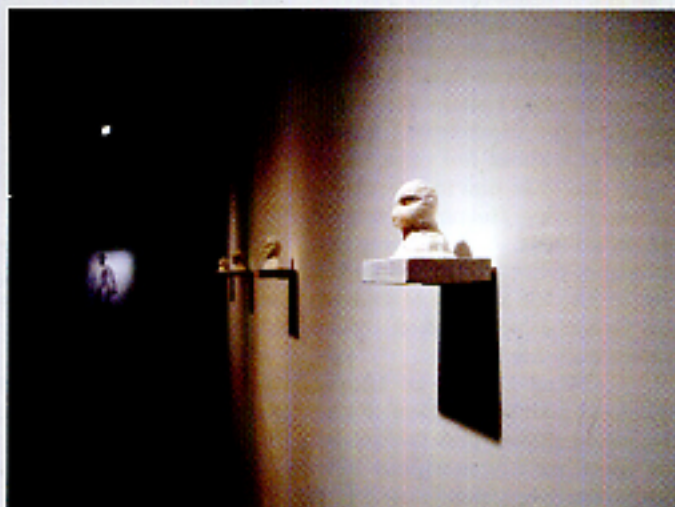


Sculpture In New York

# Seeking A Definition: The Multiple Directions Of Sculpture Today

By Robert C. Morgan

Recent exhibitions of sculpture in New York appear to be moving in many directions simultaneously. There is no absolute direction to be found in the second decade of the 21st century, particularly in the media-based, market-driven contemporary art world. From this perspective, I will explore some of the possibilities in which sculpture seeks a broader, more fluid definition. Contemporary sculpture—with all its three-dimensional vigor, encapsulating a desire for both expressive content and reinvented formal strategies—is constantly in the process of hyperventilating itself by opening new doors of perception. In the process, viewers or participants, as the case may be, are challenged to understand what sculpture has become in the sluggish ramparts of the current century, perhaps on a different level than what was thought



Heather Sheehan, *Untitled*, 2011, fabric and mixed media, dimensions variable. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

in 1912, slipping from Rodin toward Boccioni, both given to a Modernist point of view. In fact, Modernism does not end according to the time-line of a century or even a millennium—even as new forms arise and begin to infiltrate the galleries in West Chelsea, lower

Manhattan, and elsewhere throughout New York in both public and private spaces. I will begin with an exhibition of two artists—Heather Sheehan and Michelle Jaffé—at the Silvia Wald and Po Kim Art Gallery on the edge of the East Village. The former resides in Germany, whereas the latter lives and works in New York. Sheehan installed a wall of small, fuzzy, fabric-based, all white sculptures, titled *Visitors*, at intervals along a single wall. She then placed a series of square black-and-white photographs, each measuring 100 x 100 cm, taken by Bart Michielsen on the facing wall. The visual effect of comparing these small white creatures with larger images of their physiognomies is revelatory. One sees in the photographs details in the faces that appear differently from the diminutive scale of the actual objects. In the photographs, Sheehan's sculpture is



Michelle Jaffé, *Awakening in the Lightning Field*, 2012, soundscape—26.20 minutes, lights, paper, speakers, CD, 13 x 25 x 35'. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

transformed. It becomes a type of theater that enters into world rather than modestly clinging to small shelves waiting to be discovered. Michelle Jaffé's *Awakening in the Lightning Field* (2012) is a sound-piece based on a recording of the noises in the desert landscape in the space of the well-known Walter de Maria environmental piece, situated in the New Mexico desert, installed in 1977. Jaffé's work parallels the work of de Maria who also recorded sounds of crickets and ocean waves. The blue florescent tubes placed laterally between floor and wall demarcated the listening area that offers a welcome solace in the teeming atmosphere of traffic around Lafayette Street where the gallery is located.

