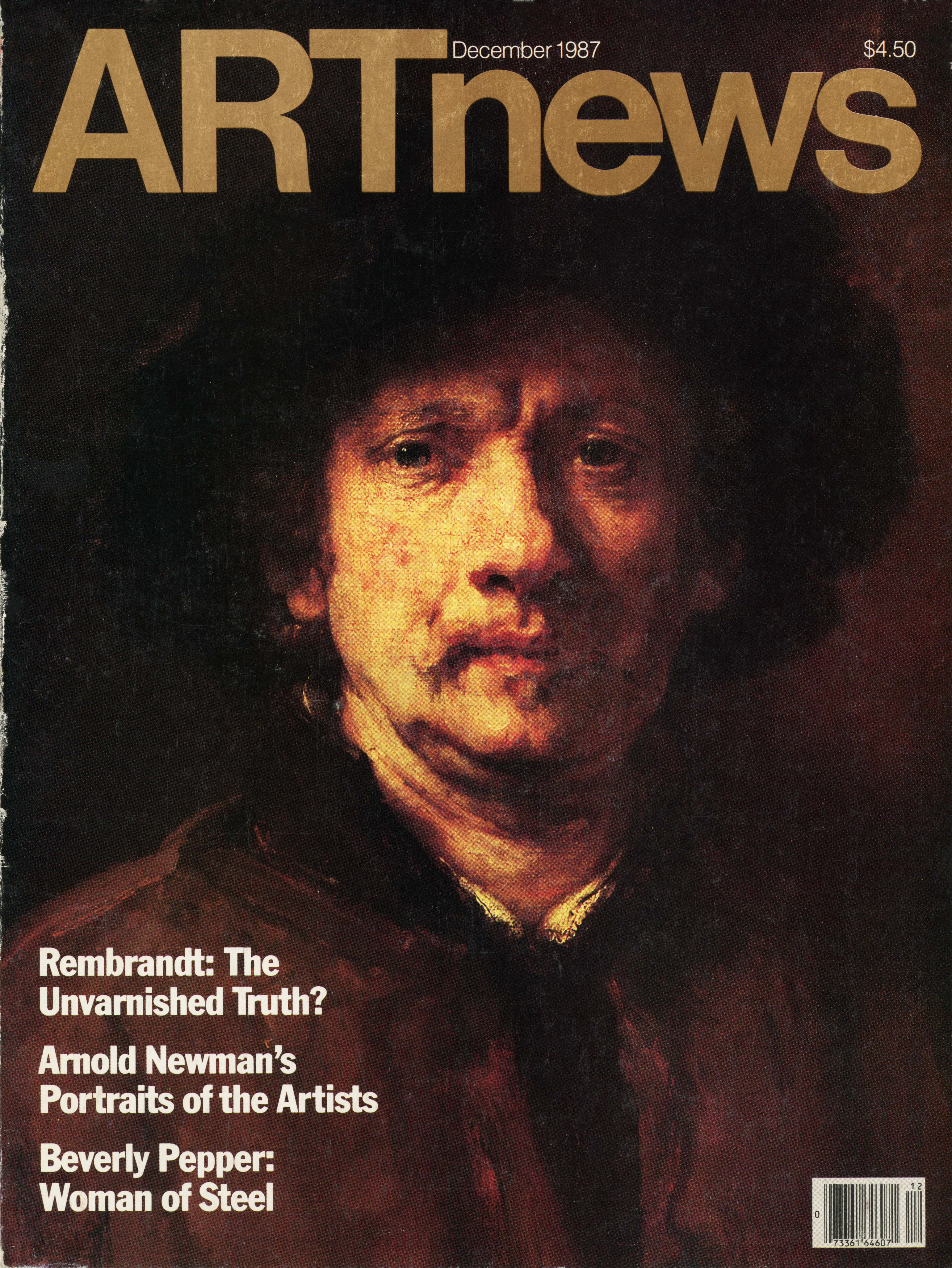

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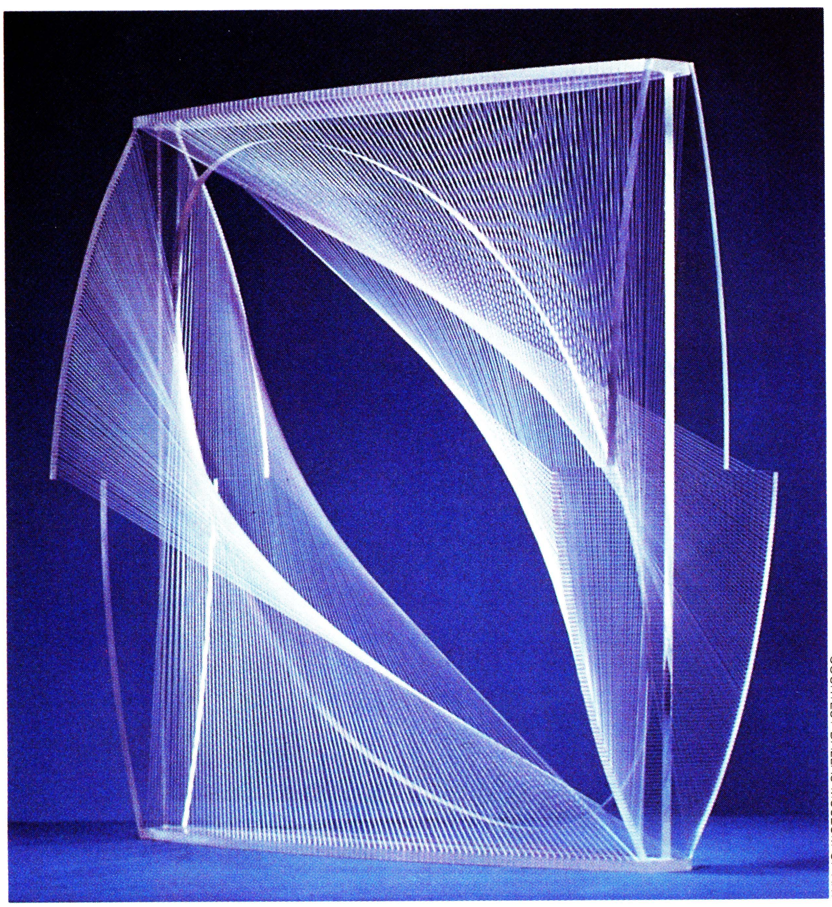
GABO'S PROGENY

Ten years after Gabo's death, contemporary sculptors are broadening and reinterpreting possibilities he introduced. They make constructed works that explore surface and interior space while expressing emotion through abstract form *by Cynthia Nadelman*



COURTESY DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

In ***Linear Construction in Space No. 1 (Variation)****, 1942-43, Naum Gabo created an implied surface while allowing a view of the sculpture's interior.*

In this century, generations of sculptors have come of age secure in the knowledge that construction is one of the primary avenues open to them. The constructive method, which the Russian sculptor Naum Gabo (1890-1977) pioneered, freed artists to make sculpture using materials and methods never before deemed appropriate. Explaining the connection between construction and sculptural form in 1920, Gabo wrote, "We construct our work as the universe constructs its own, as the engineer constructs his bridges, as the mathematician his formula of the orbits." Gabo wanted to harness science and technology to a kind of sculpture that would be forward looking and yet still tied to human expression.

In Gabo's work, engineering and building principles—like those governing the structure of the Eiffel Tower and the first airplanes, still wondrous and exciting phenomena at the beginning of the century—find their echo in cellular structure, molecules, and the human body (the rib cage, for example). For Gabo, these principles also correspond to the interior and surface makeup of the earth itself, and to the structure of the universe. Add the illustration of abstract concepts and theories—such as the space-time continuum—and the psychology that makes us create these concepts, and one gets a sense of the variety of references constructive works can suggest.

