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Seed Pods, Bases and Formalism: An Artist's Journey

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Craig Luster for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Sculpture were presented June 11, 1996, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Craig Luster for Master of Fine Arts in Art:

Sculpture presented May 28, 1991.

Title: Seed Pods, Bases and Formalism: An Artist's Journey

A sculpture can offer visual information that is simple or complex. The work can present only a single facet to ponder or deal with all facets equally polished and linked. There can be enough information to arrange in an order that reads as narrative. All is possible but, without question, the more complex the sculpture, the more information given, the greater the challenge to the artist to make a coherent and interesting whole of everything being presented.

The body of work presented in my thesis show represents the outcome of exploring a chain of questions about sculpture. The first question was simply how to present a sculpture of a seed pod. This question led to inquiring what the base could do for the sculpture. Next came a study of the artwork of Constantin Brancusi. I realized that he had used formal qualities of sculpture to link his bases and sculptures, so I wondered about the ability of formal qualities to solve my base/sculpture problems.

All of the work was completed with the intent of expanding my personal sculptural lexicon. I also intended to develop a store of knowledge that allowed free use of multiple artistic concepts. The hope was that what was being communicated through a sculpture would be sufficiently complex that a viewer would be intrigued into considering all the possible implications of the visual information.

**SEED PODS, BASES AND FORMALISM:
AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY**

by
CRAIG LUSTER

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
ART: SCULPTURE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION	1
SEED PODS	4
BASES	5
FORMALISM	6
THE SCULPTURES	9
THE JOURNEY	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY	32

LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

P/1: Monolithic cube of Tony Smith	2
P/2: "The State Hospital" by Edward Kienholz	3
P/3: Seed Pod #1	10
P/4: Seed Pod #2	12
P/5: Seed Pod #3	15
P/6: Seed Pod #4	17
P/7: Seed Pod #5	19
P/8: Seed Pod #6	21
P/9: Seed Pod #7	23
P/10: Seed Pod #8	24
P/11: Photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe	26
P/12: "For Mapplethorpe"	28

