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## Creating the Paradox in Form

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Dennis A. Peterson for the  
Master of Fine Arts in Art: Sculpture presented  
April 25, 1990.

Title: Creating the Paradox in Form


APPROVED BY THE MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:

  
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The intent of this thesis project was to create visual  
and psychological illusions and paradoxes by manipulating  
sculptural elements. This format embodied balances between

man and nature and social comment.

These paradoxes were brought about by inter-weaving color, form and texture and combining organic and geometric forms to illustrate man-made and natural elements. Two-dimensional surfaces and three-dimensional shapes were united to join the reality with illusion. By deforming and abstracting parts of the human figure a social and psychological impact was accomplished. Physical and illusional forms and colors were intermixed to maintain a compositional unity.

All of this interaction brings about a flexibility in theory for the artist and a fresh perspective to the viewer.

CREATING THE PARADOX IN FORM

by

DENNIS A. PETERSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS  
in  
ART: SCULPTURE

Portland State University  
1990

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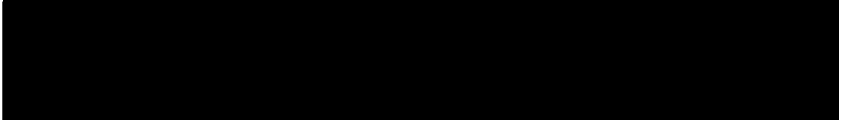
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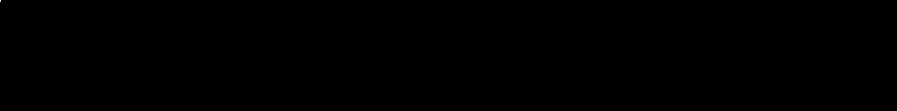
  
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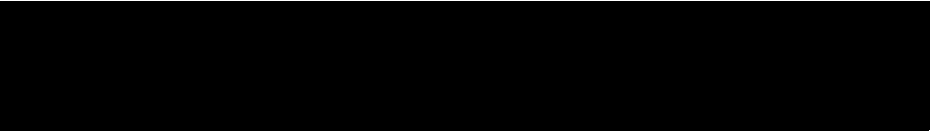
  
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## INTRODUCTION

Sculpture has the ability to express a tangible message. It possesses a physical presence and is a non-illusional object in our environment.

I believe human beings have certain obligations to themselves and society at large. The first is to understand the physical and emotional relationships between themselves and their environment, and the cause and effect relationship between their physical being and their surroundings. The second is to comprehend how they as individuals can influence the broader spectrum of society.

One of the most difficult conflicts for an individual is to change their beliefs and oppose society's traditions. Each change has a domino effect.

The following quote supports my beliefs.

In times of modifying, of doing away with traditional ways, within the individuality itself of such persons goes on, in an intensified form, that very...conflict, disco-ordination which is going on in the society at large--and agonizing moments must arise when the individual, seeing the necessity for adopting new courses of action will yet be tortured by the hold (outer, inner) of traditional ways...(this is) almost bound to rupture the continuity of their psychological being.

Olive Schreiner (Silences 1978, p. 226)



Paradoxical facts can be expressed in sculpture, giving it the ability to question societal beliefs. I am expressing realities that I believe exist between man and nature.

The methods I employed illustrate the dichotomies of perceived truths. An abstraction of objects assists the viewer. In searching for a rational interpretation of forms and content the viewers are exposed to erroneous perceptions of reality. This causes them to question their pre-conceptions.

The three means used to emotionally stimulate the viewer's perceptions are, a juxtaposition of organic with geometric forms to illustrate the man-made as opposed to the natural elements; changing three-dimensional forms with a painted two-dimensional surface treatment, and deforming the human figure with abstraction, to emotionally unbalance the viewer.

