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Sculpture Garden '96

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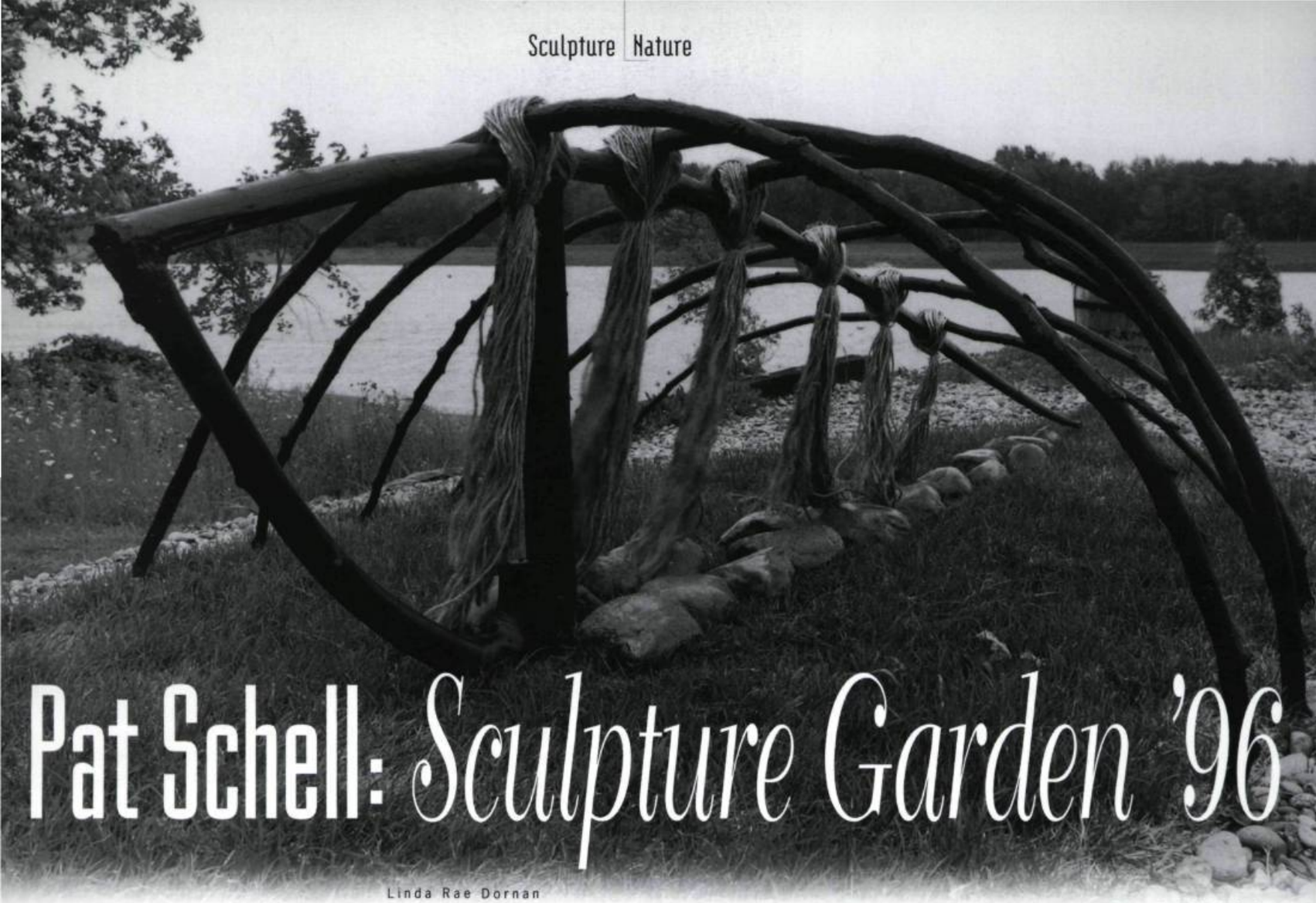

Pat Schell: *Sculpture Garden '96*

Linda Rae Dornan

Pat Schell, *Whale*, 1996. Grass sods on ground cut to fish shape boughs, wood, paint, copper, rope, rocks painted red. 92 x 230 x 483 cm. Photo: Rob Roy.

The Acacia Gallery in Gagetown, New Brunswick, is situated beside the Saint John River. Since it opened in 1994, there have been artist residencies and regular exhibitions every summer. This summer, Pat Schell had an exhibition called *Sculpture Garden '96* which she presented on the grounds of the gallery and the Steamer Stop Inn next door.

The artworks were well placed in relation to the buildings, driveway and the river, and were easily seen from the road. Schell exercised a strong control over the construction of these pieces to ensure their weather hardiness and to withstand the constant attention of people touching them during the long summer. This is a difficult feat to achieve in any public installation of sculpture without the work losing its spontaneity. Satisfying viewers' needs, whether emotional or intellectual, is another prerequisite for creating successful public sculpture. Unlike *Tilted Arc*, the controversial public sculpture by Richard Serra, the works did not block pathways, or intimidate by their size. On the contrary, the scale of Schell's work was very inviting because of its human size.