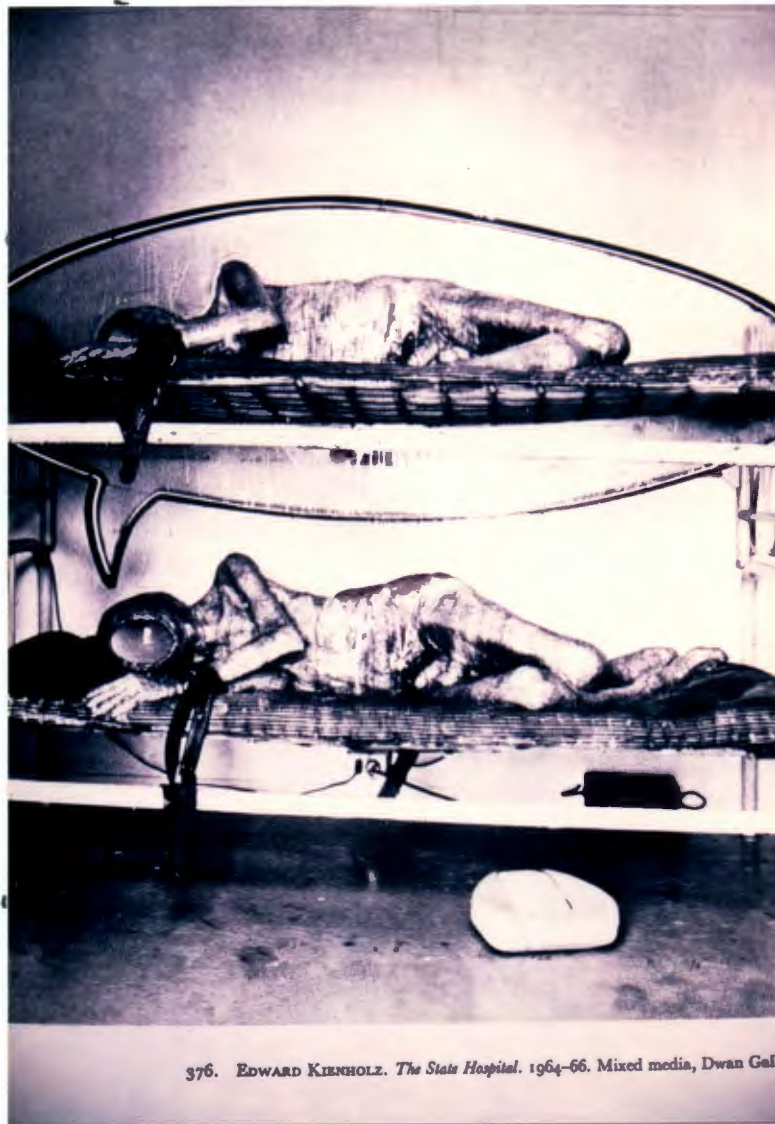
INTRODUCTION

The actual sculpted physical material of a sculpture can be a single severely simple shape. At the other end of the spectrum, a sculpture can be a complex composition of many interacting physical components. The monolithic cube of Tony Smith (P/1) is an example of the simple. "The State Hospital" by Edward Kienholz (P/2) is an example of the complex.

What one sees when looking at the cube is simple: A cube. There it is. There is nothing more. A viewer could take a logical line of reasoning and work toward an understanding of the implications of the cube. Perhaps the artist wanted to bring into focus the physicality of pure geometric mass. Perhaps the cube was an extension of a current art trend . . . , on and on. With the sculpture of Kienholz the viewer is being led through much more information. The sculpture is vastly more complex with many kinds of information being given, all of which leave many obvious paths of reasoning. This complexity is not a matter of ambiguity; it is a matter of the artist controlling how much information is being given and directing the viewer in the readings of this information.



P/1: Monolithic cube of Tony Smith.



P/2: "The State Hospital" by Edward Kienholz.

In considering the above, I offer the following as a narrative of my own journey through the process of examining some artistic questions. All of this comes down to an education that has expanded my personal lexicon of art.

In my two years of graduate study at Portland State University I worked toward adding to my knowledge of how visual reading of sculpted physical material can stimulate response and, hopefully, thought. I believed that this knowledge would increase my ability to give the viewer the possibility of many different, yet related, concepts within one work of art. I did not want to limit the viewer to working through her or his own thoughts to discover significance in the art; however, I would not exclude this possibility. I did not want to lead the viewer through an interaction of the art by way of a narrative that had only one story line and one conclusion.

What I did want was to offer the viewer a piece of art that would seem obvious in certain concepts and readily accessible at these points. Behind and surrounding these accessible concepts I hoped to layer the work with diffused concepts that would reinforce the obvious and add depth to all that was being said.

SEED PODS

To begin my journey, I found my original subject while I was walking to a store and, as usual, admiring the flowers. I picked a tulip that had withered,

leaving only the seed pod and stem. I was struck by its beauty and by the fact that there was nothing I saw in the design that was not absolutely fundamental to the function. The pod was a beautiful composition of line, volume and texture; and every speck of it was essential to its fundamental reason for being—reproduction. I took the pod back to the studio.

My two years of graduate work began with a clay study of this tulip seed pod that had so captured me with its essential and singularly purposeful beauty. I did the study because I wanted to know more—to know the composition of line, volume, and texture—and to wonder.

BASES

As a sculpture, the clay study needed a base, and it was here the work began. I had to decide what kind of base to use, which led to a series of questions: What could the base do by itself? What could the base do in conjunction with the sculpture? What knowledge did I have of the known limits of the base/sculpture interaction? I questioned the choice of material as a possible contribution beyond the structural needs. I looked closely at the point of separation between the base and sculpture and pondered how to dissolve the separation. I questioned all I knew.

In seeking the answers to these questions, I turned to (and am indebted to) the artists Constantin Brancusi and Robert Mapplethorpe for their individual talents and the way each used formalism in their work.