Since a medium can establish the continuity of issues within a sculpture, I used wood and steel which accommodates strong geometric and cubistic elements. They also provide very workable paint surfaces. Cast cement with coatings of polyester resin produced a flexible medium for constructing the organic elements of a piece and brought about an over-all abstract quality uniting the elements of the painted surface, illusions and the combination of organic and geometric forms within a piece.

## THE THESIS WORK

Finding a link between organic and geometric forms and the combination of these two elements was necessary to balance the natural with the abstract. I wanted to let the natural elements of the piece be a key to interpreting the geometric and abstract portions. Natural organic form being connected to abstract geometric form helps the viewer to interpret the abstract.

The use of a painted surface to articulate, add or subtract forms helps not only to integrate the organic elements with the geometric but also adds an illusionistic component.

Paradoxically, the illusions help lead the viewer to the reality of the piece.

The sculpture that captured these qualities initially is Elevated Labyrinth (Figure 1). This is constructed of wood and paint. It combines geometrical elements of form with illusional organic forms. Being 8' in height and expanding to a width of nearly 12', this free-standing piece commands a larger than life size relationship to the human form and causes psychological impacts on the viewer that cannot be produced any other way.

Its spacial elements are equally balanced in positive

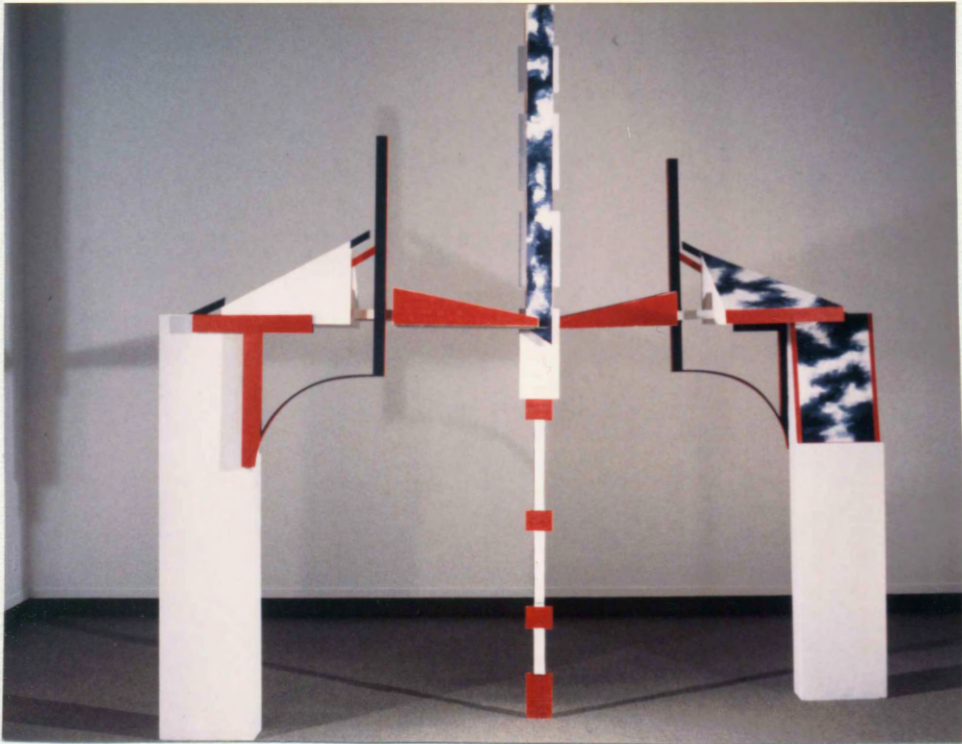


Figure 1. Elevated Labyrinth

and negative form, defining and adding mass to negative shapes. The dichotomy of the man-made and natural were expressed by contrasting blue-grey painted illusionary cloud-like forms against real geometric forms. The painted surface wraps around geometric shapes causing corners to disappear, advancing the illusionary integrants of the organic.

One structural curve furthers the transition between geometric and illusionary organic qualities.

