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Warren Carther: as time passes

DENIS LONGCHAMPS

In the lobby of a building located in downtown Winnipeg, I was greeted by the jewel-like beauty of a work of art. Towering almost thirty feet, the two glass sections of *Prairie Boy's Dream* reflect, bounce and let through both artificial and natural light, in the same way precious stones do. The two parts of the glass sculpture create a semicircular form comprising seventeen large curved glass panels in each section, which artist Warren Carther has also carved, coloured, and laminated. Embedded in the glass, one recognizes an abstract topographical view of the prairie province of Manitoba, and three yellow triangles blended in other geometrical and organic forms.

Finding myself within the half sphere, I was literally and figuratively enveloped by a coloured light that lent a spiritual quality to Carther's work. The glass provides lightness to the massive sculpture while reminding us of the material's formal qualities — hard yet fragile, transparent while creating a physical barrier, heavy even if it seems weightless —, qualities that may easily apply to a prairie boy's dream, driven by the determination to survive and succeed against all odds, or to anyone's dream for that matter.

This understanding is also evinced in an earlier work by

Carther: the carved glass wall for the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo, Japan. This work also bears the artist's signature yellow triangles, three of them, one above the other (a similar triangle is found on his calling card). The artist also says that he was fascinated by the patterns created by the rake of Zen monks in their "Dry Landscapes," in which he also recognized the furrows left by farmers' tractors while ploughing Canadian fields. By this association of patterns, the artist brought together the literal and the symbolic, the actual site, Tokyo, and the building's purpose as the embassy of Canada. Also, built of smaller panels assembled on a support structure engineered for the purpose, this work takes into consideration the seismic possibilities of the Japanese terrain. More importantly, it plays on different levels of meaning, where organic forms and man-made shapes are harmoniously brought together.

When I met Warren Carther at his studio in Winnipeg, he spoke of these tensions and ambiguities between nature and humankind as a recurrent theme in his work, and of the need to attain a balance between the two. Such a balance lies at the centre of Zen belief — but the artist may be sending us a more pressing message. Recently, he installed a new sculpture, *Euphony*, at the Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage, Alaska. The work is composed of nine sculpted glass towers reaching twenty-seven feet in height and, once assembled, is 135 feet in length. They frame four escalators that take the visitors to different areas of the airport. The nine sections are reminiscent of the landscape's rugged terrain and of the icebergs one can see floating from the Alaskan seashore.

Embedded in each is a geometric form: in some cases a copper rectangle, in one a circle. The former recalls the symbol of wealth used by some local Aboriginal nations, while the latter may suggest, among other things, the pipelines that cross the state to bring the oil (and wealth) to the rest of the American country — depleting the land of non-renewable resources. In the same vein, it is reminiscent of hydroelectric dams, but also reminds us of the jet engines (the work is installed at the



airport), or portholes on ships that bring people to Alaska to work or to enjoy its natural beauty. Inside this porthole, one glimpses a hazy landscape, perhaps the symbol of an uncertain future. The inner circle evokes the shape of a clock and the passing of time that brings the viewer to consider the effect of time on man-altered landscapes. The outer form is an imperfect, "damaged" circle, alluding to a broken wheel in the cycle of life. It may also suggest past experiences in the Alaskan state: after all, while drilling in Prudhoe Bay began in the 1970s, some environmentalists claim that it is now 60 times larger than initially anticipated.

Where one may see the warning in Carther's work, in view of keeping a fair balance between human needs and natural resources, is in the Bush administration's recent announcement that it is willing to open zone 1002 for oil drilling. While the resources and regional employment opportunities are much needed, environmentalists are concerned: the zone is part of an Arctic wildlife national refuge in which more than 120 animal species gather throughout the year. They are also concerned the development may spread beyond the zone itself, particularly into Prudhoe Bay, endangering the cycle of life for certain species or possibly wiping them out altogether.

Carther is troubled by the depletion of natural resources and, over and over again, his work questions the growing necessity for a balance between nature and humankind,

not only at the specific site where his sculptures are installed, but universally. We seem to learn with time and from experience; sadly though, it is often too late. In the search for self-betterment, as individuals and as a society, the goals of riches and power for a few seem to shatter the dreams of the many, shatter them like glass. Carther's glass sculptures are massive, and one gets an overwhelming sense of being enveloped, of being small, surrounded by the light; one feels the fragility of both the material and life. While not pinpointing any political events in particular, the work addresses universal ecological concerns. It then brings us to another level of meaning, one dealing with time and memory, marking public space with what constitutes our landscape and giving it deep symbolic value. From the simple furrows created by the farmer and his tractor, the economic symbol of the prairies, of the Canadian agricultural system, and of agriculture as the universal starting point of the food chain, to the Japanese triad of Ikebana, linking man to his environment, earth, and sky, and to the Zen qualities of respect for nature, Carther creates beautiful, airy glass sculptures that are nonetheless as fragile as nature. ←

Denis LONGCHAMPS is a PhD candidate at Concordia University in Montreal where he received his Master's degree in 2001. His present research looks at notions of travel and souvenirs as they are expressed in contemporary and historical art.



Warren CARTHER, *Euphony*, 2004. Detail. Nine free-standing carved glass towers. 8.2 x 41.1 m. Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport, Anchorage, Alaska. Photo: Dean Carman.

Warren CARTHER, *Untitled*, 1991. Carved glass wall. 7.62 x 6.7 m. Canadian Embassy, Tokyo, Japan. Photo: Gerry Kopelow.