

SONGS

ROB WARD

The artist's appeal is less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring and sooner forgotten yet its effect endures forever, the changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom, to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition - and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives, to our sense of pity and beauty, and pain, to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts to the solidarity, in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity, the dead to the living and to the unborn.

Introduction

It has long been an ambition of mine to visit Bennington, with its rich history and connection with many of the artists I admire: Newman, David Smith, Caro, Noland and Martha Graham amongst others.

I owe many people a debt of gratitude in connection with the exhibition and my work, and being in general. This exhibition is a set of songs for particular people. My love and gratitude goes to them; Cathy Ward, Jack Ward, Lisa Ward, Charlotte Ward, Tony Bright, Warwick and Susie Miller, Katarina Závodska, Claire Young, Willard Boepple and Dean Snyder.

I am indebted to Dr Urszula Szulakowska for her essay and to Rob Lycett and Jonathan Ward for their continued interest in my work.

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Usdan Gallery, Bennington College, Vermont.

November 17 - December 12 1998

ROB WARD

*The sole purpose of sculpture is neither description
nor imitation but the creation of unknown beings from
elements which are always present but not apparent.*

*(Duchamp - Villon)**

The three-dimensional artefact has its own curious logic which arises from the uncompromising density of sculptural materials, as well as from the sculpture's ability to warp and twist physical space by its very presence. Sculpture also disrupts the spectator's psychological space, raising difficult questions concerning its 'reality' and how the viewer should negotiate its singular demeanour.

However, the viewer has a significant degree of freedom in regard to the material art-object. A painting, or a film, for example, can subjugate their audience by illusionary tricks which cause viewers to lose their own sense of embodied self. But, in the case of a three-dimensional object, the significance of the work is generated by the audience, specifically by their physical presence and by their movements around the objects.

This is Rob Ward's working hypothesis in the present series of installations. He has addressed the nature of the sculptural artefact through a dialogue between two-dimensional drawing and the material object. Within these works, it is the viewer who creates the space and, thus, the meaning.

The drawings are simply structured, producing a vibrating space. Spare in colouration - red, blue, yellow, white - a few simple images relate to various bronzes placed at the side of the drawings. The installations are thematic, intentionally musical in inspiration and conceptual resonance. Each work is dedicated to a person, such as members of Ward's immediate family and close friends, but

they are not works which address psychological issues. Instead, they range from phenomenological investigations concerning the viewing-point of the spectator, through to forms which bear resemblance to written script, or to organic nature. The original objects used for the bronze casts often discretely reflect Rob Ward's personal history.

In his experiments, it is the process of casting which acts as the conceptual bridge between the two-dimensional drawing and the sculptural object. This same process also determines the position and movements of the viewer in relation to the installations. The viewer is lured into close proximity to the works in order to examine the fine details of the bronze cast, such as the edges of a fraying rope, or the fragile delicacy of a cast raffia fan, as well as the luscious, green-blue patination of the surfaces. But, he then has to step back, restlessly, to catch the effect of the whole work.

There is no single viewing-point since Ward has introduced a strong contrast between the hermetic constituents of the bronzes and a broad spatial field of vision. In one work, for instance, three bronze tripods are perceived as stools, as a site for a 'conversation piece'. However, on retreating, the viewer perceives them as being a frontispiece to a stage set which incorporates the red painting behind them.

As Marcel Duchamp commented:

*It is the spectator who makes the pictures.**

The installations produce a sense of personal intimacy with the viewer. This aura of familiarity is itself a challenge to the history of rhetorical public sculpture. Ward has specifically chosen to use bronze, in a deliberated questioning of the monumental and architectural traditions of Western sculpture with their authoritarian resonances.

However, the form of his sculpture is also seemingly 'traditional' in that it is object-based. He even occasionally places it on a plinth, 'a sculpture's circle of solitude' (Rilke). At other times, Ward returns to Anthony Caro's motif of placing the work directly onto the floor. In some works, the bronze cast engages with the angle of the floor and the wall. Other objects are located on shelves, recalling the conceptualist works of the late 1960's.

In these references to such historical conventions of sculpture, Ward re-examines the nature of sculpture, but he posits 'sculpture' as being a 'trope', a figure of signification which generates a series of contradictory historical discourses. 'Sculpture' is much more complex than the empirical history of iconic works as presented in the institutional art museums.