Echo Structures (Figure 2) is an architectural cubistic underworld that opposes a naturally organic one. This sculpture illustrates the point that perfect man-made geometry creates voids in nature and at best, can only mirror vestiges of life.

This piece combines wood, porcelain and paint. It measures approximately 6' in height, 3' wide and 2' deep, comparable in size to the human figure.

A horizontal plane, 4' from the bottom, divides the sculpture. The lower portion has a vertical emphasis. Its composition of form is architectural and physically geometric. This represents the man-made geometric world.

The upper section is basically organic in structure and surface treatment. Flowing lines dramatize mass suggesting constant change and movement in an abstract natural landscape. The use of striped black and white paint assists in the definition of form and mass. This adds to the illusion of shifting forms and planes within



Figure 2. Echo Structures

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the piece.

Echo Structures presents more points of interest in my study. It does not quite make the believable transition from geometric to organic I was after. However, it was successful in illustrating the illusions of form change created by color in contrast to geometric forms and shadows.

The social elements of this sculpture are still relatively simple. I wanted to strengthen the social comment in my art. The use of an abstracted organic naturalism could be manipulated to introduce and adjust the impact and understanding of any social issue.

Since the phantoms of reality cause paradoxes and each paradox expresses possible truths, I am hopeful that the viewers will reject pre-conceived visions and accept only what they see.

I concentrated on developing a new sculpture, Pi Five (Figure 3) which would take these formal and social issues a step further, increasing their clarity and impact.

A change of materials was necessary because of the size of the piece. I decided on cast cement and steel.

Pi Five consists of both male and female figures. It represents a monumental emphasis of a group of figures. The group is the key, not any individual in it.

The size of these figures was crucial in their relationship to the viewer. They are life-size, standing just over 6' tall and amass a width of five figures or

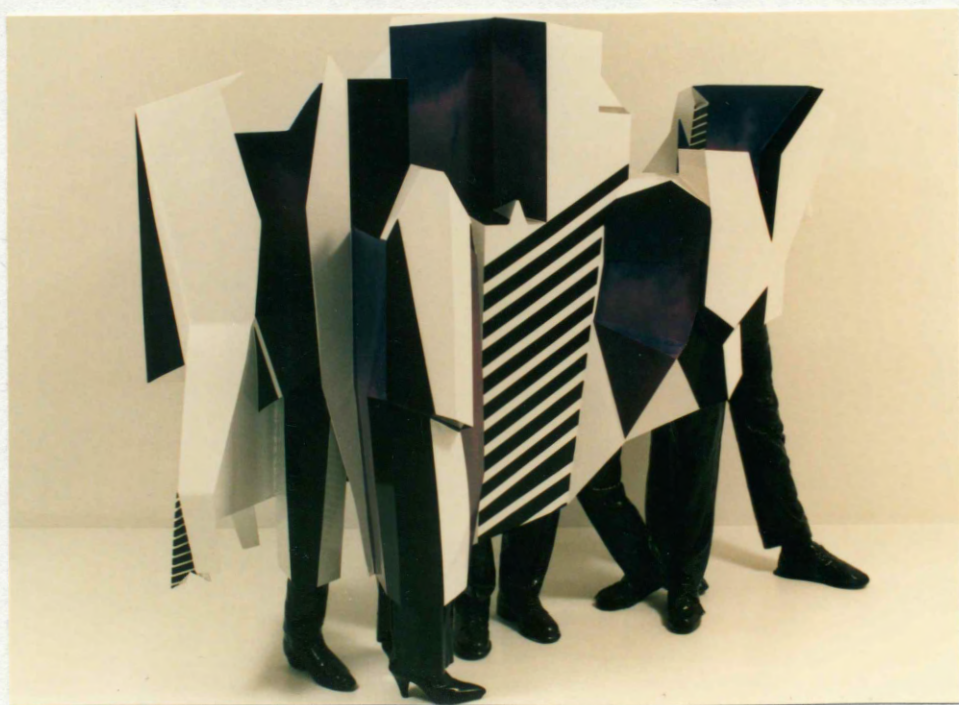


Figure 3. Pi Five

about 9' feet.

