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## Subject/Matter

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Gilles J.L. Foisy for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Sculpture were presented May 24, 1996, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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## ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Gilles J.L. Foisy for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Sculpture presented May 24, 1996.

Title: Subject/Matter

The process of obtaining the Master of Fine Arts degree led me to probe the aims and methods of my artmaking. What emerged and became uppermost was the issue of form *and* content or perhaps form *versus* content. While highly concerned with the formal aspects of art, content (subject matter) would not fade from my intentions or cease to occupy my mind.

Through much "soul searching" and inquiries into numerous materials both familiar and new to me, I concluded that my intended content was about my experience of being. I further distilled my conclusion and focused on my ontological experience in terms of the self (*subject*) as contained by the body (*matter*).

I realized that the successful and specific translation of my intentions into my artistic works had become one of the core issues in my artmaking endeavors. Thus, clarification of subject matter emerged as a core issue from the two year process and focused my attention. The many mediums I worked with helped to increase my sensitivity to the inherent nature, characteristics, and behaviors of materials.

The body of work exhibited in the Autzen Gallery in Neuberger Hall from June 5th through the 20th reflects the preliminary residuals of this process.

SUBJECT/MATTER

by

GILLES J.L. FOISY

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

ART: SCULPTURE

Portland State University  
1996

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*That for me is the real challenge of sculpture. How do you  
make something out there, material, separate from you, an  
object amongst other objects, somehow carry the feeling of  
being*  
Antony Gormley

From the beginning I saw the process of candidacy for Master of Fine Arts as a period of intensified research and exploration. I attempted to enter the process with a kind of *tabula rasa* attitude toward my artmaking. Thus, I worked with various materials both familiar and new to me, various formal approaches, and various conceptual concerns. What emerged finally is the body of work represented in SUBJECT/MATTER which inventories the media and forms I investigated, gives voice to the personal and conceptual impetus for the work, and ultimately points in the future direction of my artistic endeavors.

The title SUBJECT/MATTER refers to the realization after two years of work at Portland State that the subject matter I wish to imbue my art with is my ontological experience. My *subjective* impressions of being while at the same time putting forth the residuals of my interaction with the mediums.

The title SUBJECT/MATTER refers to the condition of being at once a body (*matter*) and feeling or knowing myself (*subject*) distinct from the body. It refers to the subject/self navigating a sea of objectified matter with built-in natural laws and cultural flaws. It refers to the perennial dichotomy of *body and soul* promulgated by philosophies, creeds, and faiths.

First, I will say something about my choice of materials. Second, I will consider my conceptual and philosophical interests through a descriptive discourse on selected pieces in the thesis exhibition.

From the start I worked with wood and it has remained with me until now. There are several reasons for my affinity with wood. One is its *soft* (some would say *receding*) presence, perhaps because of its porousness and absorbancy. That low key, unaggressive characteristic is appealing to me. It seems to be *accepting*. Wood seems to be willing to *meet* us and *engage* us, perhaps because wood is *warm*, perhaps because we are all so familiar with it in its ubiquitous use although we are not always aware of it. That visceral familiarity is a factor, I'm sure, in my attraction to the material but the very real challenge of working wood and exploring its potentials are also important reasons for my fascination.

Initially, I used found wood such as discarded furniture parts and accents. I then worked with pallet wood, discovering the wide varieties used for such lowly commodities: oak, fir,

ash, etc. Working with pallets I acquired an increased appreciation for the appeal of raw wood, sometimes distressed, sometimes in relative pristine condition. I learned to appreciate the "natural" look of wood. Finally, I zeroed in on western red cedar because of its wide range of natural colors, its workability, its lightness, its ready availability. Although a soft wood and quite brittle, it is surprisingly strong and very durable. Discovered late in the eighteenth century in the Pacific Northwest, it was extensively used by the native populations for a wide variety of their daily and long-term needs. I'm convinced my living in the Northwest for the past 30 years has increased my propensities for cedar if only through sharing the same environment with the tree.

The second dominating material in the exhibition is plaster which I found very *accommodating* with the cedar. *Accommodating* in that even though plaster dries hard it still retains much of its *softness* which resonates with that of the soft cedar. While creating an obvious duality and contrast with the wood through its stark whiteness and stone-like final state, I find the plaster and the wood co-exist well together, yielding to one another, but both retaining individual assertiveness.