In the series of engagements with the aesthetic and institutional texts of history, the patination of the bronze in Ward's objects is extremely important. The objects are loosely patinated in a painterly way. This type of finish is almost never seen in the gallery context. Usually, such extreme effects of patination occur only on architectural

finishes, such as the casing of domes where they result from environmental stress. It is almost impossible to examine this kind of patination at close view. In the gallery space, more often, the patinations are over-fastidious, finer in texture and mellow in tone, conforming to the 'objet d'art' tradition.

In Rob Ward's sculptures, the finish of the works serves as a type of painting. He describes it as a way in which he 'telescopes painting into sculpture' producing a 'tension' in the optic and haptic perceptions of the viewer. These surfaces are kin to expressionistic painting, yet they are also undeniably 'sculptural' since they are organically produced by the bronze itself.

In turn, the paintings are hung to the ground so that they act as backdrops to the bronzes. The paintings have become actual objects in the same space as the sculptures and their prime relation is with the space on the floor, not with any symbolic content on their surface. Again, the process of casting acts as a unifying conceptual trope between sculpture and the drawing. For, the paper of the drawings is cast-coated ceramic. Consequently, Ward's drawing procedure is, in fact, close to etching, a procedure of inscribing marks in which the unyielding surface of the paper rejects the pigment, rather than absorbing it, contributing, thus, in an integral manner to the production of the specific colours of the paint-surface.

Similarly, his bronze sculptures are no longer located

within the isolated glory of the academic tradition, but are placed in relation to the paintings. The bronzes are cast from utilitarian objects, such as a chemistry bench, or a pig-sticker for a barbecue. Some sculptures, however, return to an investigation of 'drawing in space'. One such work, dedicated to one of Rob Ward's daughters, is a three-dimensional graphic improvisation, cojoined with a blue painting. In its over-life size elongation, it is both totemic, implying a narrative content, as well as a form of musical notation, or a diacritical phrase of verse. Closer scrutiny reveals that this 'phrase' is composed of the most surprising, loosely autobiographical, elements. It is cast from objects such as a bobbin, a water-sprinkler and a hammer.

A certain sexual element is overt in Rob Ward's current work, signified, for instance, by a water bowl with a bronze point dipping into it, or an incongruous found-object, consisting of a garish 'golden' vase with a shell-like form and vulvic mouth. In another work, severe coffin-like, but fetishistically female, triangular forms stand open against the wall in a double reflection of themselves. Finely balanced across the painting is a rod, suspended from the point of a triangle.

Although the present installations have not evolved from any singular historical influence, Brancusi is one of Ward's mentors and he is referenced in the stacked-up forms which recur in Ward's sculpture. Another reference to

Brancusi is in his occasional use of glistening, burnished surfaces, as in one set of bronzes cast from the residues of another sculptures work, in an acknowledgement of their friendship. The use of light and shadow is also central to Ward's practice, reinforcing the viewer's after-image of the dense colouration of the paintings and sculptures. He often introduces water into his works, so that colours are picked up in their purity and reflected.

Yet, paradoxically, Ward also acknowledges the American abstract expressionists as another important factor in his artistic development and in his range of references. One clue which illuminates Ward's interconnection of these opposed aesthetic principles may be found in Harold Rosenberg's definition of abstract expressionism:

The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence.

(Art News, 1952)

This is essentially how Brancusi also viewed his sculpture, as an action beyond conscious enunciation which could unify diversified phenomena. He also sought some essential 'Isness' of unified Being which, for him, in contrast to the expressionists, was to be found within reductionist, minimalising processes aimed at revealing the essential qualities of matter in space.

In fact, within Rob Ward's installations, there is a determining overall order which, as in Brancusi's sculpture,

tempers and refines the narrative motifs. Ultimately, although Ward questions the classical origins of the Western sculptural tradition, he himself belongs to that tradition. For, his experiments occur in relation to the classical determinants of balance and harmony, adjusted by right proportion between nature and sculpture.

This aspect of a natural, central discipline within Ward's improvisation is due to an aversion to excessive effect and to excessive personalisation. Rather, as in the classical tradition maintained and furthered by Brancusi, he seeks for those essential qualities which are timeless. Yet, as in Brancusi's work, these are humane qualities. It is often forgotten how warm, tactile and animated is classical Greek sculpture. It is sensual and begs to be touched. There is no bombastic rhetoric.