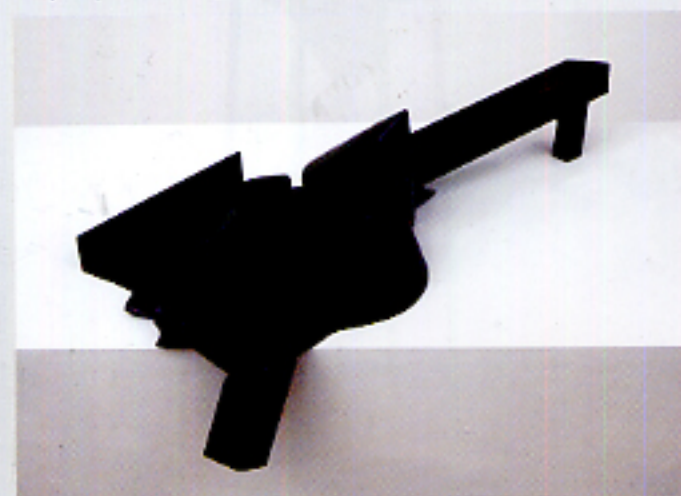
Oh Chaehyun is a Korean artist who showed his small-scale stone sculpture at Able Fine Art in West Chelsea. Titled *Saint and Sex*, Oh works mostly in small-scale carved pieces in which images of goddesses sit on stones and hang on the wall in a highly sexualized position. These images are intended to transmit reverence rather than prurient content. They are close to life on a spiritual level, suggesting fertility and abundance. In addition, Oh's beatific feminine incarnations of the Buddha are frequently represented as exalted figures of women. The same is true for his images of flying birds that the artist has installed on the gallery walls. These carved bird images are abstract in appearance as if they were being seen both near and far away. Technically the use of granite as a material in which to carve relatively small-scale sculpture is quite unusual in the West. This is particularly true when used to interpret figure or animal shapes, such as tigers or birds in flight. His work carries a strong shamanistic aspect even though Buddhist images also play a central role in his art. One might say that Oh Chaehyun's work is intrinsically Korean in spirit, and that it manifests itself without dualism. Just as shamanism exists beside Buddhism, so sexuality and spirituality abide



Anthony Caro, *Dragonfly*, 2011, bronze, cast and welded, 22.9 x 22.2 x 26 cm. Image: Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

within one another. The small-scale presence of these works implies that they are meant to dwell in a residential environment, an intimate space. They are icons of warmth and humanity, signs of longevity and celebrations of happiness, in a home where conflict is resolved without strife and where life begets eternity within the cycle of eternity.

Contemporary small-scale sculpture also exists in the West. Occasionally the subject matter focuses more on abstraction in the form of maquettes, such as the studies produced by British sculptor Anthony Caro for the Chapel of Light in the Eglise Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Bourbourg, France, in 2011. These works are tabletop size and paradoxically express both gravity and



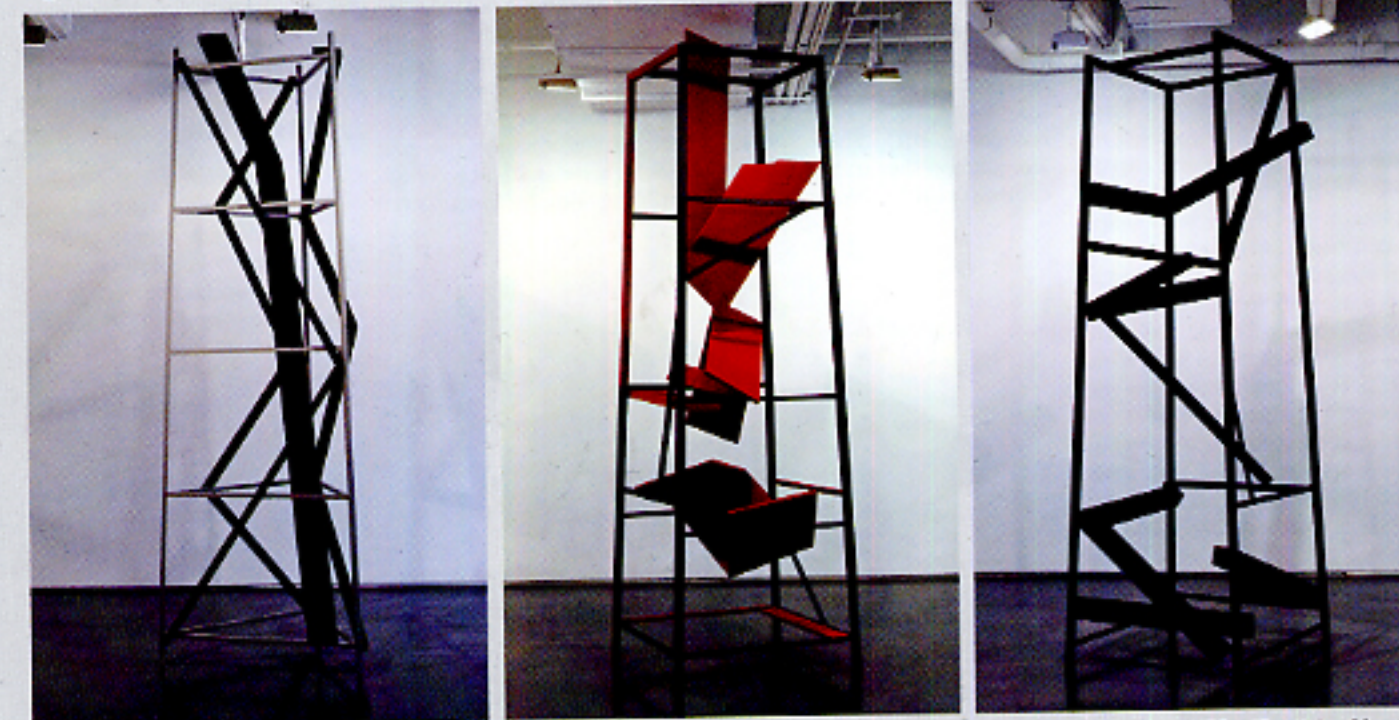
Anthony Caro, *Laughter*, 2011, bronze, cast and welded, 29.8 x 70.5 x 67.9 cm. Image: Courtesy of Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