"A work of art," Gabo once said, "restricted to what the artist has put in it, is only a part of itself. It only attains full stature with what people and time make of it." (Translations are taken from *The Tradition of Constructivism*, edited by Stephen Bann, Thames and Hudson, 1974.) Appropriately enough, people and time gave a quiet significance to the Gabo retrospective organized two years ago by the Dallas Museum of Art and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf and seen in 1986 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Now, ten years after Gabo's death, many contemporary sculptors, including Scott Sherk, Creighton Michael, Carol Hepper, Steve Keister, Steve Wood, Heide Fasnacht, Joe Neill, Owen Morrel, and Helene Brandt, are producing work that broadens and reinterprets possibilities he introduced. For this generation of artists, working at the opposite end of the century, natural materials—from animal hides to wood to handmade paper—hold their own appeal and predominate.

Gabo in his studio ca. 1948: a work of art attains "full stature" only with time.

Gabo's first important works, begun in 1916-17, were basically figural explorations of the human head and torso made from various materials, notably plastic and celluloid. What was revolutionary was that they were formed of intersecting planes, with only the suggestion of a surface. His next major step was to create hard-edged, geometric, architectonic works that were most unusual for their use of more advanced types of plastic and related materials. (Gabo, born Naum Pevsner, changed his name early in his career so as not to be confused with his elder brother, the sculptor Antoine Pevsner. The brothers often worked near one another and in similar styles.)

In 1937 Gabo began a series of what he called "spherical constructions," demonstrations of how lines and forms interconnect through circular motion. The transparent plastic material used to make some of these objects simply emphasized the accessibility and visibility of the interiors.

In 1942 the sculptor began to string nylon monofilament around a central, often transparent core or armature to create forms. Later, he would string metal wire around metal cores or mix materials. The effect was an implied surface that allowed a view of the interior. Thus depth, not mass or volume, was used to produce a sense of space.

These "linear' constructions," as they were called, which Gabo continued to make through the '70s, build up form concentrically or elliptically. As in engineering, graduated lengths of straight lines were used to yield curves. While revealing the systems by which they support themselves, these abstract sculptures also express an inner rhythm and tension that suggest the spiritual or the emotional. Similarly, many contemporary artists make constructed works that articulate form not so much through volume and mass as through explorations of surface, direction, depth, and interior space—works that also express emotion and content through abstract form.

Gabo drew a distinction between "constructive" and "constructivist" art. The latter term, he said, had been adopted by a group of artists who wanted to deny any value to art for art's sake—a stance with which he disagreed. Gabo had left Russia in 1922, and rid himself of the ideological strictures then dominating Soviet art. But he was hardly a reactionary. He always relished making public art, cherishing the ideal that art could help human beings communicate with one another on the highest possible level.

Scott Sherk, the one artist in the contemporary group who works with the figure, claims Gabo outright as a key influence. His work relates to Gabo's earliest sculptures, in their desire to express shape and volume "by indicating the inside of a form as opposed to its outside," as Sherk puts it.

The effort to reveal the interior originally led Sherk to work with Plexiglas, which certainly brought him close to Gabo's methods and philosophy. He now makes his sculptures by arranging small, abstract wood elements against flat backgrounds. His wall-mounted pieces, usually painted white, rely on lighting and shadow to enhance the sense of outward form created by the emergence of the projecting elements from the backgrounds. The resulting configurations suggest specific shapes, generally of still lifes or figures, through the buildup of interconnecting surfaces.

From Sherk's work to that of Creighton Michael might seem a long leap, yet what binds the two is the connection with their constructive forebear. Michael stretches Rhoplex-covered paper or fiberglass over frameworks of wood dowels to create abstract shapes whose translucent surface covering leaves the framework visible. The building methods—and the engineering principles—thus exposed remind one both of early airplane technology and of the structure of insect wings and, in the process, make a statement about the closeness of the two.