The first observation a viewer could make when approaching the "garden" was to notice the blackness of all the sculptures against the green grass and the blue river and sky. It produced a somewhat jarring effect which fortunately was offset by the soothing echoes of basic reassuring forms repeated throughout the works: circles, obelisks, squares, and fish became familiar windows, hearths, beacons, and porpoises. The artist brought together sculptures representing both the human and the natural worlds which reflect her own living environment. The use of predominantly found wood and stones from around her camp, and for example, metal from car engines, explored the balance between human activity (industry, culture) and natural ecology.

In the artist's exhibition statement, Schell discusses her concept of planting "seeds" (bones, stones, etc.) in the garden, the garden itself being a canvas. So a tree bough would be a line on the canvas and the stones and ropes would be the texture and pattern. The idea of seeing her outdoor sculptures as a garden is a quiet conceit which umbrellas the sculptures together as an exhibition, though they could each stand alone. It is an idea often used by artists to explain a grouping of sculptures implanted on hills, knolls, between trees, beside rivers and so on. What makes it resonate here is that Schell has tended her garden throughout the summer-watered, weeded and mowed it.

Schell is an intuitive artist, relying on a slow creative process of gathering materials she is comfortable with and imbuing them with aesthetic and often spiritual resonance. In a 1995 duo exhibition, *Communities*, with Danielle Julien at Struts Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick, Schell's sculpture was comprised chiefly of natural wood with some synthetic materials. The found wood shapes were chosen for their interesting growth formations and then transformed into abstract sculptures, yet they still spoke of their essential character as tree boughs and trunks. In Sculpture Garden '96, Schell has masked all the found wood shapes, except one, with black paint. The works are still assemblage, but less obviously fascinated with the mysteries of forests, more interested in the potential underlying narratives she and the materials have to tell.

Pat Schell, *Porpoise*, 1996. Log, paint, copper, stones set in cement. 61 x 275 x 130 cm. Photo: Rob Roy.

There are two architecturally referenced pieces in the exhibition. The first is *Shelter*, a small tepee-like structure constructed of four bundles of bound tree boughs. Each bundle was held together at its base by a black steel coil, and at the other end by wrapped painted red canvas and thin black rope. The four bundles were attached at its apex by hidden nails. This is the only sculpture in the exhibition where the wood is not painted black and, as such, it served as a visual resting place. The wood was treated with sculpture wax so the natural tone of the boughs was visible. The open structure sat on the gravel driveway overlooking the river, its floor made of hundreds of flat stones (tactilely different from the gravel), individually collected and painted black by the artist. The black created an intense sense of limitless depth, somewhat like one of Anish Kapoor's sculptures of recent years where hints of infinity can be found in the recesses of his works. This created a demarcation between the interior of *Shelter* and what was outside its circular periphery, and raises a discussion about the fragility of human-made shelters against Nature's forces; how we are open to the vagaries of changing weather more powerful than ourselves or our constructions; how we convince ourselves of our superior abilities. Of course there is no shelter in the open, roofless sculpture. The river and the sky can both be seen through it. There was a rootedness in this piece which belied its openness, though, because of the heavy strength of the metal coils rooted in the ground through which the tree boughs appeared to grow, and because of the floor's deep space, which had no hint of other colour.

Pat Schell, *Beacons*, 1996. Each unit: 114 x 122 cm. Wood, canvas, paint. Distance between each unit: 153 cm; *Boat*, 1996. Wood, canvas, rope, paint. Anchored off shore in Saint John River. 61 x 122 x 122 cm. Distance from *Beacons* to *Boat*: 20 m. Photo: Rob Roy.

It is curious that such an potent symbol as a tepee was used. The work is visually strong but offers no specific associations to Native American culture, or am I over-reading and is it only a tent after all? Possibly the "stacking" of wood boughs used here evolved into the common shape of a simple tent. Another interpretation of the work is that it is a burnt-out shelter, the black floor charred, the dwelling empty, an example of the temporality of our feeble constructions. With either interpretation, the work gives increasing emphasis to the fragility, and social and emotional importance of home and hearth.

The second architecturally inspired sculpture is *Windows*. It is made of four parallel windows on legs spread over a 15 foot length. Despite a somewhat heavy feel to the construction, it is a whimsical piece capturing a personal moment of awe. Each open window has branches curving in and out of it, all painted black except the inside sashes which are a deep yellow. It was reminiscent of cold snowy days when all one can see out the windows are the branches of trees, iced over and glittering darkly in intense sunlight and white snow. There is a magic on those days which has been translated well into this sculpture.

