

Silent Pilars A Postmodern Sense of The Human Self

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Numéro 20, été 1992

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/10055ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (imprimé)

1923-2551 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Wood, E. (1992). Silent Pilars: A Postmodern Sense of The Human Self. *Espace Sculpture*, (20), 28–29.

Silent Pillars

A Postmodern Sense of The Human Self

Elizabeth Wood

Marlene Hilton Moore, *Fragment Series*
Leo Kamen Gallery, Toronto

In its fragmentation, in its use of a multiplicity of materials, in its renewed interest in organic forms, in its grappling with and rejecting the starkness of the modern era, the work of Marlene Hilton Moore succeeds in fusing the truths of the past with the dissatisfaction, the unanswered queries of the present. It rejects the formal resolves of Modernism as it integrates the "new" organic forms of the present. As Stephen H. Watson has asserted, the modern era seriously drew into question poetic form: "In its rejection of the human or anthropomorphic representation of previous architecture, the Modern Movement undermined the poetic form in favor of nonfigural geometries." In light of this, the work of Marlene Hilton Moore can be seen as strikingly Postmodern.

Origins of Hilton-Moore's recent work can be found in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She writes: "The comprehension of nature as a spiritual resource has drawn me for the past two years to a certain field, a place I interpret as an ancient site. This field contains a hawthorn grove littered with animal bones. My attempts to paint the forms I discovered there failed, as the two-dimensional medium proved insufficient to capture the intensity of the rhythm and posture of the hawthorn trees. But as I explored further I came upon piles of cleared hawthorn branches. When I took some of these poles and stood them upright in the ground at regular intervals, I was able to recreate the ritualistic rhythm of the trees. The scattered bones I associated with ancient creation myths, the cycle of life and death, creation and destruction."¹

Evidence of this initial experience is clearly present in the construction of *Fragment Series*, exhibited in 1991 at the Leo Kamen Gallery in Toronto. There Hilton Moore, merging menacing barbed wire, dense auburn bronze, cold polished steel, and diverse organic materials, reconstructs visually the struggle that characterizes the ubiquitous attempt to reconcile body and place. The exhibition comprises a series of seven sculptures, all in the form of truncated, lifesize, human-like legs. The works are presented vertically on low tables of polished raw steel measuring approximately 1' x 3'. Each sculpture is tightly bound,

as if imprisoned, laced with some form of restricting material.

The first piece, in eery green oxidized metal, appears imprisoned in a metal cage on its table-pedestal. At the bottom, a few inches away, is poised a 12" rock, incessantly motionless. It is as if the leg would kick the stone, would interact with its environment if it could, were not all freedom of movement inhibited by the metal bars. The second sculpture is confined differently. While no cage restricts its movement, a metal, vine-like briar twists around the calf, ending in a 12" branch-like horizontal extension on the table. The third, similar to the first, consists of a green oxidized metal leg, from the calf down merely a post. Here a thin, 1 1/2" wide metal ribbon of steel twists around the leg, and stretches up into the air. It is razor sharp, like the metal strip from a sardine can. Menacingly, it renders the viewer conscious of human frailty and vulnerability. The fourth sculpture is a bronze coloured leg, split in half vertically, with branches sprouting from the top. A dark brown chunk of bronze on the table in front of the leg is nearly mistaken for a mass of burnt moss and twigs. The fifth piece is covered in a bright green patina. At the ankle and foot it is fractured into shredded contrasting brown metal. Twisting around the leg is barbed wire that grows into an extended root at the bottom. On the top a bird's nest with blue eggs suggests the passage of time, permanence, as though it had been there for a long time. The sixth sculpture is a dark brown leg in bronze, like a large branch, its base extending out in front and in back. A "tree-like" profusion of twigs sprouts energetically from the top. Finally, the seventh work is presented on a low, more horizontal pedestal. A fragment of a thin bronze frontal leg cast, evoking a medical brace, lies dejected, the front and back thin, the part detached from the whole. The reference to crippling injury is forceful.

The five works on paper, in abrupt contrast to the density of the sculpture and despite their shared themes, propose an expressive lightness. Pure white background provide a dramatic foil for the dense charcoal textures in works with titles such as *Wired Leg on a Post* and *Beehive Wired to Birds Nest*.

The positioning of the sculptures in the gallery is



important: rigidly lined up, one following the next, they resemble fenceposts. The varying allusions to imprisonment, to repression is strengthened by the repetitive nature of the pillars.

Like the cubists, Hilton Moore has gained access to the limitless by limiting; thematically, materially, she opens the door to a series of critical questions through sensitive, yet subtle variations on a theme. The viewer is called upon to question what is being contained, what is being protected? Or, perhaps, what is being kept out? Does the fence imprison the human, or is it the human self that acts as barrier and limitation? Is this series of crippled and imprisoned legs, symbolizing paralysis and immobility, a result of inability or unwillingness? Even more ominous is the suggestion that we will be (have been?) rendered immobile by signposts of some form...and, if this is so, of what pending danger do they mutely caution?