In my opinion Brancusi was not only a master of how to use the base to best display his sculptures, but was probably *the* master of the base as sculpture. His range of work on and inquiry into the problem of bases was extraordinary. However, my interest centered on his ability to make the base a beautiful composition of forms that functioned in perfect symbiosis with the sculpture it supported. I saw that Brancusi's use of formalism was a major element (one of many) that he used to link his bases and sculptures. Formalism was what I was seeking—some element of art that I could use as a concept, one that would further my study into linking the base and sculpture. At this point, the dominating focus of my work was formalism.

FORMALISM

I suspect that questions about formalism arise—even questions about its validity—when it is referred to as the ultimate form of analysis, or when definitions of what is formal or non-formal are presented. Jack Burnham, in his book *Beyond Modern Sculpture*, states: "All modern canons of formalism are more or less acknowledged property of their inventors." He further states that his view of formalism is, ". . . the material—optical, tactile—features of

sculpture which can be identified and logically examined as separate physical entities.”¹ I agree that this is a starting point for understanding formalism. It is not necessary to prove the validity or to state absolute terms. I accept formalism and its use as an analysis of art.

Rather than the formal as a set of standards, I argue that the formal qualities of art are at one end of a spectrum and the non-formal at the other, with a confusing gray area in the middle. The formal in a sculpture begins with the physical material, that is its line, form, texture, mass, color, etc. These qualities stand at the far end of the spectrum as the clearly formal end. The non-formal and the transition from formal to non-formal is best explained by example. If a person examining a sculpture states that a particular line is a hard line, she or he stands at the edge of the gray area between formal and non-formal. That there is a line is understood, however defining the line as hard edges into the area of personal interpretation. A step further is to say that the hard line represents or means something. This is the non-formal—the personal interpretation of sculpted physical matter. From my biased artist’s point of view, non-formal can be explained competently only by the artist. The artist can say what was meant by any line. The formal can be understood

¹ Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture*, p. 12.

without the help of the artist—a line can be seen. My graduate work was influenced by this concept.

Within my focus on formalism I ventured into studying the effects of proportion, design, composition of mass, and even had a close brush with total abstraction of formal qualities. This course of study continued up to the eighth sculpture, when I felt the need to incorporate and move on. I then was ready to work on something that would allow my use of this new knowledge, one that would invite more engagement from the viewer. I needed to have more categories of visual information at work simultaneously.

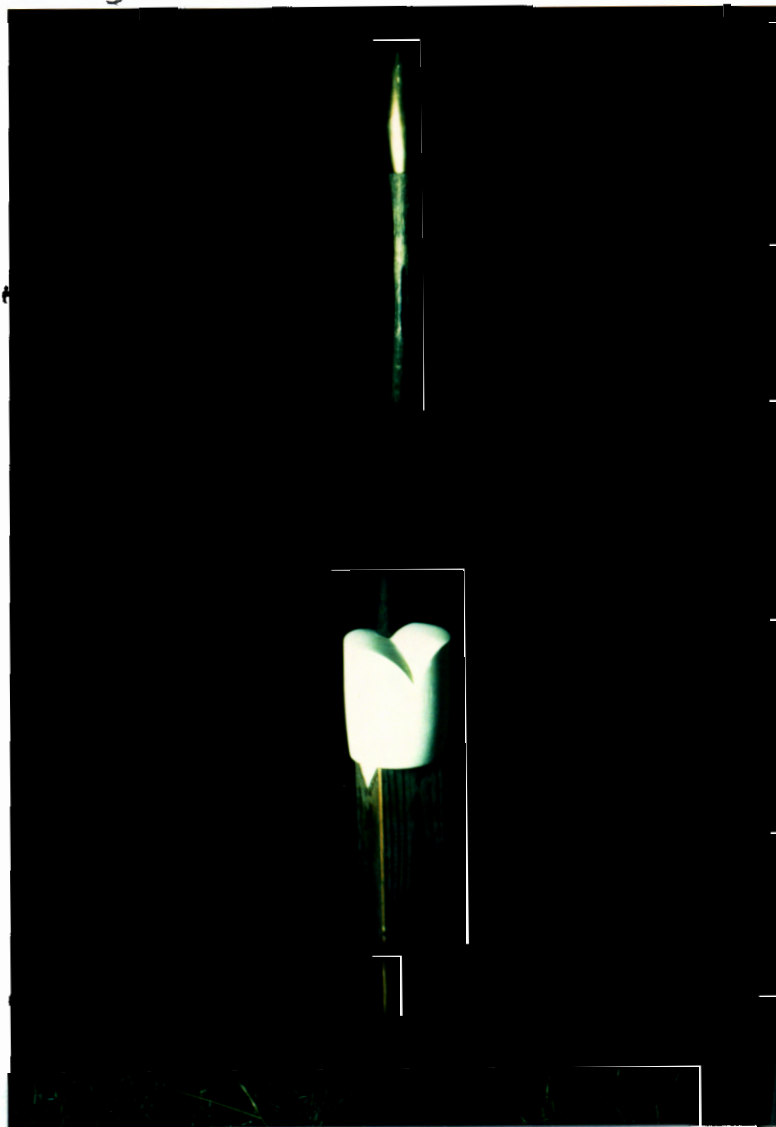
During this time of questioning, I examined the work of Robert Mapplethorpe. In his photographs I saw the perfect example of how the beauty of competent formal control mixed with explicit imagery could elicit strong, albeit mixed, reaction. I studied his work, not with the intent of finding ways of shocking the viewer with the explicit sexual imagery he had used, but rather to see the formalism aspects in his ability to use a strong image with strong content as a recognizable aspect of sculpture in creating a composition as beautiful as it is intense. All of this layering would give the viewer more than the easily recognizable formal issue to think about.