The upper forms are treated as a compositional unit both in physical and illusionary terms. A vertical emphasis was maintained throughout this piece to project an architectural format. I combined an organic natural element in the lower section and progressed into the more geometric shapes and surfaces above. This gave me the ability to disassemble a natural object and re-assemble it to express my formal and social concerns.

The flat geometric surfaces can be more easily manipulated by paint. Planes of color, shapes with patterned stripes, and areas of black or white oppose each other, creating depth and positive and negative perceptions.

Each cubistic piece I added conformed to the individual figures, the group, then further defined the geometric, architectural, and the overall illusional composition.

Welded steel presented a more workable medium for size, stability, and structure. It also developed the flat surfaces I wanted to paint on. The physical edges of the features could be duplicated two-dimensionally with a simulated edge created by paint. Form and depth now are created by illusion.

The lower section of Pi Five is composed of cast cement with a bonded polyester coating. The process involved casting and coating these cement pieces to generate a workable surface for paint, along with a stable balanced



base structure.

I used loose flowing brush strokes to develop two-dimensional forms on the surface, conveying an organic expression on the physical and geometric shapes. This was unsuccessful. It became a surface treatment and would not integrate the two-dimensional forms with the existing three-dimensional forms. I returned to a straight forward division of existing physical shapes and added geometric painted shapes to those already defined by their physical forms.

I developed a unity of simplified forms and added complex painted geometric structures without losing the unity of the figure or objects.

Social implications in Pi Five are numerous and layered. Facets of individual components including religious, political and social factors become one complete and powerful entity.

Determining the method of expressing formal and psychological effects should be done first, and the selection of media last. This permits more freedom in the approach to issues.

I believe the interpretation of symbolism contained in each piece should not always be discussed nor should it be so literal that the viewer is not stimulated to make and also to question his own analysis.

Brothers (Figure 4) is more expressive of a social problem. To convey this I wrote and added the dimension

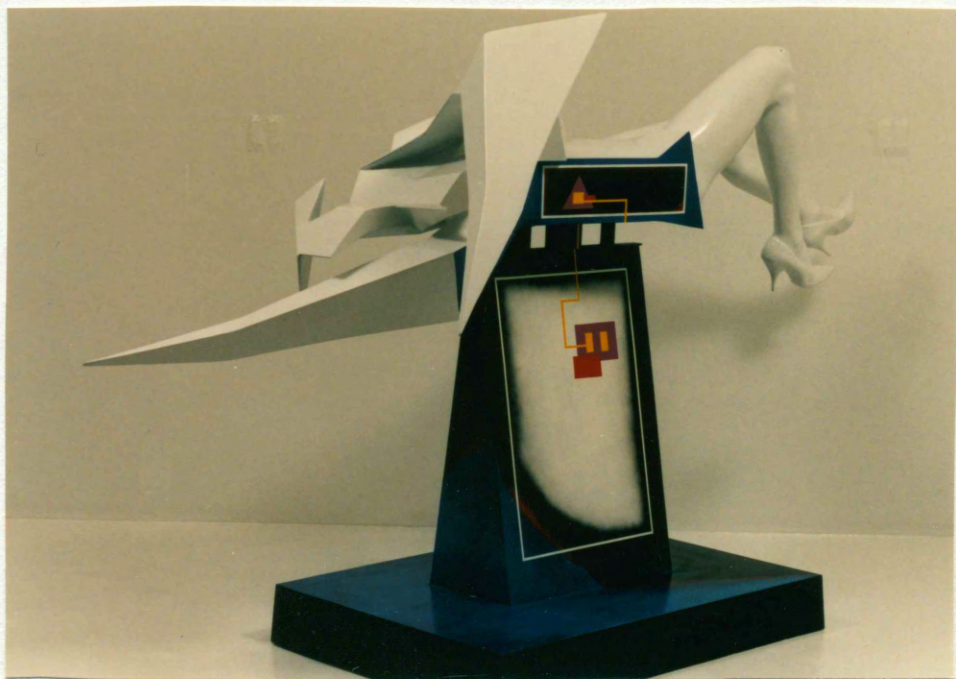


Figure 4. Brothers

of poetry to accompany the sculpture.

