

BRADFORD SMITH

BRONZE SCULPTURE, 1964 - 1984

JULY 28 - AUGUST 25, 1984

in the Art Gallery...



St. John's
College

BRAD SMITH/AND THE ARCHETYPAL ARTIST/ARTIST AS SMITH

In the Post-Golden Age, which is our age, what we call Art has come to serve purposes that are trivial or false. These products will eventually find their way into the cultural land-fill and were therefore never necessary. Those dispensable "art" products are connected with either the self-aggrandizing of the age in which they are produced (the heroic propaganda of Soviet painting or the narcissistic self-proclaiming of much confessional poetry are two such types) or with the infatuations of whims of the market place (art with an inflatable gimmick, or which flatters or titillates the consuming class.)

To understand, therefore, the true and necessary purposes of art, we must look back to the foundation age of human civilization, the time when the Gods first put their stamp on our psyches and set out the limits of our capability and purpose...

The first artist is the Olympian Hephaestus, the smith from whose foundry came not only the ornaments of the Gods but also the tools and furnishings of human civilization. It is the artist/smith who has the skill to convert in his crucible the raw materials of the world into an intelligible, useful, meaningful product. Those products, when they are faithful to the Idea they are meant to manifest, serve the deepest necessities of man, are components of the soul.

The desire for adornment or aesthetically enhanced comfort is apparently a soul component for it is found universally and is practiced shortly after the satisfying of physical necessity. These are the decorative and household arts--as distinct from the "higher" art forms (which separation seems artificial when one experiences a Chang blade or an Ashanti gold weight, objects which often have more integrity than the megabronzes in bank lobbies). They focus our humanness or are in a meaningful way useful. And are therefore necessary.

Or the desire to see form/structure (beauty, harmony, system, meaning) in the multiplicity and contingency of What Is and then to render (reveal) that form/structure so that it is intelligible to others. This is the aesthetic purpose of the arts. It is what Wallace Stevens called the "blessed rage for order."

Or, going deeper into human purpose, the desire to see the truth of What Is, to search out the invisible forces and structures that underlie the apparent meaninglessness of experience.

Art, in this practice of it, becomes a metaphysical exercise, a Tao to knowing. It formulates, simply by what it focuses in depth upon, fundamental questions about reality. The questions suggest as corollary the possible nature of the answers. Throughout the foundation world we excavate the tiny bronze figurines representing the Gods and Demons, visible metaphors for the invisible and ideal forces that lie within the world. Such practice of art is an active platonism which produces useful information or understanding about What Is. It is a hands-on and product-oriented skill of hand, mind, and heart--which description may define art itself. It perforce begins with realism, an uncompromising staring at what there is to stare at.

Recapitulating: A blade, though striving to manifest the Ideal Blade, must fit comfortably in the human hand to be useful as a blade. Form, revealed through the metaphor of the body or an apple, refers always to an organism which is found only in the transitory and corruptible world. Truth cannot refer to what does not exist, only to What Is. And truth, to be so, must be also accurate, and make, in Pound's dictum, "no false reports."

What Is is found directly and experientially in the world. In the myth, Hephaestus is thrown out of Olympus and falls to earth. He is injured in the fall and now limps (as do, some say, most artists in their relationship with the practical necessities of the world). He thereafter practices his art within the constraints imposed by the available raw materials (bronze, tin, the fuels found within the body of the earth). And he puts his skills into the service of the necessities, both physical and spritual, of Man...

* * *

In Brad Smith I am tempted to see the archetypal pattern of the First Artist. (How fortunate for this analogy that he was born a Smith.) From a lean-to in Santa Fe he practices what is clearly the ancient (inherited?) skill of bronze casting. He performs all steps of the process himself--the wax original, the mold, the melting of raw material (bits of cast-off plumbing, etc.), the pouring, removal of mold, sprues and chasing, polishing. Every step is done by hand--the only power assists are a Foredom grinder and a blower salvaged from a vacuum cleaner (the ancient caster employed a boy or a slave to operate the bellows). Smith studied hi-tech foundries in both Florence and Berkeley, but found the product of those foundries faulty and undependable, subject to human-cum-technology errors. So, drawing inspiration from the bronze workers of Benin, he set out to learn an older, more practical way. He learned to make a foundry (as opposed to buying one) from an article in Popular Mechanics (twenty years ago) about an old man who cast model trains in his backyard.

He judges fuel mix by the sound, the temperature of the metal by its color. Everything is handled, lifted by human muscle. His limp, to allow the analogy full rein, is that he has never been commercially successful as an artist: his vision is often offensive to the "art" establishment and not, therefore, suited to the marketplace. Like Hephaestus, he is indomitably cheerful.

I do not make the arthetypal case glibly and would not make it at all if it weren't for the evidence of the work itself. In an historical display of Smith's work, one catches glimpses of the evolution of the Artist in civilization, a recapitulating of the myth of the fall into the painful world, a wrestling, both in terms of skill and understanding, with the realities of the world and the available raw material, the search for form and structure in elegant organic geometries, the metaphysical questing for the invisible...