Marlene Hilton-Moore's treatment of the subject invites the viewer to recall the handling of the human body by other twentieth century artists. Bacon, for example, similarly proposes an analogy between the human and other organic forms, placing his "figures" similarly behind bars. However, while he renders human flesh using red pigment, thereby intensifying its *living* quality, Marlene Hilton Moore denies that life entirely. Her truncated fragments are reduced to melted (charred?) bronze. Somehow the term "silent pillars" comes to mind. Dismembered columns. Ones that have been burned, as these legs

have been, poured from liquid bronze. Through this emerges a sense of pending disaster, a Post-nuclear hush densely envelopes the work. Only the five drawings provide breath and with that, respite.²

In this work themes of weight versus weightlessness, mobility versus movement remind the viewer that it is indeed the human's upright posture, the ability to walk in a vertical position, that distinguishes our race from that of other life forms. In these truncated remnants of the human physical structure always one leg stands alone, like a trophy. Immobile, they support nothing, yet are nonetheless bound, constricted, imprisoned. Like the dotted line on a highway, or the black punctuation of a fence against a field, the sculptures recreate the co-existence of the human being and its environment. Here, the two become one.

Typical of Postmodern tendencies toward appropriation and fragmentation, this work is not easily defined. Is the subject landscape? Self portrait? Is the return of what Watson called the "human or anthropomorphic representation" a sign that indeed the Modern era has made way for a new language of expression? Does this signal a preoccupation with the self-reflective period of civilization in which we currently exist, or is her's perhaps more prominently an attempt to return to a language of the past, in a vigilant articulation of the present?

Links to earlier civilizations are made by the artist, in writing about her earlier research: "The ritual, ordered aspect of the presentation of these sculptural forms becomes ceremonial. In such a ceremonial re-presentation, the territory of site amalgamates with the territory of self, forming connective links between traditions to establish new cultural meanings."³ The theme of ritual, ceremony, rhythm, recurs: "The intentional fragmentation of the environment, and the vertical, rhythmic repetition of elements, especially fenceposts, relates strongly to her earlier work. Man and nature confront one another along a narrow strip of asphalt, virtually drawing a line, posing one set of intentions against another."⁴ Which "set of intentions" will ultimately take priority?

It is increasingly tolerated, if not yet overtly encouraged, for artists to defy the tenets of conceptual art, to base their work upon fundamental concerns of a humanist nature. Ethical questions concerning war, environment, human consumption... moral responsibility itself have begun to replace the formalist musings that comprised the "art for art's sake" of the middle 20th century. Increasingly the viewer is being challenged to consider the relationship between individuals, between the human being and the environment, between person and place. The Postmodern embracing of the human form, at the expense of earlier 20th century explorations of obdurate geometric representation, is clearly evident. Donald Kuspit identifies this phenomenon with regards to our constructed environment: "Where the modernist building was the metaphor for the modern ideal of robotic man, the Postmodernist building is an attempt to make buildings once again like essentially organic human beings, however integrated with the machine."⁵

The question that surfaces is the following: what is the relationship between the forboding atmosphere that hangs over *Fragment Series* and the state

of that contemporary "organic human being"? Is Hilton-Moore's merely a propitious testimony or is it a documentation of hopelessness? Does it allude to tomorrow or yesterday? Does her work "struggle to articulate a sense of human self that, while appropriate to the present, takes its cues from older statements of humanness which it struggles to remember"?⁶ And thus solace? Or, Dickens-like, does it disclose prophecies of a world whose approach we would rather delay or even avert entirely? ♦

- 1 Stephen H. Watson, "In situ: Beyond The Architectonics of the Modern". *Postmodernism, Philosophy and the Arts*. New York: Routledge, p. 83.
- 2 It is of note that these works were created in early 1991, prior to the political changes that have since taken place in the USSR, and prior to the subsequent lessening of a global threat of nuclear disaster.
- 3 Excerpt from artist's statement, April 1990.
- 4 Excerpt from press release, Leo Kamen Gallery, June 1991.
- 5 Donald Kuspit, "The Contradictory Character of Postmodernism". *Postmodernism, Philosophy and the Arts*. op. cit. p.57.
- 6 *ibid.* p.68

La sculpture de l'artiste ontarienne Marlene Hilton Moore consiste en une série des pièces en forme de "jambes", chacune emprisonnée différemment et alignée dans la galerie comme un alignement de barreaux. Rappelant un site de rituel, les œuvres peuvent être vues à la fois comme représentant et comprenant les restrictions qui nous limitent. Les questions surgissent à savoir si c'est l'être humain qui s'inflige un tel emprisonnement, et, de façon plus grave, si ces piliers de bronze calciné peuvent être vus comme un présage à la Dickens «d'un monde dont on voudrait que l'existence soit reportée voire même évitée entièrement». Cette inquiétude, ces fragments de sentinelles, emprisonnées dans des formes organiques, témoignent de l'accroissement des préoccupations humanistes qui semblent caractériser l'expression postmoderniste.

Marlene Hilton Moore, *Wrapped Leg With Bird's Nest*, 1991. Bronze, steel, wire. 129.5 x 91.4 x 38.1 cm. Leo Kamen Gallery.

Marlene Hilton Moore, *Structure Series: Beehive Wired to Bird's Nest*, 1991. Charcoal on paper. Leo Kamen Gallery.