Being new to plaster, I started using it with an innocence that allowed me to perceive it more acutely. I found it *sensual* and *temperamental*. I say *sensual* because compared to wood, which is relatively rigid and is always worked with some tool, plaster is worked as much with the hands as with tools. And I

say *temperamental* because its process of solidification seems exponential rather than sequential, a feature I think of as "passionate", unpredictable, and at times frustrating. It is very workable and capable of endless manipulations both in its wet and dry states. And it demands more expertise than I imagined.

In my first attempts to use plaster, I employed the technique of the now mostly obsolete wall plasterers who combined lath with plaster to make interior walls. The vivid memories I have as a child of discovering for the first time the backsides of walls, with the endless strips of plaster that had oozed between the lath, were a major factor in my decision to work the material the way I did. I was struck by the freeze-frame appearance of rows of rolling plaster abruptly arrested in their progress, as if frozen in time by some mysterious, invincible force. An image branded in my memory for some reason.

I hasten to say that an almost subliminal interest in architectural issues and techniques was also a determining factor. Architecture, I suspected, played a far greater role in my urban life than I realized. I imagined architecture as sculpture on a grandiose scale with a practical aspect on the side. Even the dwellings I inhabit, I thought, the shapes and openings and lines and layouts must have an influence on my state of mind and *état d'être*. And the agglomeration of these

dwellings into towns and cities, the urbanscape, surely affected my comportment.

My suspicions were born out when I read I. Kaxis McEwen's *Socrates'Ancestor* and discovered his position that preclassical Greek architecture was built metaphysics and that it embodied the very fabric of the society. Architecture served as a book in stone, a civic focus and reminder of the values and valued skills of the society. It played a major role in shaping the mind of the citizenry. Finally I could see that sculpture and architecture spoke the same language, both articulating the same meaning: space, location, material, valuation, purpose, objects of communication and communion. All of these ruminations carried out over a couple of years were, then, also instrumental in the technique I elected to use with the plaster and cedar.

In some instances, the natural oils in the cedar were drawn out by the wet plaster, staining it in a totally random and unpredictable way. Taking my cue from these oil stains, I became interested in the plaster's response to staining and surface treatment by applying ink or gouache washes to the wood before the plaster application. Or conversely by rubbing dry pigments or powdered graphite over its dried surface. In the first instance, the results were mostly left to chance since so many variables came into play. In the second, near complete control was possible.

For surface treatment I used only pure black or white pigments or graphite. One reason being that for some time I've been interested in the idea of *alternatives* to colors. My BFA degree being in photography, most of the photographic work I have done has been in "black and white". The metallic grey/black of the graphite I found intriguing to me: an ambiguous, colorless shade. The varieties of blacks and whites, depending upon the pigment, I also found engrossing: both black and white are continuums, neither pure black or pure white existing as such, neither considered a color.

Another reason for my relatively limited list of coatings is my interest in the idea that *little is needed for an effect*, and that much can be achieved with just a few elements. The unsuspected or overlooked potential of any material is what I'm alluding to. By using only "pure" white or the plaster itself for the light tone, "pure" black or graphite (previously called *black lead* because of its "black" appearance under certain conditions) for the dark tone, I chose to work with a very limited palette but achieved a surprisingly varied result. It doesn't take much to transform a blank piece of paper or canvas or expanse of plaster or an empty space. Perhaps the drawback is the alienation of some viewers because of more demands made to appreciate the "finer" aspects of sculpture, or art in general, but the refinement of perception is a task for us all.

One's awareness of the phenomenology of any given substance or material or medium inevitably intensifies one's perception of its presence. By forcing myself to *sharpen my sight* I have continued to be challenged by my short list of tones and powders. The phenomenology of an object goes beyond the crude, half conscious perception of every day life. It seeks the *objective existence* of the object through an analysis of all its constituents and the nature of their interactions. Through an analysis of the *presence* of the object, it probes how the object goes beyond itself to affect its surrounding environment, to affect our perception of that environment. My sharpened awareness lead to the realization that all materials and all decisions involved in the use of these materials were equally important. A restricted use of forms, tones, or materials still engenders demanding, sophisticated, provocative artworks.