levity. Early in his career, Caro was defiant about removing the base from sculpture, a problem that the American sculptor David Smith also struggled with but never seemed to resolve completely. By 1963, Caro's steel planar shapes began to reveal a constructivist tendency as he placed them perpendicular in relation to one another, thereby neglecting the use of a base. One of the most delightful and intriguing aspects of the current exhibition at Mitchell-Innes & Nash is joyfully built quality that appears in each work without losing an ounce of sophistication. Anyone familiar with the technical and formal ploys employed by Caro in his evolution of work over the years can see the formal clarity in these works, the ease by which he is capable of assembling simple form, often

into a density that nevertheless remains light. I am thinking specifically of a work called *Bough* and another magnificent example called *Dragonfly* (2011). In either case, the assembling is so elegantly levitated that one may wonder if we are seeing it correctly. Every pipe has its place, and every flank of cut-steel is stupendous as it entangles itself over the top or underneath something weighted or squashed, pertinent to the theme of *Dragonfly*. This heraldic work seems to buzz like an actual dragonfly, to ascend upward as its gravity struggles to keep it grounded, or, if you need relief from this intensity, let me recommend the deliriously coy *Laughter* (2011) that sprawls openly over the edge of a table along with *Bellman* in which an ancient automobile horn buckles over another rounded shape to imply dignity as in summoning a request not to be effaced or removed from the emotion of generosity that works such as these aspire to communicate through the ages.

precise measurements of the elements are so acute that, at first, it is difficult to discern whether the towers are constructed from wood or metal. In fact, they are crafted entirely in wood. The process of circumambulating around these towers implies an investigation of form in which the various angles of vision ultimately requires an intentional grasp of the whole. Yet the work is substantial entirely on this level as the various components within the derricks both conflict and harmonize not only with one another but also with the exterior structure that supports them. The formal intrigue can be mesmerizing as it opens possibilities for how we intuit the foundation of structure through the process of seeing and how we think holistically in relation to what we have seen.

In contrast to the more formally oriented sculpture of Caro and Boepple, Ruth Hardinger works with less finished materials, such as corrugated cardboard and cement. Her forms are more physical and less predetermined. The notion of structure in these works is within expectant formal attributes, thereby suggesting that the material process



Above left: Willard Boepple, *Ever*, 2010, wood, 127 x 44 x 36 in. Above center: Willard Boepple, *What Gives*, 2011, wood, 135 x 49 x 41 in. Above right: Willard Boepple, *Heath*, 2012, wood, 124 x 42 x 41 in. Images: Courtesy of the Artist and Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York. Photo: Etienne Frossard.



Above left: Ruth Hardinger, *Double Envoy*, 2012, concrete and cardboard, 16 x 26 1/2 x 11 in. Above right: Ruth Hardinger, *To Be Changed #2*, 2011, concrete and cardboard, 21 x 10 x 7.5 in. Images: Courtesy of the Artist.

determines the form without rational interference. Hardinger's work has been shown widely in New York and has a look—a demeanor—that is original and, to a large extent, unwieldy in its appearance. Yet the pieces somehow manage to forge a presence of the landscape difficult to deny. Her recent exhibition, titled *Normal Faults*, clearly reflects a defective earthly condition, a surface both unstable and haphazard. In contrast to a formalist approach, Hardinger is searching for poetic metaphors referencing the damage that persists in

relation to the earth. Works, such as *Double Envoy* (2012) and *To Be Changed #2* (2011), suggest inevitable ecological instability without losing their force as self-contained pieces of sculpture. I would not call Hardinger's work 'installation art.' The intuitive presence of these works is sculptural. In addition, Hardinger produces drawings that have a strong tactile presence. These would include *Pathway 8* and *Pathway 9*, which both employ concrete applied to cardboard, encrusted with black lines interfacing mottled white surfaces.

Hardinger's works are fresh and pulsate with vigor. They might also be read as entropic signs of dystopia, yet open to forging ahead as if to widen the spectrum of what sculpture can be, even on a modestly human scale—with the power to change the way we understand and feel the human condition in this highly conflicted age of globalization. Δ

Author, artist, professor, and art critic Robert C. Morgan is the New York contributing editor for the magazines World Sculpture News and Asian Art News.