THE SCULPTURES

The overall concept for Seed Pod #1 (P/3) was to make the base a contributing member of a two-part work of art. The first was the image of the sculpture, a tulip seed pod. The second part was to create the base as metaphor for the plant. By a careful selection of material and shape, the metaphor could be successful.

In the studio, I had quickly completed a clay study, which at eight inches, was much larger than life. I abstracted the work to display the qualities of form I found most appealing. After the clay was finished, I transferred the clay into bronze. Once the bronze cast was finished, the next step was to make a suitable base. In considering the base, I was at the pivotal question which led to the first two sculptures—how to integrate through metaphor the base with the sculpture.

The first part of the three-piece base is a rectangular box made of lead and filled with cement. The lead was selected because it is a base element found in the earth. The cement is not seen, but added the weight needed to anchor the tall unstable work. The second part is a wooden beam—wood grows out of the earth. The last part is a column of cast plaster—chosen as another base material found in the earth, but one I felt didn't work as well as



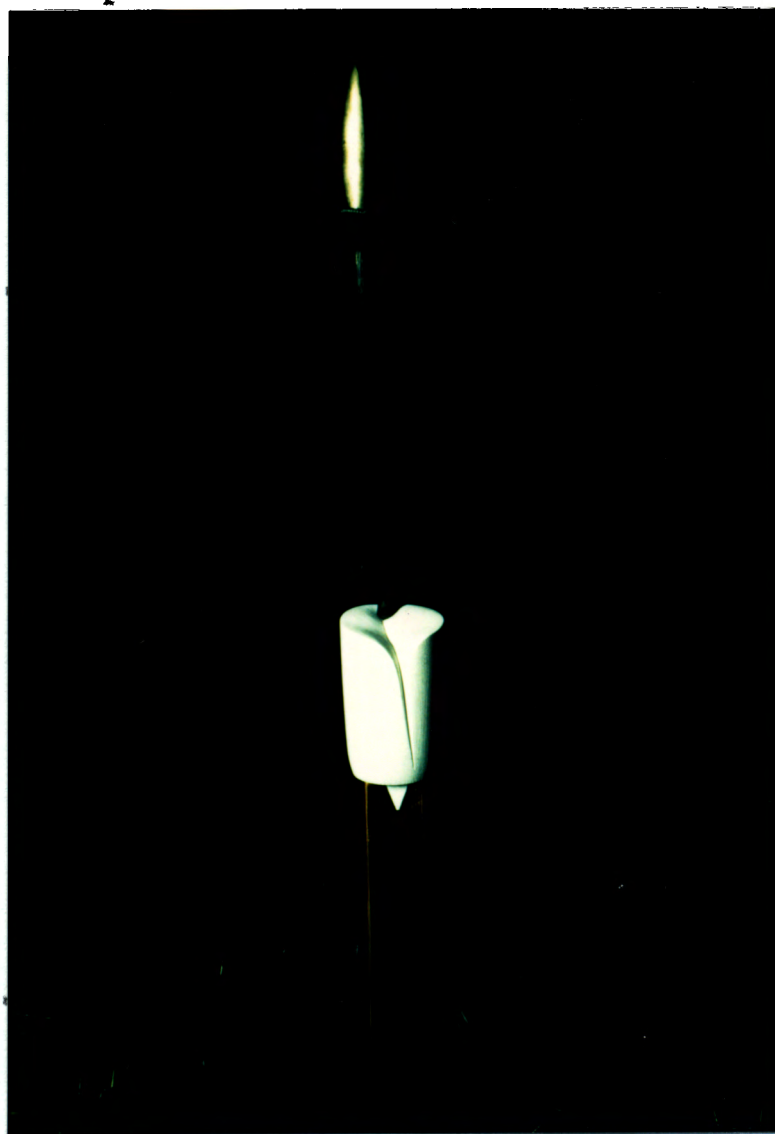
P/3: Seed Pod #1.