In this respect, the contribution of the *Minimalist* artists that emerged in the late 60's could be said to be phenomenological. They stripped the noise or interference or "excrescences", Henry Moore would say, from sculpture and made us *see form* and *surface* and made us rediscover the importance of all decisions involved in a creation and its presentation. The Minimalists turned our attention to the basic ground and provided the opportunity for sculptors afterwards to re-investigate unlimited variations made possible by the minimal works.

In my discussion of specific pieces in the exhibition I want to state that I will not elaborate specifically upon the *process* in artmaking. It is just as important to me as it is and has been for countless artists but find it such a subjective, personal issue that I do not wish to impose it upon my committee nor do I consider it exceptionally important to this body of work. The *process* is touched upon, at times, when speaking of materials or concept or philosophical stance, and that will be the extent my involvement with the subject.

The first piece I want to discuss is Connection (fig. 1). Here is a good example of the cedar/plaster use described above. In this instance, however, the application is done with the piece laying on its side so that when upright the oozing plaster is not drooping down the face of the lath but hangs in horizontal bands, defying the pull of gravity. Likewise, the plaster at the bottom is reaching up without collapsing back on itself, offering a similar look to that of the sides and top. I attempted to keep splatters and smears to a minimum, so that each material remained individualized, their duality projected more forcefully.

Although the two boxes are in contact, that physical connection is limited to a thin spine while each has, potentially, far more surface area to share. The boxes face in opposite directions: Actual, full inter-face between individuals is rare; rather they usually present a restricted, well protected flank. Contact is made but actual communication occurs only if the



Fig. 1.

participants want it and are willing to work at it. The gap is bridged only through willful gestures. Thus, the interaction between the two boxes could be far greater, both literally and figuratively.

This work is also about the interaction of two volumes and the thin link that connects them as the total extent of their physical interaction. They are barely yet inexorably linked, a tenuous bond forcing two into one. But still, they are isolated and separated. Each box a unit in itself with the slender link between them underscoring their individual identity. And, at the same time, that slight link creates a cohesive unit that undermines individuality, forcing them to be one unit.

The scale and dimensions were chosen to inspire a sense of intimacy with the piece, they make it neither too imposing nor too receding. Elevating it a couple of inches from the ground brings it up to the viewer and reduces the distance from the eyes to the piece without expanding its actual scale. This largely psychological ploy, hopefully causes the work to seem more reachable and accessible, a gesture on the part of the art toward the viewer to promote a more intimate experience.

But how successful am I in conveying my intent? Does the work project what I wish it to? Is it evident or not? And if it isn't, is it present in the work anyway? I believe this may be one of the thorniest issues for artists in general when it comes to what they think about their art. Let me start by citing three

examples from distant past to the present to illustrate the situation.

Early Christian art (before fifth century) was heavily influenced by the then inherited and prevailing Roman esthetic, in the form of naturalism and illusionism. But by the middle sixth century, abstraction and symbolism had replaced these influences completely. Figures had flattened and had acquired generalized features; nature was symbolized or replaced by a gold or blue background representing the heavenly realm; all elements of the artwork had become symbolic. The goal was to communicate to the congregation the great spiritual truths of Christianity, even to provoke an otherworldly experience for the worshiper. But did it work? The canon had its intended meaning and its vehicle, "unobstructed by perspective and other illusionistic devices", but was it evident to all? Can we with our dispassionate, objective eye declare these mosaics or painted works "spiritual"? We know the proselytizing intent, but is it manifest or intrinsic in the art?

The second example, from the recent past, is from the painter Vasily Kandinsky (1866-1944) who proclaimed with great passion the spiritual value and power of art. Kandinsky's famous *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) was written over a period of more than 10 years and reflects his dedicated, serious attitude toward the subject. He believed that shapes, lines and colors could represent or evoke emotional and

spiritual vibrations, that painting was a language of the soul. Proposing that only abstract art could fulfill his definition, Kandinsky was one of the pioneers of nonrepresentational painting. But, if I am not privy to this philosophy will my soul be stirred by such artworks? If I do not subscribe to such metaphysical fancies am I doomed never to fully appreciate such art? Are the beautiful abstractions that Kandinsky painted, *spiritual bullets* that penetrate the flesh and energize the soul of the viewer?

