

NOTES ON AN EXHIBITION

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Since I first met him in 1970, Rubin Peacock has seemed to me to be something of an anachronism. He is a sculptor whose work directly reflects twentieth-century idioms, while his chosen sculptural material is now undisputably bronze, a medium firmly rooted in tradition.

Shortly after we met (I remember the day distinctly, he was dressed immaculately in a dark blue suit, dark hair freshly combed, slightly ill at ease), I learned that he had just found a new excitement in his life: an abandoned run-down, late-17th century house in Aylett, Virginia. At the time, his sculptural forms were multi-layered, automotive-painted, streamlined shapes. He subsequently acquired the house, now his country residence, which he shares with his wife and co-worker Sylvia, and a fat lazy cat. Adjacent to the beautiful house is his studio and foundry, now filled with the complex statements of a dedicated 20th-century artist.

The anachronistic enigma of the artist whose bold forms in bronze speak in an eloquent sophisticated language to our hearts and minds today, but who has a declared love for the past, is better understood when Rubin talks about his sculpture. His words are carefully chosen, his thoughts deliberate, his mood mystical. "My roots are in nature; my roots are ancient rather than in the 20th century; I feel a subliminal magnetic pull by the forces of nature; yet my voice- I am of this time. My work is of today. I am a link." The conversation is dotted with evocative words "totem," "magical," "visionary," "fantasy," "ritual," "rite."

Several weeks ago I drove from Richmond to Aylett to watch Rubin cast a small bronze figure of a Catawba Indian medicine man, commissioned by the Virginia Museum for a gallery of works for the visually impaired. That day Rubin was also casting a piece for a fellow artist, a Pamunkey Indian, Kevin Brown. While the cast bronze was cooling we talked over a welcome glass of white wine. I was reminded then of the fact that Rubin's mother is of Catawba ancestry from North Carolina, where he was born. The pieces of the puzzle began to fit. From the first time that he can remember, Rubin has felt a strange compulsion to express himself through sculptural forms and he remembers that even his early realistic figures had a reference to ritual.

No one encouraged him to pursue art as a career. In fact, his early college training was in the field of music, perhaps accounting for the fact that his sculptural forms often have a strong rhythmical sense. Rubin begins to talk about the act of creation, the "crazy



Photo Credit: William Gaines, VMFA exhibition catalogue, 1980

energy” that drives him to work, a feeling that primordial forces are at work on his mind and body, forcing the forms to take shape.

Certainly, much of the inspiration may come from natural forms, from seeing great stones fit together. (Sylvia attests, “Rubin is always stopping the car and getting out to see the rocks; he likes the way rocks hang on each other; he particularly likes quarry marks, where man has cut into the stone”). But now the trained subconscious of the artist takes over as forms push against other forms, adding the sophistication of angles, counter volumes, “beyond what you would find in nature, pushing.”

Any reference to the work of other significant twentieth-century sculptors who are working on a monumental scale is too easy. The use of rectangular volumes that rise up from a base, thrust into the air, and push against each other, involving other volumes--- the cube, in particular ---may be a familiar vernacular. We may presume to see influences from contemporary Italian sculpture, the jagged broken edge contrasted with the precise, machined form.

Rubin speaks of the strong influences on his work and aesthetic theories from his three periods of work in Italy. But for Rubin Peacock these are part of the iconography of our time to be employed by the artist to his purpose. Look more closely and you will see that

the material has been carefully and lovingly attenuated, each edge precise, each volume realized in a form that is a totem of our time. Each surface becomes a landscape with ancient tracery; echoes of the Nazca culture, pyramids-each form speaks with “words” in a foreign tongue, making the space around it sing.

