Open form sculpture

Alain Kirili is a French sculptor living in America who emerged within the artistic context of New York in the 1970s. He is, consequently, an artist whose work evades easy classification, and in many respects his work does not bear an obvious resemblance to either French or American art of that decade. It would be impossible to understand this work, therefore, without attempting to situate it somewhere between Europe and America. Kirili’s work, nevertheless, shares much with the history of sculpture in both France and the United States, and he willingly makes references, on the one hand, to Rodin, Maillol, Picasso, Julio González, Giacometti and, on the other, to David Smith, Barnett Newman and De Kooning.

These artists represented some of the most important innovations within the sculpture of this century. Picasso, González and Smith developed a form of constructed sculpture executed in direct welding, where open forms incorporated the space around the sculpture into the composition. This linear way of composing a sculpture was tantamount to a three-dimensional approximation of drawing. Giacometti and Newmann approached sculpture as an expression of the erect vertical position of the figure in space and as spatially demarcated by a plinth. At the same time, Giacometti sought to capture accurately the artist’s visual perception of the figure or head as statue and to render this in terms of modelling. Despite such innovations, sculptors such as Maillol and González retained a subject matter rooted in the tradition of statuary which treated, in particular, the female figure in terms of a Classicism based on ideal Mediterranean types, while artists such as Rodin and De Kooning, each in their own way, developed a form of modelled sculpture based on the human figure, which often introduced a near abstract approach to mass and surface texture expressed as modelling.

Kirili’s reference in certain early works is to the human form expressed as linear verticality and rendered in forged iron. Here the artist’s physical engagement with the process of manipulating the red hot iron in the forge defines the structure of the resulting sculpture. Works such as Untitled (1982–1983) and Solares ll (1984) point to the physicality of the sculpture as body and to the body of the artist as the force which shapes the sculpture. These are highly suggestive and sexualized works in which the element of verticality refers predominantly to masculine sexuality at the same time that such forms are manipulated so as to suggest a womb-like containment referring to female sexuality. In his modelled terracottas, such as the recent Chartres series (1993), the material of terracotta takes on the metaphorical presence of the female body and sex, while the incorporation of forged iron elements into the mass of the sculpture suggests an erotic celebration of both male and female sexuality.

And yet these works are abstract. Such references to the human body exist on the plane of metaphor and beyond their physical presence they are not literal; nevertheless, they foreground sculpture in forged iron as vertical line or terracotta as tactile mass. The references to the body derive from the artist’s relentless exploration of the sexual energy or pulsation involved in his own physical or bodily engagement.
with the materials of sculpture. For this reason, it would be wrong to think of these works as purist abstraction or as "Formalism" in the sense that this word was understood within the context of New York in the 1960s.

Rather the critical context of "Post-minimalism" in the 1970s may offer a more viable means of understanding this work. Post-Minimalism, an appellation coined by the critic Robert Pincus-Witten, was a reaction against the abstraction of Formalism and the repetition (what was referred to as seriality) of Minimalism; it was a reaction by which a group of New York artists sought to reintroduce personal and subjective content into sculpture and to reject abstract, objective and impersonal approaches to their media. This tendency adopted a pluralist stance in which a wide variety of approaches were explored which often focused on a highly subjective awareness of the human body. While Formalist and Minimalist artists, such as Frank Stella, Carl Andre, and Donald Judd, explored abstract compositional relationships, or mediated in their work on serial structures, the sculptors of the early 1970s experimented with what Robert Morris called "anti-form", or what Richard Tuttle called "Free-Form Sculpture". The concern with the subjective experience of one's own body and with the personal dimensions of human sexuality presented women artists with a particularly relevant set of critical and aesthetic concerns, especially in the case of sculptors such as Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis and Jackie Winsor, or the older French artist Louise Bourgeois, whose work was rooted in the earlier ethical stance adopted by Surrealism. Such artistic positions and critical perspectives indirectly informed Kirili's work produced in that decade.

**Commandment**

In the early 1980s Kirili began a series of works which departed from the references to the human body. These works are called *Commandment* and derive from the shape of the characters of the Hebrew alphabet. Here the work points to the presence of language as a sacred sign. Kirili began this series at a time when he first rented his New York loft and wanted to mark this event with a work which would be based on what he has called "a demultiplication of signs". At this time he was reading James Joyce and thinking of the idea of letters, a question he explored in discussions with the French writer and critic Philippe Sollers. Kirili did not want to do something literal or representational, but rather something which had more the quality of the "scriptural" and that could be expressed as a sculptural approach to the alphabet.