The final example (fig. 2) is from the work of British sculptor Antony Gormley (b. 1950). Three figures are offered as representations of *Land, Sea and Air II*. By ascribing a specific gesture and pose to each, Gormley not only wanted to imply natural elements but also a "Buddhist awareness" of them. With the artist's explanation (and the setting: the seaside) the sculptures can acquire some of the qualities intended by the artist but, without it, is such intent evident to the viewer?

In all three cases the intentions were very clear verbally but did the art carry the message? The message may be evident if it is orally or graphically articulated either by the Church or by the artists. Otherwise, a *faint suspicion* may arise as we view the works but *specificity* or the *exact aim* of the creators most often may elude us. In all three cases, the art created is moving and evocative but whether it clearly projects its content is highly debatable. There are examples of artistic



Land, Sea and Air II

*above left, Air*  
1982  
Lead, fibreglass  
118 × 69 × 52 cm

*above right, Sea*  
1982  
Lead, fibreglass  
191 × 50 × 32 cm

*left, Land*  
1982  
Lead, fibreglass  
45 × 103 × 53 cm

© Antony Gormley

Fig. 2.

creations that clearly convey their content, or creations whose intended content gradually have become more obvious over time. That much is readily acknowledged. But the "fantasies" of the artists are not always successfully expressed in their art. What the artist *wants* to say and what *is actually said* may be different to the viewer while obvious to the creator. I think the answer lies in the combining of the art and the statements of the artist, and in using these as complementary to one another.

The second piece I want to examine is Vessel (figs. 3a, 3b). This form represents the latest manifestation of my interest in the *boat shapes* and in the idea of *journey*. Starting in May of '95, the concept of the life experience as a *journey* acquired enough significance in my mind to give rise to a body of work over the next 4 or 5 months. Portal (fig. 4) and Ship (fig. 5), are two examples from this period. Both were made of cedar rubbed with powdered graphite.

With Vessel the plaster was allowed to droop on the inside as applied and the entire exterior surface was rubbed with powdered graphite. The decision to apply this uniform coating was based on my desire to maximize the shape itself by eliminating many of its incidental features, features that were minimized, though not entirely eliminated. This strategy was designed to underscore the overall bow-like shape, and to evoke the marine and peregrination connection.



Fig. 3b.

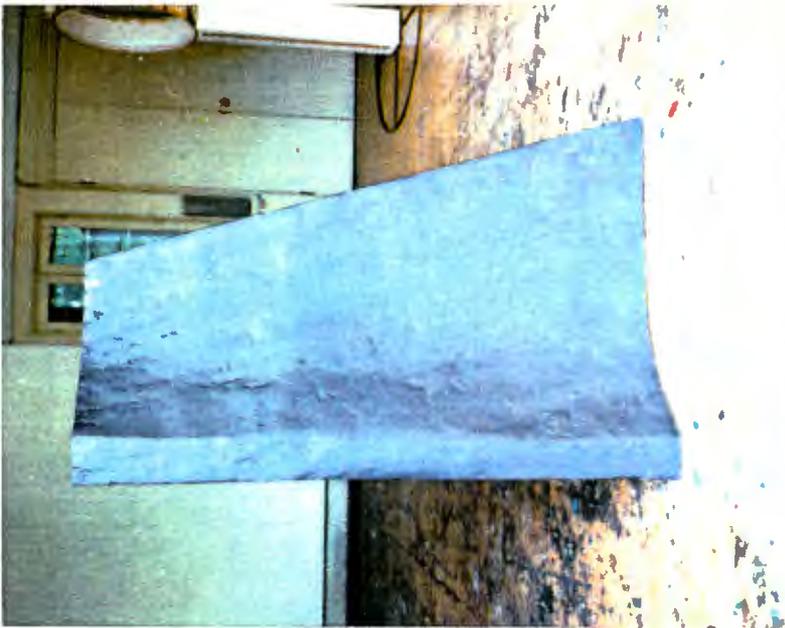


Fig. 3a.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

On the inside, the plaster can be seen as it behaved during application. This reinforces the idea of our intrusion into an unseen, inner space like the generic backsides of plaster walls. The raw cedar gateway or entranceway to this space is a boat-like trough that references the notion of hull and upholds the rationale of "walls".