As the excitement about his art carries the conversation on, Rubin talks about the work “we” are doing. His wife, Sylvia, is at his side throughout the process of the work. The foundry operation at the Aylett studio (he also maintains a residence/studio/gallery in Richmond) is capable of casting medium-sized bronze sculptures. Sections up to 200 pounds each can be welded together to form larger works. Although the process of making a bronze sculpture is not easy, Sylvia and Rubin accomplish the task without aid. The present system, learned from Florida artist Frank Colson, utilizes space-age technology. Why bronze? Other materials are easier to work with, less costly, technically less demanding. Rubin talks about the material reverently “Strong, bold yet responsive; it shows the human touch. It doesn’t lie-there is no room for cheating-it has purity. It is so responsive even a thumbprint shows. Sure, the alternatives are there, but not for me; I know that bronze is my material. I’m willing to go through the agony to get the perfect cast.”

First, there is the initial creative “blast” when he works in plaster to make the model for the finished sculpture. Then comes the long, demanding process of transforming that model into a completed bronze sculpture. Rubin has gone to Italy three times to work and to study the process of bronze casting. The European system, when money is no object, allows the artist to complete the original sculptural model, which is then turned over to accomplished artisans. They complete the process of making the molds and casting the work, delivering to the artist the bronze sculpture ready to receive the patina-the final finishing of the surface.

The process of casting a bronze object has changed little through the ages, but new technology has made it possible to simplify and expedite the process. After coating the plaster original (which is sometimes made of clay or wax) with Vaseline or oil to keep the mold from sticking, a plaster mold (often executed in a number of pieces, depending on the complexity of the form) is made. Molten wax is then poured into this mold is allowed to cool, and at the right moment is poured out, leaving a wax shell approximately 1/4 inch thick. This step will later determine the thickness of the bronze sculpture. Next, following the latest developments in bronze casting, a ceramic shell (made of layers of fine, medium, and coarse alumina silica sand in a colloidal silicon liquid base) is carefully applied around the wax shape, thus forming an outer shell and an inner core at the same time. (The older system utilized a separate core that had to be suspended inside the cast.) The new silica mold is then placed in a gas-fired furnace

lined with a space-age ceramic fiber blanket, and fired at 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit for about 20 minutes, in order to burn out the wax. The molten bronze (ingots of 97% copper, 2% tin, and 1% silicon) is poured into the preheated mold replacing the space previously occupied by the wax.

Now, after a long, painstaking, and often frustrating technical process, the excitement of creating a sculpture begins to rise again. The mold is carefully chipped away and the emerging piece is sand-blasted so that all the mold is removed. This may be only one section of the finished sculpture. If the piece has been cast in several sections, the various parts are welded together, and the surface is chased and burnished to remove all mold marks, burrs, and imperfections in the cast. Now the artist takes over and with the use of acids and a blowtorch, the final, loving patina is applied. (If exposed to the air, bronze will oxidize naturally, forming a greenish-brown patina that is not always beautiful.)

To my knowledge Rubin is the only artist working in Virginia who is creating and casting a body of large-scale bronze sculptures. He is also devoting his life to art. Although he taught for short periods and briefly pursued an art-related career, he now chooses to spend his entire time working as a sculptor.

The large-scale pieces in this exhibition were created on commission for Virginians who believe in the talent of the artist and in the integrity and merit of the works. Their patronage sustains him in his creative achievements. Without such patronage, it is often impossible for an artist to have the means to continue his work. Rubin could choose the easier route, to use stainless steel and build the pieces (or have a factory do it) as a number of artists in the United States are doing today. However, because of his strong conviction that he and his work have an affinity for the medium of bronze, he makes the necessary sacrifices to achieve his goals.

In 1979, discussing the St. John's Church Project (Arch, no. 2 in the VMFA catalogue), Rubin wrote, "As a sculptor, form is my first consideration, the way a shape appears in space, the problems of unity, of balance, and of sustaining interest. My total involvement in conceiving and producing a piece of sculpture is the embodiment of my ideas through bronze, with a concentration on producing excellence in craftsmanship and expression." This exhibition presents the works of a young Virginian who promises to emerge as an artist of major significance.

WILLIAM GAINES, 1980

Guest Exhibition Director and Programs Director of the Virginia Museum