Nearly all of the ancient debates concerning the nature of art, those of Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca, were focused on the bronze sculpture of the Greek masters, such as Phidias. They argued over the exact relationship between the artist's imagination, organic nature and the raw artistic materials. In their discourse, they established that the sources of artistic inspiration were those same principles which underlay nature, namely, those which produced life-supporting order.

Perhaps, this is what Rob Ward means when he states that his overriding intention is 'to create a song', a form of expression which, although personalised, nonetheless, rises

from a source deeper and more universal than ponderous
psychology or dour theory. In this aspiration, Ward has a
kinship with Brancusi, who urged his audience:

Don't look for obscure formulas or mysteries.

It is pure joy that I am giving to you.

*Look at my sculptures until you see them.**

Urszula Szulakowska

* Quotes taken from:

John Golding, *Cubism*, NY, 1959.

John Golding, *Marcel Duchamp*, London, 1973.

Sidney Geist, *Brancusi*, NY, 1975.



BRETTON HALL

COLLEGE OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This book is a collaboration between Bretton
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Oneself I sing

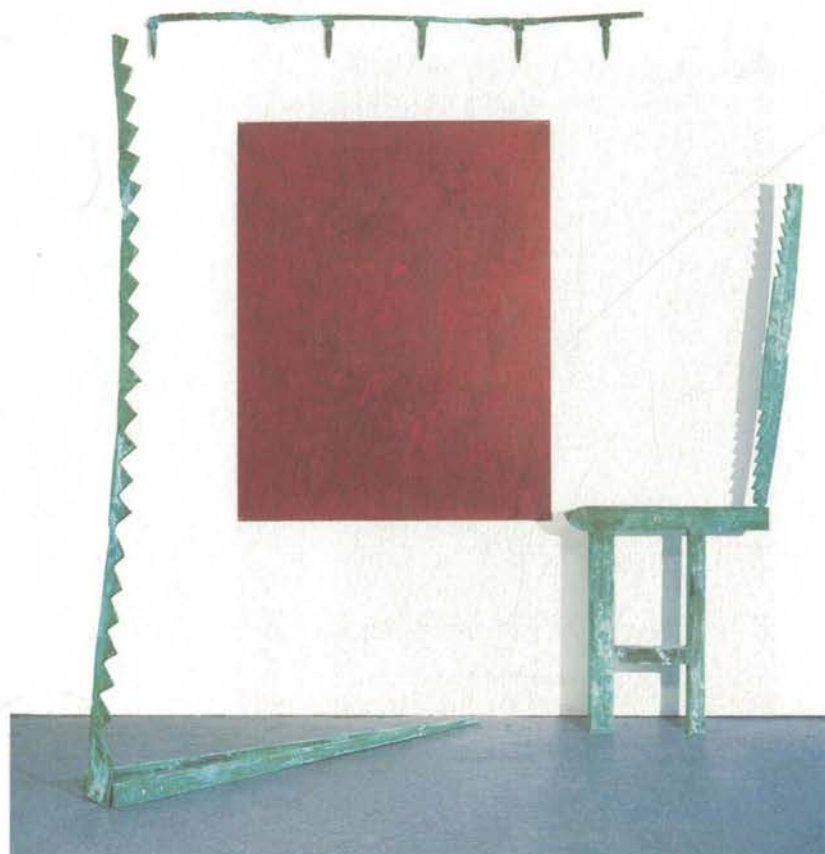
Oneself I sing, a simple separate poem,
Yet utter the word democratic, the word en masse,
Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse,
I say the form complete is worthier far,
The female equally with the male I sing,
Of life immense in passion, pulse and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The modern man I sing.

Walt Whitman
Leaver of Grass

SONGS



Billy's Song
78 x 56 x 36 inches - Acrylic on paper and bronze.



Song for Katya

36 x 46 x 144 inches - Acrylic on paper and bronze.