Just as with Connection, I explore in Vessel the concepts of inside/outside or inside *versus* outside. Viewed from a certain angle Vessel is a simple, dark form (fig. 3a). Offering an unambiguous exterior and an assertive relationship with the floor. Looked at head on toward its inner space (fig. 3b), it becomes more complex, intricate, less direct, maybe mysterious with its nearly inaccessible deep interior. This visual duality, the *heavy*, opaque graphite outside and the *airy*, receding wooden structure inside, symbolizes the difference between the superficiality of the outer covering, the skin of the inscrutable, complex dweller, the I, or private self of the inside. Perhaps, for some, the dichotomy is too great and the exterior cannot be reconciled with the interior. Perhaps, for others, the opposites are brought successfully to great proximity.

The third piece I want to focus on is Power Of One I (figs.6a, 6b). It is so titled because it consists of an installation of controlled, multiple variations on one simple rectangular box. The standard dimensions are 7"x7"x14" with all variations being fractions or multiples of lengths of this arbitrary

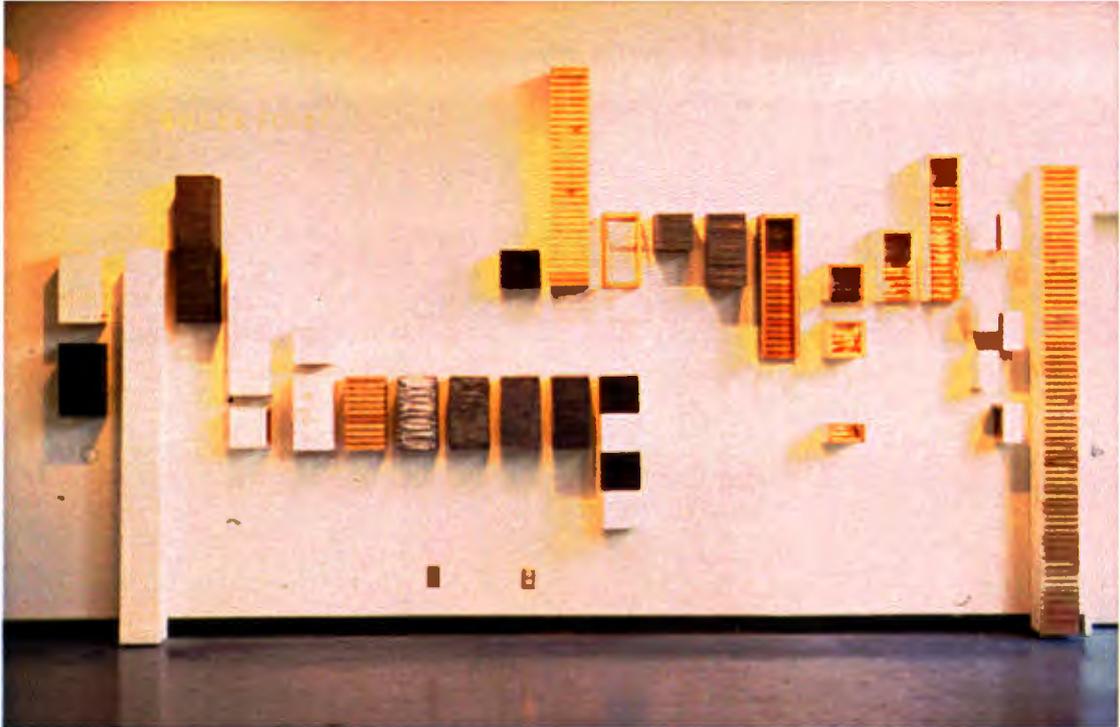


Fig. 6a.