*Commandment* introduced a fragmented and varied set of signs which pointed to a coherent sculptural language. They moved away from the more classical concerns with the verticality of sculpture in space and the mass of the sculpture as body to a more horizontal concept of sculpture consisting of similar, though distinct units, spread out in space. These works extended the concern for the incorporation of content and meaning into the sculptural event. *Commandment II* (1980) is a more literal reference to the plastic
presence of an alphabet of signs, while in *Commandment XII* (1991) only the idea of each unit as a sign is evident. Here we are more in the presence of the idea of calligraphy, or what Julio González and later David Smith called “drawing in space”. This distinction seems all the more appropriate in that the first work is executed in forged iron and the second in torch cut iron. In the latter case, the torch is used to “draw” the characters in iron.

“Sculpting Jam Session” in Jazz

The recent series of terracotta sculptures called *Chartres* (1993) may be viewed as concerned with the architecture of the human body, but likewise they are concerned with conveying a sense of rhythm and pulse. Kirili executes the terracotta quickly and with great physical strength. The rhythm of work is one of a series of pulses of energy brought to bear on the material. Kirili has called this way of working "Action Sculpture", in deference to the earlier generation of American Abstract Expressionists. For example, Jackson Pollock’s approach to painting had involved a physical engagement with the painting, and he often worked on the floor from all sides of the canvas using a stick to apply the paint, an instance of a horizontal or non-hierarchical approach to art, what in music might be called free form. The rhythm of such work might be likened to that of the jazz drummer setting the syncopated beat for the ensemble. Recently, Kirili has engaged in experimental collaborations with Jazz musicians in what he calls a "Sculpting Jam Session". In one such session, which took place in the artist's loft, Roy Haynes played drums while Kirili sculpted in terracotta. What struck Kirili as extraordinary about Haynes, when he saw him play at the Village Vanguard, was the similarity of their physical stature. Likewise the drummer’s movements in playing paralleled that of the sculptor in executing a terracotta. Kirili insists that these sessions have nothing to do with a performance. Creation is not a public act. This private collaboration was, however, documented by the French video artist Jean-Paul Fargier and forms part of this exhibition. In a similar experiment Kirili recently collaborated with the soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy on a similar Jam Session. The sculptures created during this session were then presented in New York at the alternative Thread Waxing Space, and accompanied by a performance by Lacy.

Open Form Sculpture

The title of this exhibition derives from the idea of “free form improvisation” in jazz music. Kirili’s exploration of *Commandments* gave rise to the creation of other works in series, consisting of multiple components, and increasingly he incorporated greater degrees of openness in such works, often allowing for modification of the arrangement in the installation. Out of a consideration of language he arrived at a concern for music, and the approach to sculpture was one of repetition and difference. The use of different, physically distinct components within each sculpture allowed for a considerable degree of variation within the treatment of a given form, and Kirili increasingly incorporated chance into his way of working.
Works like *Spirit of Mingus* (1992) involve the incorporation of fragments of scrap metal discovered in an old factory. These happy finds then become the basis for the sculpture and are formal metaphors for the rhythms and modulations of jazz music. When once asked if his work was "atonal", Charlie Mingus responded that he did not think of his music in these terms, and that his intention was to keep the composition as tonal as possible, but expressed with several compositional lines being played at once, what he called "a little beyond the elementary" and simply as "the way I feel."

"A little beyond the Elementary"

Kirili has broken the formal integrity of the sculpture as solid figure. His sculpture can be thought of as tonal in the same sense that Mingus' improvisations are tonal, in that he always grounds the work in a clear visual structure, often anchoring the pieces on plinths which are incorporated into the overall structure of the sculpture. This base line, if you will, provides the grounding for the presentation of a polyrhythmic composition. A clear vocabulary is established through the presence of the base elements and the similarity of the supported forms. This vocabulary is then rhythmically elaborated and modulated in the play of repetition and variation. Kirili captures the pulse of the jazz musician's breathing in this visual performance. As with the physical engagement of his own body in the creation of the terracotta sculptures, here Kirili incorporates this sense of rhythmic breathing into sculpture. This rhythm resonates with energetic pulsations which can only be thought of as an expression of the sexuality and eroticism implicit in the syncopated beat of free jazz.

*Nord Sud* (1992) represents a distillation of the simplest sculptural means. Pieces of granite have been placed on a series of iron tubes. The placement of the tubes is spaced rhythmically in the gallery space, the intervals between the tubes becoming, as it were, part of the sculptural concept. Kirili's exploration of the spatial aspect of sculpture parallels Lester Young's advice to the young Charlie Parker "to shape the air" with sound. In *Nord Sud* the granite has been painted a bright orange colour with a special paint which prevents the rusting of iron. In doing this Kirili establishes an identification between the material of iron and granite. Sculpture may be thought of as defined by gravity and weight, and here through the transformation of the material granite, Kirili achieves an extraordinary sense of weightlessness, an equivalent, I might say, of a similar weightlessness and preoccupation with acoustic evocations of flight so evident in Parker's compositions and performances.