The shapes of the objects may also suggest such readings. Often Michael will twist forms or leave them open. Recently he has added a sort of exoskeleton to some of his sculptures, with the result that they seem turned inside out. The notion of drawing in space is thus played off against the idea of creating enclosed forms, where the ''drawing'' is interiorized. One can't get much closer to a thorough study of interiors. Michael often hangs large pieces at difficult angles—from the wall, the ceiling, or both—testing and exposing the properties of his materials and enlisting the walls and ceilings as participants.

Carol Hepper has found flexibility and adaptability in a variety of natural materials, from animal hides and fish skins to willow branches. The route of her materials from natural state to constructed sculpture is particularly meaningful, because it expresses so succinctly the relationship between the structures of living things and built things. Yet Hepper's floor and wall sculptures grapple with issues of sculptural abstraction in just as pure a manner as Gabo's works made from synthetic, historyless materials. (Actually, the aging plastic in his original pieces now has a historical look all its own.) The tension from bending straight wood branches into curved shapes is not only felt in the forms but left visible in the linear underpinnings that show through the stretched, translucent surfaces of the sculptures. In these works, which might be called ''expressive constructions,'' the pieced-together, openwork element, and sometimes the shapes themselves, literally guide us into the interiors—just as the content and feeling in the individual works lead inward to a more metaphorical heartland.

Two other artists whose work has depended on ''skins'' of some kind are Steve Keister and Steve Wood. Keister's work shares with Gabo's a smooth, mathematically cool elucidation of twisting curves as the means of exploring depth and interior. His sculptures are made from sewn and stretched spandex, covered and stiffened with fiberglass and epoxy resin. They have tight surfaces whose pushing and pulling configurations suggest internal tension in much the same way as do Gabo's strung forms, where skins and surfaces are only implied. No doubt the synthetic spandex, which can be stretched in different directions—hence Keister's twisted geometry—would have intrigued Gabo. Ironically, it is the armature, incorporated in the makeup of the fabric itself, that is invisible in this artist's works—here, the surface is all. In recent sculptures, Keister has added curvilinear chair parts and their skeletal structures that echo the topological shapes produced by the stretched spandex.

Wood's constructions from the early '80s

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

ABOVE Owen Morrel's *Pilot Bridge*,1984, echoes Gabo's large-scale public work. BELOW Creighton Michael leaves his building methods—and the engineering principles—exposed to view.

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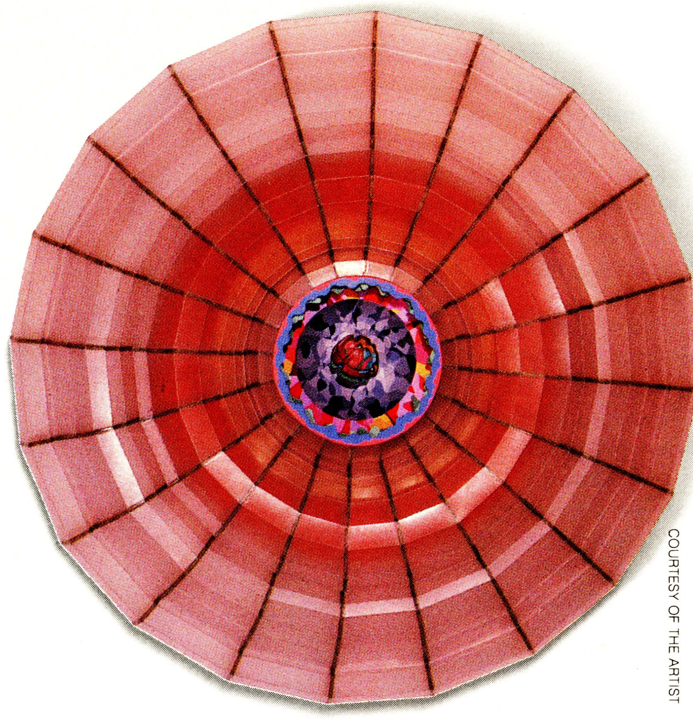
only partially yield their interiors to the viewer. His opaque cloth skins are ripped here and there to tantalize us, and sections of makeshift-looking armatures protrude from the ends of the stretched-cloth shapes.