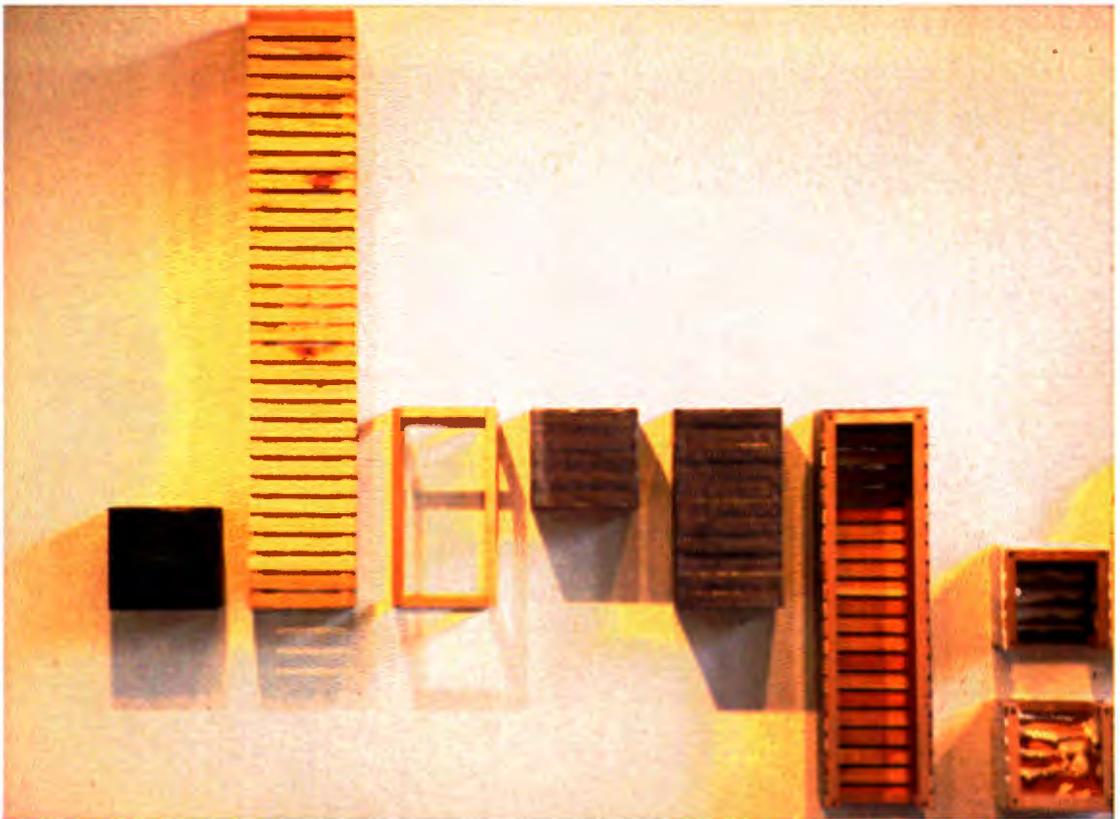


Fig. 6b.

standard. The basic rectangular form is extremely simple and commonplace and I chose it for that reason. I wanted to create an engaging work using a generic, basic form. The method of plaster application is uniform so as not to become a distraction from that common shape. The surface treatment, however, covers the spectrum from cedar stains, to wash stains, to dry pigments and graphite.

These varied surfaces along with the varying heights are the two major distinguishing features. Three of the boxes have a covering that introduce a new element, namely lead. I decided to include the material because of its tonality which relates to the graphite most specifically, and because of the "grounded", low metallic energy that it possesses. This "grounding" returns attention from the more cerebral aspects of the piece and brings it back to the solid form. Since I find lead *assertive* and *imposing* I used it sparingly in an effort to maintain a balance which I have tried to keep subtle and low key.

Reading the complete installation from left to right, the last leaden box on the right terminates a "grouping" within the whole (fig. 6b), initiated by the half sized black box, four units to the left. This grouping explores the transformations of modulation in size and coverings. There is a formal "push pull" proposition here (as throughout the entire piece), with the final, double sized lead box offered as striking a balance between the opposing forces and as conclusion to the series.

Returning to the far left of the installation, the first grouping involves only two boxes, one black and one "white". As I strove to maintain a visual balance between these two units, I realized that a pure white box was not necessary and that a certain amount of departure from white would not be objectionable. Implied is *black and white*, and with a black box I could alter the white one, to some extent, without fatally undermining the impression or concept of black and white. Thus, some gouache washes were incorporated with the plaster in the white one, just enough to sparingly color its surface. How far can "white" be stretched without dissolving the idea of white altogether was part of my interest here.

These boxes two were paired to interact a certain way, their open ends opposite to each other to emphasize the volume they enclose and increase its importance. This bottom end or top end opposition is repeated in different ways throughout the installation as diverse propositions and variations on the idea.