In the early bronzes, from the 60s, one feels the sovereignty of the flesh: a first discovery, the injured body: it is lumpish, obscene, suffering, animal. And yet these unsparingly physical figures have qualities of the eternal, as if they are figures found in a pre-bronze-age cave, an Altamire of the soul.

Smith's work has never faltered in what I am trying to establish as "platonian realism," nor in its attention to man and his world. The rubber-and-machine (quintessentially twentieth-century raw materials)

sculpture of the middle and late 70s, not represented in this exhibit because they are too large, present a vision of the foibles and evils of the human present and future that is so grotesque and horrific that few are able to make eye contact with it: the figures are formal and dark, like Aztec gods waiting for their ration of human sacrifice. Smith's desire is to see and render visible (that we too may see) the Terrible Faceless Ones that lurk in human nature.

Yet, like Hephaestus, Smith has remained cheerful and playful (if not optimistic), and always ready to be helpful to us. In the painted bronzes he becomes the artist/magician who turns the dark ones into minor demons, nightmare figures which through imagination become manageable and which we, waking, may look beyond.

To look beyond, or within, is what Smith attempts in his most recent work. We see the human figure striving for transformation, organic forms evolving, as they do in the last part of Dante's Commedia, into pure idea. Smith's geometrical metaphor is both cryptically dense, like the work of the alchemist, and innocently simple: the divided whole, two spheres, (a duality) combining at the only possible points of tangency with two identical spheres (a duality to itself) to create a figure structurally (and metaphorically) indestructible, the tetrahedron, a form whose nature underlies the structure of the other "platonian solids" (the octahedron, icosahedron, the dodecahedron, and the cube), all interrelating perfectly within the irreducible figure for wholeness, the sphere.

- HARVEY MUDD

STATEMENT

Looking back over twenty years is exciting, some wonderful objects, fragments, an adventure. I recognize some of the locations, some have faded. It is depressing, it seems I have not gone very far from where I started. The patterns of self-delusion and fantasy are strong and persistent. The expectations started very early. I've been looking for answers with unformed questions. I have been involved in a process of thinking, expressing opinions (some not even mine), beliefs, personal experiences, manipulation and constant modification of the past. All limited by the idea of being an "artist," the creative person. I was having second-hand experiences preformed with handed-down misinformation. At the same time, feeling the deep warmth of the sun, being aware of my body against the blue sky and smelling the fermenting of cut grass.

The Arts are defined as man made, manipulating, skillfully separating the life functions of the natural world. If we truly understood what it is to be creative, it is doubtful that we would be making the objects and providing the forms of entertainment for ourselves as we do. The quality of understanding would be as different as the shape of our lives.

Creation is about that which is totally new, pattern without form that cannot be known is brought into existence, a singular expression of the only pattern that exists, absolute and boundless, invisibility upon invisibility, there to be seen.

Through the years the idea of creativity has brought forth some wonderful concepts and artifacts. It has also produced a form of one of the great oppressive devices of mankind. It perpetuates a separation, those who naturally have it (god-given) and those who do not. It has become an arbitrary standard for judgment, criticism and comparison, personal attitudes that prevent us from any understanding of our own nature, making it almost impossible to bring about the realization of something more comprehensive. It would seem that one who is truly creative would not know it for the limits of the concept would have no relevance to their activities, and no sense of separation would exist, and the world would be a different place. We must begin to understand this or remain narrowed by the limitation of repeating ourselves in one form after another. As long as our minds keep separation, we will miss the larger interrelatedness and will never be able to understand the nature of regeneration.

All this is a strong indication of direction during the next twenty and more years. I hope that it will bring me a little closer again to feeling the warmth of the sun and the ability to observe the greater beauty we are.

This statement is much like my sculpture, not done because of what I know, rather to understand something about what I know, acknowledgment, to acknowledge, to observe, to see how things are put together, the process of becoming. I am not an authority on anything, have no answers, not long on clarity, have accumulated a lot of debris, but have enjoyed making the objects I have made.

- BRADFORD SMITH

CURRICULUM VITAE

Born: Los Angeles, California, in 1940

Education: University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1959
Peter Cooper Union, New York City, 1960
Chicago Art Institute, Chicago, 1961-63
Awarded the Anna Louise Raymond Traveling Fellowship for Sculpture. One year of independent work and study in Florence, Italy.