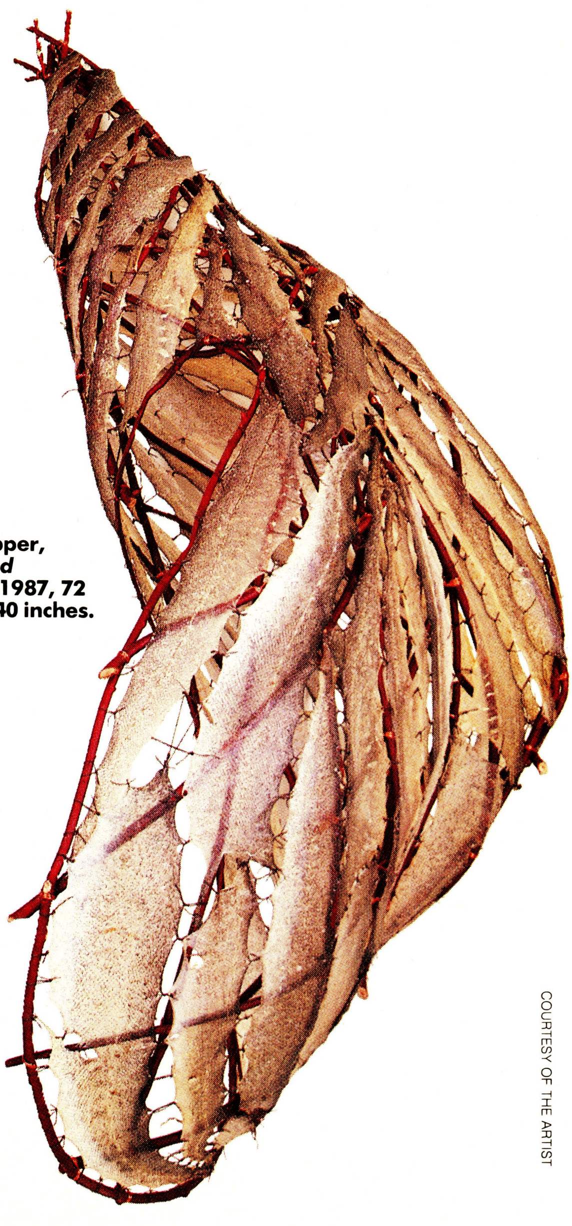
The works' surfaces are used to suggest their interiors, which seem, once again, to be characterized by internal pushing and pulling. Thin threads crisscrossing the surfaces help hold the pieces together, while also suggesting lines of force creating form. They, along with our rudimentary knowledge of the presence of the armatures, almost call into question the necessity of the cloth skins. Yet the mysterious surface qualities of the skins and the forms defined by them are what give the works their emotional power. Wood's newest pieces are smooth, solid-looking wood sculptures whose irregular contours obliquely hint at the various forces—mathematical or instinctive—that go into the creation of the finished forms.

Heide Fasnacht points out that any connection she might feel to Gabo would be through the method of working incrementally. Where Gabo's stringing was a way of building up curved form through measured variations in the lengths of the straight lines formed by strung wire or monofilament, Fasnacht's sculptures are made of graduated, circular, laminated plies that she builds up and then cuts into. Her early "phenomenological" works, as she calls them, are almost large-scale explanations of the principles involved in their making. This constant awareness of process, of the relationship between form and content, was not alien to Gabo. In 1942 he wrote, " 'Perfection,' in the Constructive sense, is not a state but a process; not an ultimate goal but a direction."



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Joe Neill's *Earth Aether Series E*, 1987, diameter 42 inches, ten inches deep. Incremental layering keeps leading the viewer toward the centers of these imploded forms.



Carol Hepper, *Reticulated Chamber*, 1987, 72 by 29 by 40 inches.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

In recent years, Fasnacht has turned her sculpture in a more expressionist direction. By hammering in new splines at angles, or by alternating the colors of sets of plies, she creates a sense of the formal and emotional tension of opposing rhythms and forces. There is also a linearity in her work derived from the buildup of layers, which is especially evident in the recent all-black standing sculptures. It reminds us of how the piece grew, even as it is an aspect of the finished form. Viewing them, one can't help thinking of growth rings on trees—or, for that matter, of denser Gabos—with interiors that develop organically along with the overall shape and structure.