But what are my thoughts in relation to this intricate arrangement of *dressed up* boxes? Is what I am thinking reflected in this work? Let me, once again, elaborate on my thinking and on the basis for it.

The impetus to be an artist can be difficult to pinpoint. How an artist discovers what he or she *has to say* is equally difficult to ascertain. Formal concerns are common artistic considerations but for me expression and communication are

also uppermost in my artmaking endeavors. The art object can, I believe, be a conveyor of meaning or information untainted by the prejudices of language. It can bypass the *literary self* and contact the *cognitive self* directly. Because I do not wish to preach, proselytize, or impose an agenda, I want to make my artworks potential, non-prejudicial transmitters of information, epistemological messengers devoid, as much as possible, of intellectual biases and that reduces ontological isolation.

Through my years of ontological and epistemological research I have reached limits that are seemingly insurmountable. Physicists tell us that the ultimate state of matter is light, and the ultimate ontological state I experienced was a dissolution of phenomenal reality (macrocosm) into an unearthly white light where sensory reality and subject as-we-know-it faded away, although a non-defined witness remained (the cognitive self?). Closing or opening my eyes made no difference to my perception. This luminous "limit experience", to use Foucault's favorite expression, is my subjective counterpart to the ultimate objective phenomenon: The luminal boundaries of science and my own personal luminous cloud reflecting each other. The experience was short lived, and returning to sensual reality was like being shoved in a box with peep holes (five senses) as openings or windows on a holographic scenery.

Epistemologically, uncertainty reigns; we might to be in the middle of the *Age of Uncertainty*. Even the photon, that

bedrock of physical reality is described as possessing an "inherent uncertainty" in its identity. The stream of scientists, philosophers, and teachers have not taken us beyond the *gates of Faith*. One creed opposes the other, one philosopher disproves another, one theory wrestles with another for advocates. Invariably, we are left to turn to our own subjective valuation and convictions in our quest for knowledge. Pockets of adherents to a particular system of thought or theory may develop but they are just as dogmatic as the faithful: objective knowledge ends at the *gates of Faith*, or that of the subatomic world. The tools to obtain knowledge, such as intellect, reason, intuition, sensory perception, are all limited, turning the human apparatus into a defective instrument for the job at hand. Technology, still a crude extension of ourselves, helps us penetrate further into the "mystery beyond" but fails us only too soon. At best, we can hope for glimpses, hope to distill from these glimpses some conclusions that can form stepping stones on our trek across the ocean of life.

The boxes, then, for me, represent the human body as container, as a limited and limiting vessel for a dweller with stirrings of freedom and knowledge that leave the body far behind. The boxes represent bodies as generic, anonymous units, assembled, paired, grouped, manipulated by societies and cultures to give credence to prevailing doctrines or agendas. They represent the *objectified body* of my experience and the

*objectified body* of the modern individual (re: *Romanyshyn*), an inconvenient conveyance for a protean, mental self (re: *Lifton*).

As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, *being* and *knowing* as the core conceptual concerns of my artmaking are a recent conscious development. If these concerns are not readily evident, it remains for me to continue in that direction, seeking to refine my intended statements and avenues of expression. Materially, the plaster/cedar mediums still hold my interest and will persist I suspect for some time to come. Likewise, the simple box form retains for me much potential to explore.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. *Connection*, 1996  
cedar, plaster, steel  
46" high x 21" x 10"  
following p. 8.
2. *Land, Sea and Air II*, 1982  
by Antony Gormley  
following p. 11.
- 3a, 3b. *Vessel*, 1996  
cedar, plaster, graphite  
51" high x 35" long x 15" wide  
following p. 12.
4. *Portal*, 1995  
cedar, graphite  
82" high x 69" long x 35" wide  
following p. 12.
5. *Ship*, 1995  
cedar, graphite  
94" high x 40" wide x 26" deep  
following p. 12.
- 6a. *Power of One I*, 1996  
cedar, plaster, graphite, lead, pigments,  
ink, gouache  
12' high x 16' wide x 7" deep  
following p. 13.
- 6b. *Power of One I*, detail  
cedar, plaster, lead, black pigment  
56" high x 55" wide x 7" deep  
following p. 13.

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