This loss of gravity is a consistent theme in Kirili's open form works. For example, a work like *Le Boiser (La Vague)* (1991; not in exhibition) consists of wooden bases which support slabs of Carrara marble. The positioning of the marble components is suggestive almost of an undulating suspension of weight. The title further implies the meeting of the masculine and the feminine in an embrace, expressed sculpturally in the meeting of the horizontal and vertical orientation
of the stones and in the image of the surging rhythm of the sea, expressed in the spatial arrangements of the marble components.

North / South

The sculpture Nord Sud borrows its title from a French avant-garde review published by Pierre Reverdy (1917). The title of that publication referred to a now defunct line on the Paris Metro. This was the line on which the poets and writers living in the quarter of Montmartre took to the cafés of Montparnasse, where they could see performances of American jazz music and could visit the famed Bal Nègre cabaret. Kirili's sculptures recuperate the French and Spanish Surrealists' concern with the workings of the unconscious and striving for a liberated expression of human instinct. Artists such as André Masson, Joan Miró and Alberto Giacometti, together with writers such as Michel Leiris, Georges Bataille, Robert Desnos and the anthropologist André Schaeffner, were among the first in France to celebrate the vitality of jazz music and Afro-American dance. In a similar vein, though one which is far less naive, I would argue, Kirili celebrates the contemporary contribution of African-American musical innovation, as is evident in his recent series of sculptures entitled Harlem's Rhythms (1991–1992; not in exhibition). More generally his recent tendency to use black terracotta may be seen as an homage to the creative impulse of Black America. The title Nord Sud may also be read as indicating the metaphorical link between the North and South: the geographical axis which gave rise in the United States to jazz in the first instance, and the same geographical axis in Europe, best symbolized in the location of France, and Paris as the ideal centre of France, where it was possible to attain a synthesis between the North and the South, the Protestant and the Catholic, the irrationality of northern Expressionism and the instinctive harmony of an idealized Mediterranean Classicism.

South

Nord Sud is accompanied by a sculpture called Sud (1992), which breaks the strict relationship between the torch cut iron forms and the wooden plinths. Some plinths are turned on their sides; others are inverted and stacked. In some instances the wood plinth dispenses with the iron components and the repetition of the plinth echoes the endless column by the Rumanian sculptor Brancusi. Sud presents a more halting rhythmic structure, in which some stacked plinths support the torch cut iron fragments; others together with the iron elements are turned on their side; and still others adopt the more conventional arrangement of the plinth as base or support. Here the interweaving of tonal compositions points towards the open complexity of free form improvisation and the possibility of exploring randomness in the play of the sculpture. The iron fragments introduce yet another compositional deviation from the base line structure of the sculpture in that they are spontaneously drawn in iron with the torch and in that their arrangement on the plinths remains open to interpretation and allows for a response to the nature of the space in
which the sculpture is staged. Such a composition would approach
dissonance were it not partially anchored in a tonal structure articu-
lated in the vocabulary of the plinth.

Atelier

L’Atelier (1992) presents a repertoire of the range of possibilities Kirili
has explored in his recent sculpture. Metaphorically, it represents the
site of creation as well as the panorama of what, in Kirili’s conception,
sculpture can be. Here the clear base line articulated by the plinth is
broken and the different components within the overall arrangement
presented in an apparently haphazard order, as if this order were to
echo the accumulation of possibilities typical of any sculptor’s studio.
For Picasso, in the series of etchings called The Sculptor’s Studio (from
the “Vollard Suite” 1930–1937), it was precisely the crucible of the
sculptor’s studio, which provoked what he represented as a near
mythic form of poetic inspiration. Not surprisingly, it was the studio
at Boisgeloup which gave rise to the remarkable series of direct weld-
ed iron sculptures he made in collaboration with Julio González at the
beginning of the 1930s, and, tellingly, these were composed from a
heterogeneous collection of found objects and iron fragments which
he and González had gathered together in the studio.

There is also the feeling of discovery in Alain Kirili’s L’Atelier, and also
a sense of balance and lightness, stated as a dynamic relationship
between horizontal and vertical, weight and weightlessness. The idea
for such an arrangement, gathering together the repertoire of the
artist’s materials and forms, relates to another, earlier sculpture enti-
tled Concert (1985; not in exhibition). In that instance the range of
sculptural possibilities was presented as statuary resting on a wooden
base, as if in a classical arrangement of theme and variations. In
L’Atelier the register is all the more polyphonic and sculpture present-
ed not as rooted to the floor, or as defined by the tradition of the
statue, but as something potentially weightless and open to the space
around it. This loss of gravity may be read as a visual equivalent to
the loss of tone (atonality) and the free exploration of dissonance or
sound. If music is composed not of notes, or pitches, but of sounds,
and if in music the intervals defining the sounds take on a signifi-
cance equal to that of the sounds themselves, then, I might say, sculp-
ture is composed not of forms, but out of the relationship established
between forms in space and out of space itself.

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