Tony's Song

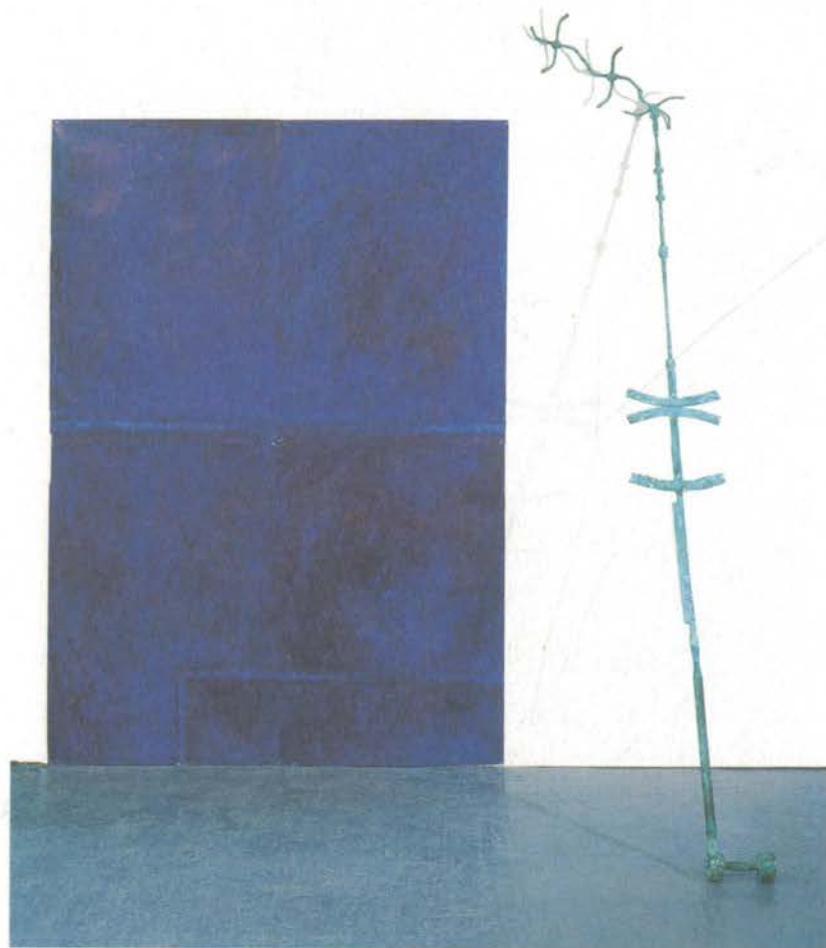
78 x 56 inches - Acrylic on paper and ceramic.



The Miller's Song
92 x 72 inches - Acrylic on paper and bronze.



Willard's Song
78 x 56 inches - Acrylic on paper, bronze, glass and water.



La La La

78 x 56 inches - Acrylic on paper and bronze.