Schell's hands-on approach to artmaking is based on her involvement with form, texture and process. This is evident in how she describes her work, as well as in the obvious time-consuming process necessary to create the sculptures: the process of looking for materials and gathering them, the physical labour of removing dead wood from the forest and dragging the pieces back to her camp, the time spent with the found shape, looking at it, the intuitive search for meaning within the forms of the materials, and then the transformation. To quote the curator of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in PEI, Terry Graff, Schell's work is characterized by "modernist dialectics between painting and sculpture, between figuration and abstraction, and between expressivity and a tautly formal vocabulary..."

The most easily readable work in the exhibition is titled *Beacons*. It is comprised of three inverted triangles placed in a line down the slope to the river, a green sprayed line linking them to the tied *Boat* sculpture floating in and out with the tide. It has a split log construction, once again painted black, with some green. The beacons and the small boat, cum raft, together, create a metaphor for the lights or shore markings which guide fishermen and sailors safely home again. As sculpture, it connects the river life of commerce and physical survival to the relative safety of the land. There is no hint of a human presence in this narrative, but the sorrows of maritime disaster are well understood in the Atlantic provinces and easily seen in the sculptures.

On the street, beside the gallery, is situated *Sentinel*, a cluster of vertical split black boards. Its flat sides face inward, round sides face outwards in this enclosure which holds several stuffed green canvas forms shaped like the boards. They have gold eyes like medallions painted on them which "eye" the river. The base of this five foot tall personage has painted, copper-coloured stones stacked under a flat, green disc pedestal. It is an odd work, the least open to interpretation yet quite fanciful and somewhat stern in its black

Pat Schell, *Windows*, 1996. Wood, boughs, paint. Four units: 122 x 90 x 20 cm/each. Overall length of sculpture: 730 cm. Photo: Rob Roy.

"coat", as a serious watchman should be facing out toward the river, waiting, watching, on call.

Down the hill, *Whale* and *Porpoise* sit side by side across the driveway from each other. *Porpoise* has only the tail showing of the diving mammal as it disappears into a circle of round, smooth stones. The tail, an arched wood log 253 cm long, is a textured river of deep cracks painted black while the tail fin is copper foil retrieved from a car radiator. The copper fin is the only element within the exhibition's assorted assemblages which is awkwardly attached. Nevertheless, *Porpoise* is an arresting image. Are the stones metaphors for water or destruction? Is the porpoise diving into the known elements of the ocean or into unknown pollution?

Whale is the most poetic of Schell's sculptures in the Sculpture Garden. The skeletal ribcage structure of black wooden arches, its ends buried in the grass, immediately pulls the viewer over. A beached whale is a powerful being if you've ever witnessed one. When only the sun-bleached bones remain on shore, as with the bones of any living thing, it is a reminder of the immediacy of life and death, of one's mortality, and of our subtle connection to all mammals in the inevitability of death. With these "bones" painted black, there is an added sense of grief. I have said that I found this to be more poetic than the other sculptures and possibly that is because it offered more dream-time, more lyricism. Underneath the black ribcage was the shape of a real whale cut into the grass (which was reseeded), akin to an after-image, or a remembrance mirror. The physical use of the earth, somewhat resembling a grave, and magically shaped as a whale, was a wonderful adoption of the ground as sculpture and participant.

The evocativeness of Pat Schell's work rests in large part on their quiet meanings, hinted at in their forms, and echoed in repeated shapes and textures. Questions about humanity's uncaring, controlling dialogue with Nature, and about our place in this world whisper from amongst the sculptures. There is no cynicism here, only an honest, sincere attempt to investigate symbolic visual language in the context of the artist's life in New Brunswick's landscape. ∎

L'auteure commente l'exposition que Pat Schell a présentée sur le site de la Galerie Acacia, au Nouveau-Brunswick. À l'inverse d'une pièce comme *Tilted Arc*, la sculpture publique controversée de Richard Serra, les installations de Schell sont accueillantes par leur dimension à l'échelle humaine, sans jamais obstruer la vue ni intimiter les visiteurs par leur gigantisme. Issues de l'environnement quotidien de l'artiste, elles symbolisent à la fois la présence des humains et l'univers naturel, tout en rétablissant un équilibre entre l'activité humaine (industrie, culture) et l'écologie. Dans cette exposition, Schell s'est intéressée particulièrement au concept de *plantation* dans un jardin (os, pierres, etc.), lequel se métamorphose alors en support de l'oeuvre : une branche d'arbre devient une ligne sur la toile, tandis que les pierres et les cordages se font textures et motifs.

Pat Schell accorde une primauté à la forme, à la texture et au procédé de fabrication. Une approche qui s'élabore dans le temps et la réflexion : la recherche et la quête des matériaux, le geste d'extraire le bois mort de la forêt et de le transporter à l'atelier, les longs moments de contemplation pour saisir les formes déjà inscrites dans la matière, la patiente transformation en sculptures. Pour citer le conservateur Terry Graff, le travail de Schell s'articule autour « des dialectiques modernistes entre la peinture et la sculpture, entre figuration et abstraction, entre l'expressivité et un vocabulaire formel rigoureux ».