as a metaphor. I needed a material that could be carved easily and quickly. This was a need that I hadn't anticipated before work was started.

One of the functions of a traditional base is to provide a flat surface for the presentation of the sculpture. This flat surface is a sterile area that separates the base and sculpture and this would have been at odds with my intention of joining the two. My solution was to carve the top of the column into the shape of a leaf in relief. Into the leaf at the correct spot for the sake of the composition, I inserted the stem of the seed pod sculpture. The plaster column still read well as a purely geometric shape that fit well with the two other pieces of the base, and with the carving the viewer would, hopefully, begin to consider the sculpture.

The next sculpture, *Seed Pod #2 (P/4)*, was an attempt to work through recreating the first sculpture as a way to rethink what I had accomplished. To keep the work interesting, I reduced the size as a challenge to figuring out new proportions. The repeat was undertaken almost as a spontaneous reaction—it was not planned, but it worked well. This course of action resulted in a useful way to rethink, so I continued to work in sets for the remainder of this series of eight sculptures.

It was after the first two sculptures were complete that I found an obvious likeness to the work of Constantin Brancusi. I had long admired his



P/4: Seed Pod #2.

work and had studied it to some extent. Now I viewed his work with intent. I was looking for some aspect of it that I had not fully considered, something that would help me understand more about what was possible in the interaction between base and sculpture.

As with most truly masterful artists, there is much to see and understand in Brancusi's work. His sculptures have the formal perfection of line, volume, and surface finish. (It is not limited to these, but these are standouts.) In addition to his abilities on the formal level, he was highly successful at extracting from his subject matter only the essence—that to which his personal sensibilities responded and which gave form to it. The bases are proof that Brancusi was a progressive thinker in his challenging of known limits. He developed bases to a point where they were integral to the sculpture. He also took this development to its conclusion by leaving behind the sculptures and making free standing sculptures of the bases.

The aspect of his work that was most pertinent to my study was his like use of formal qualities in designing his sculptures and bases. Due to his unfailing attention to the most formal qualities, he has the ability to blend into an inseparable composition the dissimilar sculpture and base. The sculpture finish, although quite different, was as considered in his sculptures as it was in the bases. This is true for all formal qualities. This issue of how he linked his work was what I was after.

Seed Pod #3 (P/5) became the test for what I had seen in the work of Brancusi. I made a three-piece base and placed a two-piece sculpture in the obvious flat surface at the top of the base. I made no attempt to blend the base and sculpture by any other means than by the handling of formal qualities, in a like manner, for the whole work.