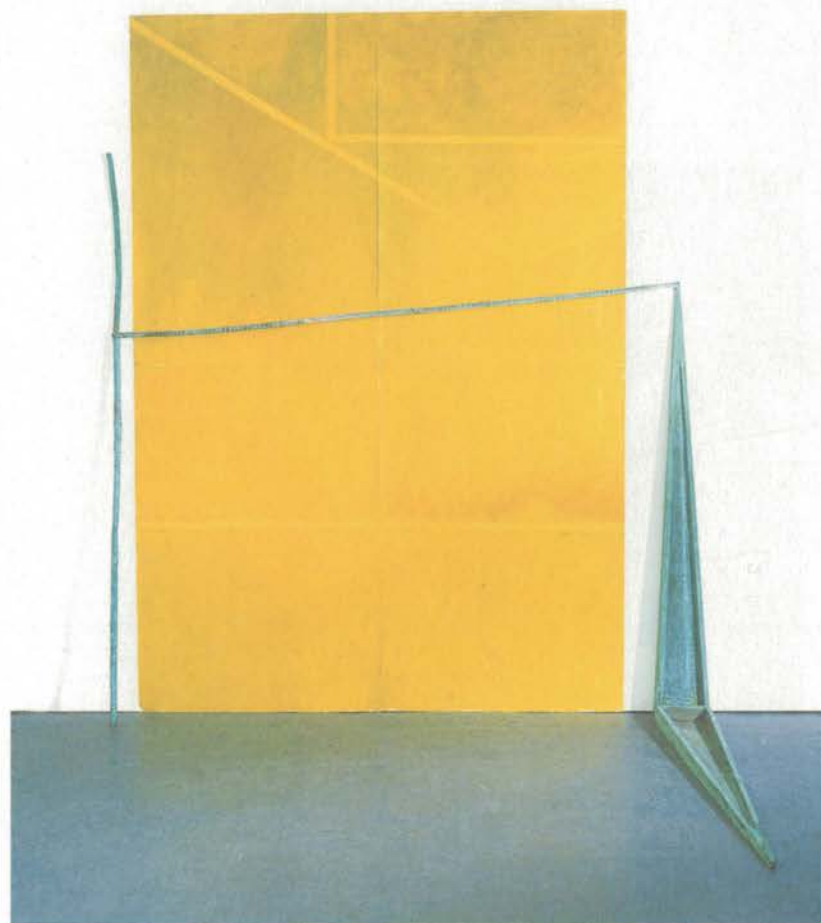
Bennington Song

108 x 46 inches - Acrylic on paper and bronze.



Lisa's Song

78 x 56 inches - Acrylic on paper and bronze.

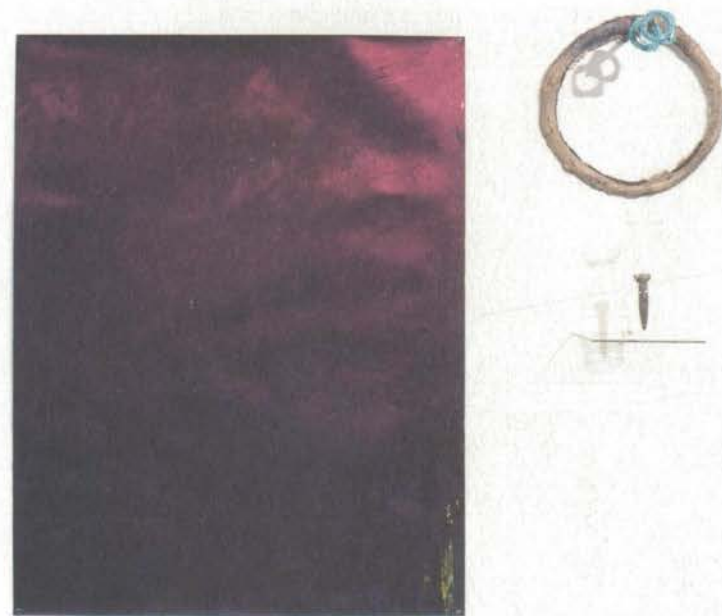


Claire's Song

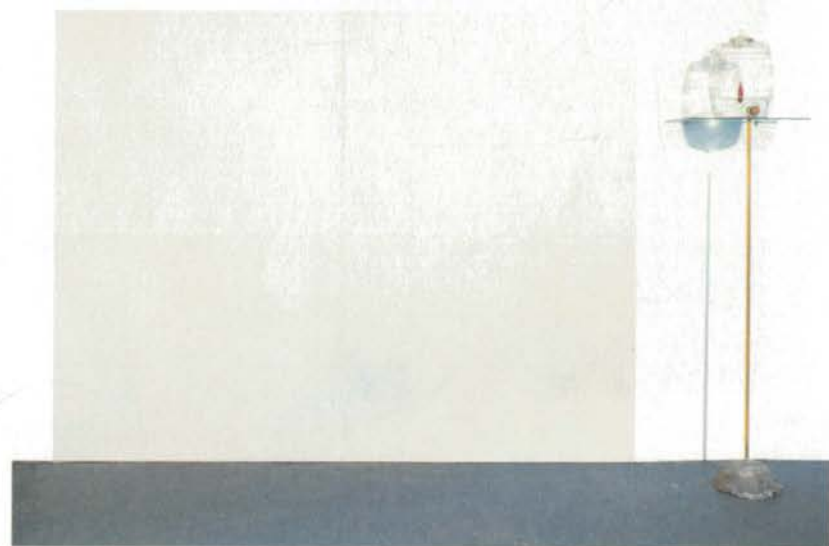
78 x 56 x 48 inches - Acrylic on paper and bronze.



Jumping Jack
78 x 56 inches - Acrylic on paper and bronze.



Song for My Wife
36 x 46 inches - Acrylic on paper, bronze and glass.



Song to Myself
92 x 72 inches - Acrylic on paper, glass, water and wood.



Dean's Cream
78 x 56 inches - Acrylic on bronze, leather and stone.



Mc
68 inches.

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