Solo Exhibitions:

1964 American Federation of Art, Carmel
1965 Shelby Gallery, Sausalito
1973 Canyon Road Grocery Gallery, Santa Fe
1976 Lower Eastside Gallery, Aspen
1978 Hillis Gallery, Santa Fe
1979 Black Kachina Gallery, Santa Fe
1980 The Performing Space, Santa Fe
1983 The Eason Gallery, Santa Fe

Group Exhibitions:

37 group exhibitions since 1957

Selected Commissions:

1968 Vorpai Gallery, San Francisco
Carved bas-relief door, walnut, 10 feet high
1974 The Institute for Regional Education, Santa Fe
Rubber sculpture for national conference on the issues of privacy, 10 feet
1975/80 The Institute for Regional Education, Santa Fe
Developed traveling environmental sculpture for public display--around the issues of man and technology
National Media Conference, College of Santa Fe
Media Show, Rising Sun Corporation, Santa Fe
ACLU/IRE Conference on Privacy and Technology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles
IRE, presentation of issues of privacy and technology, First Unitarian Church, San Francisco
IRE Installation, Issues of Privacy and Technology, DeVargas Mall, Santa Fe
1976 Installation, Bicentennial Rally, New Mexico State Capitol, Santa Fe
1976 Installation, Taos Civic Auditorium, Taos
1980 Santa Fe Council for the Arts/Institute for Regional Education. Non-profit sponsorship to create a permanent outdoor public sculpture environment for the Santa Fe area
1984 The Santa Fe International Scandinavian Film Festival. To design and create the presentation award for the selected best film.

Publications:

Contemporary Crafts of the Americas: Nilda C. Fernandez Getty, 1975. p. 38.
Who's Who in American Art: 1976-1980.
Installations: New Mexico Museum of Fine Arts, 1978.
Rocky Mountain Magazine: June 1979. Vol. 1, #2, p. 15.
Artspace: A Southwest Contemporary Arts Quarterly, Fall 1979. Vol. 4, #1, pp. 66-67.
American Artists of Reknown: 1981.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBIT

All bronzes are unique--no editions have been made except when indicated.

Work was not necessarily done in numbered order, some dates are approximations.

1. Pregnant Woman	1964
2. Crucifix	1964
3. Bees	1964
4. Three Wheeled Centaurus	1965
5. Rocking Horse Lady, Edition #5/5	1965
6. Oracle	1965
7. Fallen Man #I	1965
8. Ashley	1965
9. Moth	1965
10. The Dark Side of the Moon	1965
11. Whorse	1966
12. Animal Aspect	1966
13. Sprewed Figure	1966
14. Seated Figure	1966
15. Yerma #II	1966
16. Lazarus Up, Are You Dead Yet Ciacometti?	1966
17. Crucifix Relief #II	1966
18. Dragon Toy #III	1967
19. Metaphysical Self-Portrait	1967
20. Military Toy	1968
21. Balance Toy #I, Edition #2/2	1969
22. One Leg Angel	1969
23. Archetypal Mother	1969
24. Toy Harpy	1970
25. Moon Watcher	1970
26. Dead Bird	1970
27. Seated Bird Figure	1971
28. Celestial Godmother	1971
29. Celestial Dancer	1973
30. Birth	1973
31. Bright Eyes	1973
32. Lunar Aspect	1974
33. Desert Bride	1974
34. Winged Pull-Toy	1974

35. Jack	1974
36. Continuum	1974
37. Poenix	1975
38. Chicken on Head Toy	1976
39. Ancestral Post	1977
40. Prayer Birds	1979
41. Second Coming	1979
42. Small World	1980
43. Pink Sphere	1980
44. Eydea	1980
45. Desert Meeting	1980
State #1	
#2	
#3	
#4	
#5	
#6	
#7	
46. Death Ride	1980
State #1	
#2	
#3	
47. Goat	1981
48. Head Stone	1981
49. Archetype	1981
50. Egg Carton Lady	1981
51. Seated Figure #II	1982
52. Fruit Tree	1982
53. Boy with Dog	1982
54. Cornfeather	1982
55. Study for Outdoor Project, #1	1983
56. Study for Outdoor Project, #2	1983
57. Study for Outdoor Project, #3	1983
58. Study for Outdoor Project, #4	1983
59. Study for Outdoor Project, #5	1983
60. Study for Outdoor Project, #6	1983
61. Dual Sphere	1984
62. Icosadodecacube	1984
63. Fall	1984

THE GALLERY PROGRAM

The College operates its Art Gallery to benefit its students and faculty, and those in the community with serious interest in the visual arts. To this end, careful thought has been given to the most appropriate use of the Gallery space. The resulting program consists mainly of small retrospective shows of the work of major southwest artists, alternating with shows suggested by these artists introducing the public to the work of others who deserve wider recognition. All media of visual expression will be included in the program: painting, graphics, sculpture, ceramics, photography, folk art, architecture. While the Gallery is not devoted to sales shows, works in various exhibitions may be for sale. Please ask the Gallery attendant for the price list.

Regular Gallery hours are 1:00-5:00 p.m. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, and by appointment. Please do not hesitate to call 982-3691, ext 289, if you or those you know wish to view the exhibits at some special time.

We wish to thank Marcia Mikulak for her help and encouragement.

We are grateful to the C. G. Rein Galleries for lending pedestals.