Joe Neill's sculpture refers to nothing less than the surface-to-core layering of the earth itself, the movement of the earth, and the relationship of this movement to the form of the earth. All of these issues are addressed in the works themselves, which, of course, can do no more or less than suggest sculptural solutions. But in doing so they reveal how sculpture stands for all structural relationships. Neill's work of the early '80s began the enterprise that is continued by other means in his recent sculpture. The works in his "World Line" series generally present a cut-back view of the earth's surface as the tiny core of the sculpture, with continuous, curving wood lines—formed from straight and bent pieces—reaching into space and creating a network of ellipses around the central form on the wall. These represented orbits and the circular movement of the earth—in short, movement over time.

In his most recent work, Neill has consolidated earlier ideas into more solid, closed, almost imploded forms. His circular wall sculptures seem flat in certain respects, but a kind of incremental layering keeps leading us toward the centers. In the newest works, in fact, the sculptor has made use of translucent plastic surfaces to hint at and gradually reveal interior surprises and depths.

Owen Morrel, a sculptor whose interest in creating large-scale public art has led him to an automatic kinship with Gabo, has been working with form in a related way. In his recent metal pieces, there is an emphasis on circular, spiraling forms and on an idea of movement. His sculptures, with their implied trajectories, bring to mind airships and even weapons. This, in turn, connects his work to Neill's—with its built-in orbital ellipses—and, of course, to references to atoms in the work of Gabo. In such elements as the staircases in his large-scale sculptures and the guy lines and tension cables in both the large and the smaller, more objectlike pieces (which the artist hopes may serve as maquettes for much larger future works), Morrel's work echoes the sense of direction and interior/exterior exploration of Gabo's stringed sculptures.

Another artist who makes participatory sculptures that, like some of Morrel's work, are meant to be entered or climbed on is Helene Brandt. Her work, made from bent and welded plumbing pipes usually supported by rows of straight pipes, exemplifies many engineering principles—including the idea of working incrementally. While looking, on the one hand, like small relatives of the Eiffel Tower, her armaturelike structures also have a biomorphic, organic attitude that makes them seem more than built structures. Titles amplify the connections: some works are called "Gazebos"—implying abodes or shelters—while others have names like *Carapace*, the word for an animal's hard, protective outer covering. We are reminded of a number of similar references in the sculpture of Creighton Michael and Carol Hepper. In Brandt's work, though, as in Gabo's, the skin is merely implied. The difference is that Brandt's denial of a membrane to her sculptures deliberately deals a low blow to their suggested functions as abodes. Thus, although people may actually sit inside them—open to view, of course—the works retain their status as formal sculptural investigations through the irony of their lack of a protective, insulating skin.

Undoubtedly, one could find artists in any decade of this century whose sculptures have affinities with Gabo's. There have been waves of artists interested in science, in engineering, in biomorphic forms, and in combinations of these concerns. But the direction in which the basically abstract, constructed sculptural object has recently been taken is a new one. Gabo's constructive model is an open book, without the canon that exists around Cubist sculpture, planar constructions, assemblage, or the tradition of drawing in space. And while Gabo made his way in advance of many current ideas, he did leave some avenues unexplored. Rather than plucking this artist from some appropriative sourcebook, it would seem that certain contemporary sculptors want to explore some of the same territory that inspired their predecessor, or at least pick up where he and others left off. The evidence that this area of modernism still has life left in it can only be described as "constructive." ■

Cynthia Nadelman, an art critic and poet, is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

COURTESY LESLIE CECIL GALLERY

ABOVE Scott Sherk, *After Roger Van der Weyden*, 1986, 48 by 18 by 16 inches. BELOW Helene Brandt temporarily inhabiting one of her constructions.

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