### The Brothers

The Brothers have gifts for me.  
I'm their's.  
They savor.  
I give my gifts without regret.  
I give freely.

The Brother's touch is always covetous.  
I sacrifice.  
I give willingly.  
They are weak.  
It is my purpose.

The Brother's nests are secure and safe.  
I prosper.  
I give birth.  
I submit.  
They must survive.

There are always limitations to any medium. Selecting the media to fit a sculpture allows expression of its legitimate qualities. I selected steel, cast cement, polyester resin and paint, using many of the same techniques as in Pi Five. Again I chose a horizontal emphasis and combined cubistic with natural characteristics.

This piece is also just over life-size, at 6' 6" in length and 4½' high.

The simplicity of Brothers intensifies its interpretation through form, texture, and detail. There was less need to articulate this sculpture with paint or form into cubistic illusions since it is a single figure.

Again, I used the deformed human figure to stimulate the viewer's emotions. I moved from the idealized and literal feminine features of the feet and legs into an

abstract contorted geometric feminine form thus transferring the emotional realities into a more abstract understanding.

I questioned the presentation of Brothers. Should it be formal or informal? It is less tangible and more austere with a formal elevated base. An informal base that moves into the viewer's space uses and defines negative forms, forcing interaction. It would have interjected more elements than were necessary to make my point.

The base had to both elevate and separate itself from the figure, otherwise it would pull the form of the figure into its mass, lessening its significance.

I went on to further explore the correlation of base and sculpture with a new piece, Origins (Figure 5). By reversing methodology a construction was developed whose base elements are a framed two-dimensional wall piece and floor piece. Three-dimensional objects are placed in the viewer's space, but at the same time they are attached to and integrated with the two-dimensional illusions of a flat surface.

This directly opposes three-dimensional sculptures being altered with two-dimensional surface treatment.

The two-dimensional is changed more easily with the addition of three dimensional forms, than a three-dimensional object is changed by surface treatment. The balance depends on a subtle emphasis between the illusional and actual forms. I kept this sculpture stark and simple.