The base of Seed Pod #3 is made up of three sections. The top and bottom are columns of plaster. The middle is a large shaped section of a ten-by-ten wood beam. These were shaped and cut to meet the needs of a composition that consisted mostly of line, mass, proportions, and texture.

The sculpture is made up of two pieces. The column of transition in Seed Pods #1 and #2 now became, along with the seed pod, the sculpture. The two pieces were formed with the same formal concerns as the base—line, mass, proportions, and texture. The difference is the subject matter image.

Seed Pod #3 turned out to be a compromise. Consequently, it was not really satisfying. The forms of the base leaned toward the work of Brancusi, but it did not go far enough. I was trying to adhere to my personal sensibilities and failed to stay on track with what I was doing. This left the forms of the base not as distinct as I would have liked, hence the sculpture fails. In other words, my intentions were mixed, so the work reflected two ideas—studying



P/5: Seed Pod #3.

the work of Brancusi and following my ideas of blending the base and sculpture.

I thought through the failure of Seed Pod #3 and decided to try a different concept of blending the base and sculpture. Instead of using an overall composition of large masses of material, I would try to find a composition that used surface design running through the parts to make a coherent whole. This was Seed Pod #4 (P/6).

I went back to Seed Pods #1 and #2 and used same the components for the base and sculpture as a starting point for Seed Pod #4. Everything was changed, but the most significant changes were to the bronze and the wood column. I made the bronze much larger and shortened the stem, almost eliminating it. The most important change was to the wood column. In the wood of Seed Pods #1 and #2 there is a small section of plaster cast into the top in the shape of a "V." For Seed Pod #4, this section was enlarged and shaped to form a design that rose up out of the wood and formed a flowing section that supported the next piece.

Seed Pod #4 was a success in exploring another possibility of sculpture within the concepts for the group. As far as discovering something new that excited me, I found nothing. At this point, I was no longer drawn to



P/6: Seed Pod #4.

the idea of dealing with the work of Brancusi or surface design and I was uncertain where I would go next.

By accident, during a fit of cleaning, I stacked up some pieces of scrap material in a corner just to get them out of my way. Later that day I looked over at the pile and I saw a stack of pieces that was a unique composition, the proportions of which held a strong visual presence. The stack also fell exactly within the format of the Seed Pod sculptures. This accidental stack was made up of a block of wood, a rectangle of lead, a column of plaster, another taller column of plaster and a leftover seed pod bronze. I could not pass up this synchronistic seeming chance happening, thus I began work on Seed Pod #5 (P17).

There was little work to do. The top column of plaster was carved to accept the bronze and the bronze was cut to fit the carving. After this little bit of work, I sat back to look at it and there it was—a unique sculpture that had just *happened*.

The only aspect of the sculpture that held my interest was the sensation of presence—I had the sensation of the work demanding its own space. I considered this presence a function of its particular proportions of mass relative to the human scale. To check on the theory of mass proportions, I started work on the next sculpture.



P17: Seed Pod #5.

Seed Pod #6 (P/8) was a copy of Seed Pod #5 in nearly every way—the only significant change was a decrease in size to see if the presence would be lost. Other than this significant change, almost everything else was the same. The number of pieces was the same as was the material. There were small differences in surface texture, but they were minimal. All of this was done so that the effect of scale shift could best be judged.

The results of Seed Pod #6 was mostly what I had expected. I had wondered if the presence would transfer in spite of the scale change and found that it did not. The size change had the effect of moving the piece from the human scale, where the piece was felt to be in the same space, to a removed space of its own—isolated from humans. The mass of Seed Pod #5 was simple undeniable—one could not ignore it—and the change to Seed Pod #6 took away this quality.

When I was considering the next sculpture, I realized that I was weary of the base sculpture questions, and that I needed to explore something else. I decided to study formalism on a more abstract level, but not one related to the base. To move to an isolated study of formalism, I decided to remove the base from the work so I would not be forced to deal with its interaction with the sculpture. Without the base I could deal with just the concept of making a seed pod sculpture that was a composition of abstract formal qualities.



P/8: Seed Pod #6.

Seed Pods #7 and #8 (P/9, P/10) will be discussed as a unit because there was absolutely no change in concept, nor was there a change in form from one to the other.

