

Throwing Prayers into the Abyss

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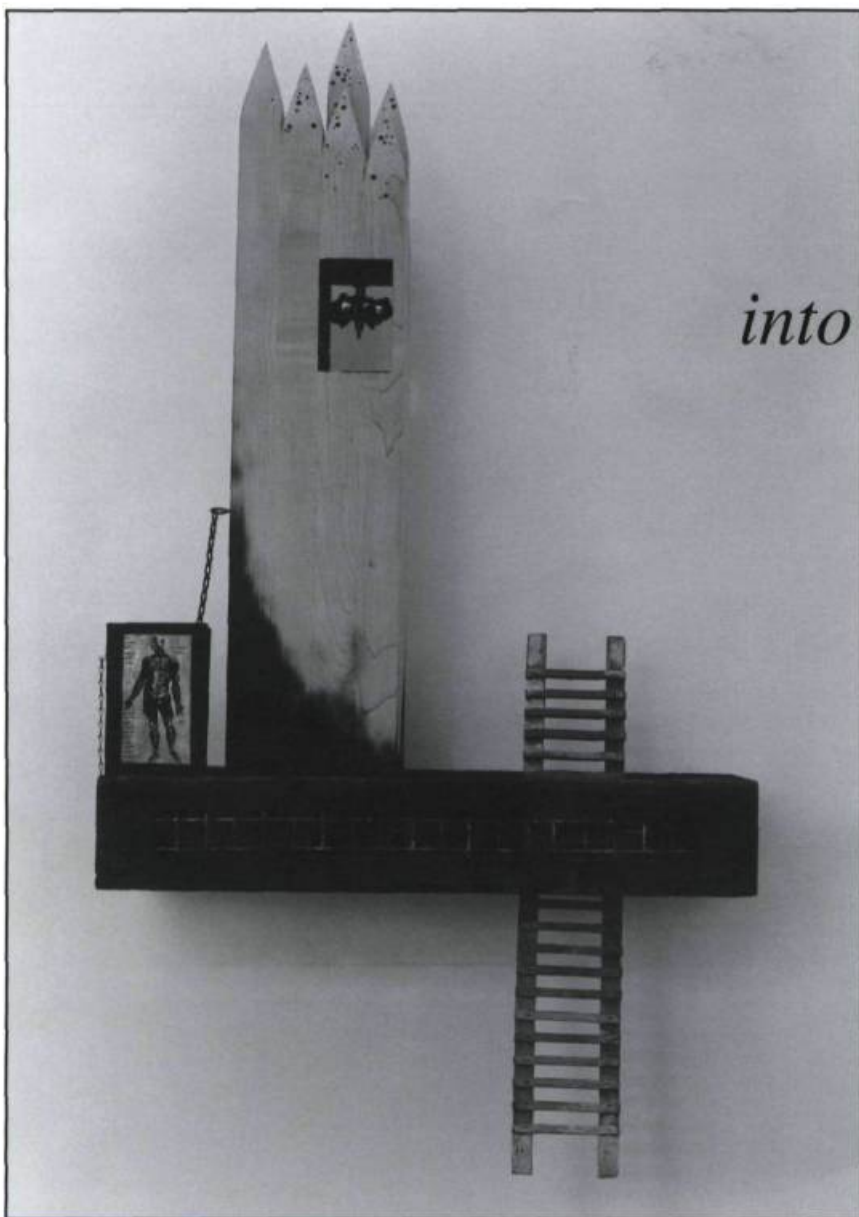
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came to mind when I looked at Merrell Eve Gerber's sculptures. Her "objects" trigger the same kind of mnemonic knowledge that I felt when I picked up stone axes or pit-fired clay bowls. In the quiet of that dimly lit attic my fingers unerringly found the places where the maker had smoothed the surface, where years of everyday use had created subtle indentations. Holding those ancient objects, I "knew" far more about their former lives than any museum identification tag could ever describe.

During a visit to Gerber's Vancouver studio in early September 1995, we talked about the ways that memory floods unbidden into her sculptures. "I think all of my work touches on nostalgia", she explained, "but that's only one level (of memory)". Her eyes rested on a rope tensely angled between a sand-filled galvanized bucket and a section of dull, green-painted wood fencing. "It's the emotion that rings, seeing that picket fence and suddenly remembering the sound of your grandfather's voice, or catching a smell that bristles your skin", she adds.

Another of her sculptures, *Asleep on a Wing*, appears to be simply an ordinary wooden oar with the paddle end hollowed out and perforated like a saltshaker. "Paddles are as old as humans", Gerber muses. "It's a tool you use to move yourself, and the (implication of) water is the unconscious - moving through the unconscious, through the depths". She picks up the oar to show me, a sprinkling of brilliant blue dust falls from the perforations, marking the path of her movements.

In her artist's statement for an exhibition of her work at Baird/Delano Gallery earlier in 1995, Gerber described her struggles to translate ideas into visual language. "One hurdle lies in attempting to evoke the sensation of an experience or feelings, rather

than merely illustrating an idea", she wrote. "Another difficulty lies in relinquishing control and allowing the piece to evolve on its own terms and not forcing it to go where one thinks it ought to go".

Please Don't Cry, a curved oar-like carving, balanced over a vertical post, she says is "about when you're depressed, when there's no energy - about how far you can get broken". She explains that the small cast bronze bird at the fulcrum is the heart, and the vertebrae-studded drooping oar "is trying to keep moving, trying to keep going".

Throwing Prayers into the Abyss, the signature piece of her exhibition at Vancouver's grunt Gallery, is a wall hung sculpture consisting of references to a cathedral bell tower, and a biblical Jacob's ladder. A small handbound book is chained to the work's fire-scarred wooden crossbar. As elegantly spare as a volume of *kaiku*, it presents textbook anatomy drawings interspersed between pages imprinted with geographic place names: Beirut, Belfast, Bosnia.

The depth and weight of thought that goes into Gerber's sculptures is highly intellectual, but her materials are the most ordinary kind and make her work absolutely accessible. In conversation she doesn't mention her years of art training at the University of New Mexico, Emily Carr College of Art and Design, and the Rhode Island School of Design. Instead, she quotes poets, such as Robert Frost on what triggers a poem: "... it begins with a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness".

Like my memorable hours at the Smithsonian, Gerber's sculptures touch the places that feel. ■

Merrell Eve Gerber, *Throwing Prayers into the Abyss*
Grunt Gallery, Vancouver
Sept. 19-Oct. 7, 1995

Once spent a week locked in the Smithsonian Institution's attic, an endless wood-floored storeroom filled to the rafters with artifacts collected from all over the world. Allowed into this ethnographic heaven each morning (and released, exhausted by the experience, late each afternoon), I was privileged to roam among the stacked cabinets, pulling open drawers, and lifting out and holding whatever items I chose.

Delicate, feathered Maidu baskets. Stone Age weapons. A coyote dance costume.

My purpose at the Smithsonian was research related to Pacific Northwest Coast textiles, and I was given the run of the attic treasures because, at the time, no one at the museum knew for sure what had been stored upstairs. Delving into their archives I was able to discover a number of artifacts previously unrecorded or misidentified in their files, but the overwhelming experience during my five days of self-imposed incarceration was not the scholar's pleasure in detailing historical facts. It was the opportunity to touch and feel objects that people had made and used over centuries of lifetimes.

Those days at the Smithsonian