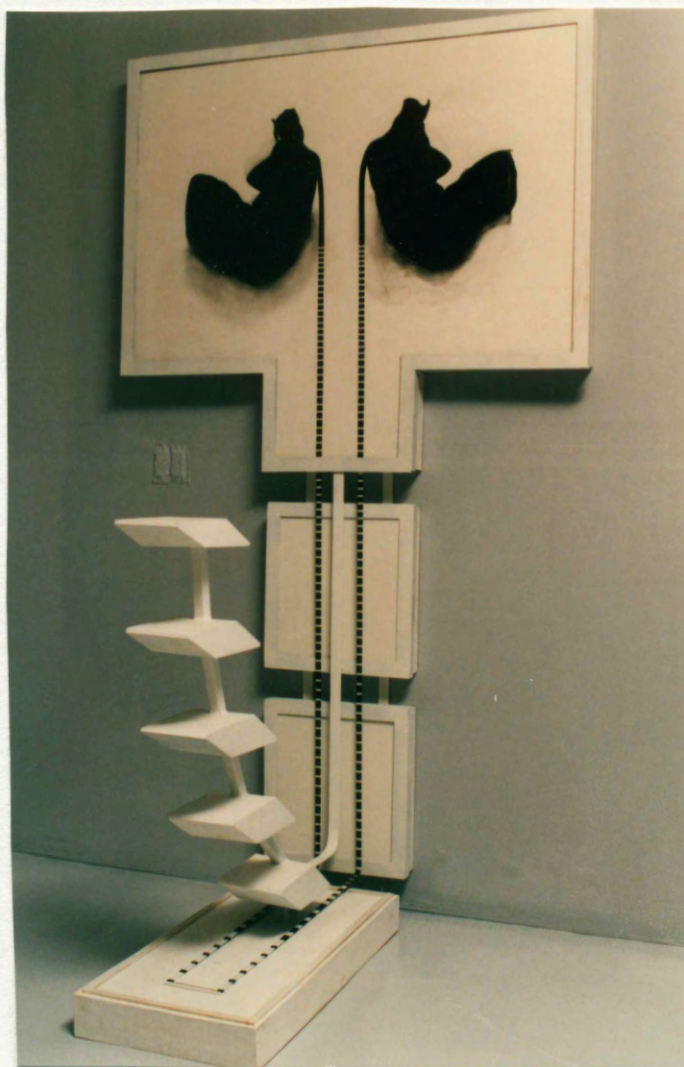


Figure 5. Origins

The social significance introduced in this piece is open to general interpretation, but employs the use of human deformation again.

I preferred to work with black and white. This allowed more direct manipulation of formal and psychological factors.

Size, again, was an important element. The framed flat wall section stood 7' high with a vertical leg extending to the floor and projected 3' into the room across the floor.

The lower section is physically geometric and three-dimensional. An integration into the two-dimensional upper section is done with real and painted objects linking the two elements. Black and white lines and forms create illusions of what is two or three-dimensional.

Permitting this wall piece to move between two and three-dimensional space, provided a fresh perspective in approaching my prior concerns. The stark contrast of form on a large surface lends added strength to the two-dimensional in accepting the power of literal forms. Origins has given me a flexibility in theory, media and further ideas to pursue.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have discussed elements of my work in terms of related dichotomies, that of organic verses geometric, two-dimensional versing three-dimensional, and the perfection of human figures versing deformity in the abstract.

These methods when used to construct a paradox, convey a strong esthetic, social, and psychological message.

Each sculpture I complete forces me to turn a corner and not look back.

Self doubt seems to always be a major personal issue with one's work. The belief in one's abilities, both physical and mental, to make decisions, and have them technically work is the balancing point of failure or success.

Believe you are an artist. Do not accept negativity concerning yourself. Welcome justifiable criticism about your work. Be prepared to stand alone in your beliefs. All art is subject to the personal and cultural prejudices of the critic and society. They will be right only a portion of the time. They may not share your heart's view.

The historical perspective of the development of art and its recording of mans' physical and social

progression has been a key in correlating my work and my beliefs. Acquiring a healthy sense of worth to my art has come from understanding its relationship to past and present perspectives.

During the last two years my previous convictions have been questioned and altered. I know these are only temporary and a continuous re-examination of my values is necessary.

When I make decisions now in producing my work, the reasons for selection, whether social, psychological, or formal are based on a more concentrated working knowledge rather than an intuitive one.

Technology of media will always be a struggle as my work continues, and technical advances are made, and my art changes. I have acquired a much wider use of media at P.S.U. including bronze, cement, plaster, clay, and plastics.

I have gained a strength of convictions and direction based on more than personal issues. My sculpture will continue to express honest viable truths.

In placid hours well-pleased we dream  
Of many a brave unbodied scheme.  
But form to lend, pulsed life create,  
What unlike things must meet and mate:  
A flame to melt--a wind to freeze;  
Sad patience--joyous energies;  
Humility--yet pride and scorn;  
Instinct and study; love and hate;  
Audacity--reverence. These must mate,  
And fuse with Jacob's mystic heart,  
To wrestle with the angel--Art.  
--Herman Melville



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