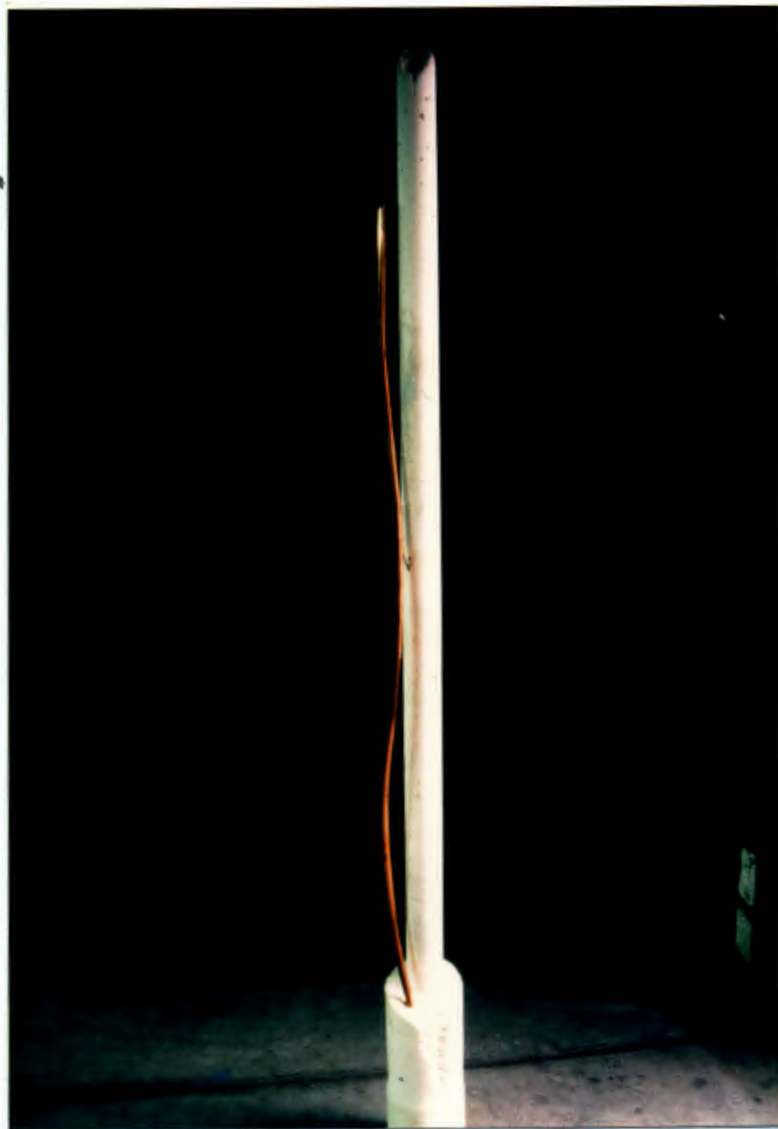
For Seed Pods #7 and #8, I began with two parts, loosely taken from the sculptures of Seed Pods #3 and #4—the column of transition and the seed pod. I say loosely because the shapes were two columns: one a twenty inch tall column and the other a five foot tall column coming out of the first. My only concern was finding a composition of purely formal components. For the most part, I considered mass, texture, line, surface, and proportion. During the work I found the sculptures boring and static, so I added a copper tube as an element of movement and color. These sculptures were so severe and static that they needed help, but I don't think the tube was enough.

As an idea, the stringent adherence to one severe concept is appealing; however formalism taken to the point of minimalism, as it was in Seed Pods #7 and #8, was not a suitable concept. Minimalism, meaning to deal with a minimal number of formal concerns, had led to sterile objects that were devoid of any ability to communicate in the manner I sought.

What I was after was a more complex communication, one that allowed viewer reaction—a stimulation to thought on many levels. I then began to think about developing the content of the image. It was at this point that I



P/9: Seed Pod #7.



P/10: Seed Pod #8.

looked at the work of Robert Mapplethorpe as an example of what I was seeking. The pertinent work was the photographs dealing with explicit sexuality (P/11).

The photographs are of personal images dealing with a universal subject matter that could not be ignored. His formal qualities were controlled with impeccable competence and the results of this, if one can put aside the subject matter for a moment, were pictures of extreme beauty. This beauty set up a weird duality that allowed the viewer many levels of entry into the work. He had succeeded in controlling unbearably confrontational imagery and matching it with a complete command of a solid and beautiful formal language.

I decided to start with that format of the base and sculpture of Seed Pods #3 and #4. This was a good solid composition that would allow for the development of the image. To expand the content of the image, I took the idea from Mapplethorpe of dealing with something of an explicit sexual nature. This seemed to fit as a natural progression of the image because the seed pod represented the state of reproduction and all of the sculptures were phallic in shape.

The subject chosen for the image of the sculpture was that of an animal penis. The question being asked was whether this image could be what it is



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202

P/11: Photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe

and at the same time function as a sculptural form? Through this approach, the idea of having multiple entry levels into the work for the viewer could be carried out.

The sculpture "For Mapplethorpe" (P/12) was made up of the base: lead box on the bottom, wood beam next, and the column of plaster finishing it off. The sculpture consisted of a cast segment of marble—cylindrical and carved to form a suggestive opening on top. Coming out of this was a combination of two cast bronze penis shapes. The first was bovine, the second canine. For the sake of the overall composition, all of the shapes were treated independent of subject matter and considered for their formal qualities.

This sculpture was my most successful work on a formal level and a strong example of what I was after in a competent control of multiple components. I dealt with an overall composition of formal issues between sculpture and base, and within, but not at odds with, this was the development of the content of the image.

THE JOURNEY

All of the work completed in the two year period can be looked at in terms of differing processes.



P/12: "For Mapplethorpe"

The first two Seed Pod sculptures were works of art completed by way of a process that did not include predetermined questions. The first sculpture was the result of a simple inquisitive response to an organic form. After completing the sculpture, I faced the immediate problem of what to do for a base and the problem was solved by following an idea that occurred quickly and was seemingly an easy solution—the base as metaphor. After the first two works, the course of study turned aside from simple responses to immediate questions toward a directed study of predetermined questions—a purposeful detour.

These predetermined questions came about after following a train of reasoning that began with a study of the work of C. Brancusi with particular interest in his ability to form such beautiful compositions between his bases and sculptures. I became aware that the inherent formal qualities of both the base and the sculpture were largely responsible for such compelling compositions. From this insight it was easy to see direction in my need to understand more about formalism and that the best method to learn was to set up a series of predetermined questions.

I reasoned that formalism could best be studied through an analytical approach for developing a way of completely blending the base and sculpture

into a single composition. The question was simple: How could formal qualities of sculpture be used to blend the base and sculpture into a whole?

My curiosity about the questions had mostly run its course about the time I began to feel the pressure of my time at Portland State University running out. I felt it was time to leave behind this body of work. Yet before I did, I wanted to make one last sculpture, one that would help me move away from the overriding concerns of formalism, base and sculpture. My hope was to integrate what I'd learned into my work and to move on.

Not only had I learned about the chosen subjects, I also had developed my ability to search for new knowledge that came during the work in the form of unforeseen discoveries. By this, I mean that at the end of my two years of graduate work I did not want to be so academic in my approach to art. I had been setting up specific questions to find answers and these answers came at the end of the work by referring back to the questions that lead to the sculptures. This method of working had been fine but along the way I found that I was overlooking discoveries about form, composition, etc. These discoveries, if acted on immediately, could lead to a more complete work of art and a free-flowing step to the next piece of work.

The last sculpture in the series, "For Mapplethorpe," was approached differently. I accepted, at the beginning, that I could find an overall

composition between the base and the sculpture. This allowed me to move on and challenge the development of the image. I did not specifically set up questions as to finding an image that would fit in. I just picked an image subject and used the overall format of the previous work to begin with. What developed during the work was a spontaneous use of what I knew.

My personal lexicon of art was expanded. This journey, for its limited purpose, was at an end.

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