Bladen and Murray: The Giants of Canadian Sculpture

Joan Lowndes
In March the Vancouver Art Gallery mounted the first major exhibition ever accorded in this country to Ronald Bladen and Robert Murray, for whom it staked and overwhelmingly substantiated the claim of being "the giants of Canadian sculpture." In so doing it remedied, in the case of Bladen, a flagrant neglect.

True both these artists are expatriates, and Bladen has been away so long that we perhaps tended to forget his Canadian origin. Born in Vancouver like Murray but now in his early fifties, he left Canada when he was 21. He went first to San Francisco, where he followed up his year's study at the Vancouver School of Art by attending the California School of Fine Arts. He then moved to New York because, as he put it once in an interview, "if you play tennis you go where the best tennis is played."

At the power centre of contemporary art he has made a name for himself even though his output is small (about two pieces a year). He is represented in the Museum of Modern Art of New York, the List collection and the Los Angeles County Museum. He was included, among others, in the epoch-making Primary Structures show at the Jewish Museum in 1966; in Scale as Content at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in 1967; and in 14 Sculptors: the Industrial Edge at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis in 1969. In Gregory Battcock's "Minimal Art", he is referred to no less than sixteen times as well as having two of his works illustrated.

However, although he was selected for the National Gallery's Sculpture '67 show at Toronto and for Expo, he is still so little known in a Canadian context that the proposition advanced by the Vancouver Art Gallery—that he and Murray are the finest living Canadian sculptors—will startle many people.

Murray decided to stand the test of the fiery furnace that is New York in 1960, when he was 24. He went there from Saskatchewan, where he was brought up and studied at the School of Art, Regina College, University of Saskatchewan, as well as at the Emma Lake Artists' Workshops. He has enjoyed a very wide exposure in the U.S., having participated in the Whitney Annuals, the Guggenheim International of 1967, American Sculpture of the Sixties at the Los Angeles County Museum; again the Walker Art Centre's 14 sculptures: the Industrial Edge at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis in 1969. He was included, among others, in the epoch-making Primary Structures show at the Jewish Museum in 1966, the List collection and the Los Angeles County Museum. He was included, among others, in the epoch-making Primary Structures show at the Jewish Museum in 1966; in Scale as Content at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in 1967; and in 14 Sculptors: the Industrial Edge at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis in 1969. In Gregory Battcock's "Minimal Art", he is referred to no less than sixteen times as well as having two of his works illustrated.

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But since he left with a Canada Council grant more attention was focussed on him, and a more determined effort made to keep in contact with him. This was facilitated by the fact that he is more prolific than Bladen, making not only heroic outdoor pieces but smaller ones that can be accommodated in private galleries. Thus since he settled in New York he has had a number of one-man shows in Toronto, as well as exhibiting at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Hart House and the Norman Mackenzie Gallery in Regina. The National Gallery has purchased two of his works and last year chose him to represent us at Sao Paolo, where he won one of the eight International Awards. His big Cumbrie of yellow Cor-ten steel (at the moment abominably sited in front of a Shell gas station) stood out from the rest and made the first one-man show at the Jewish Museum, to pick only the highlights.

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Because of their size Bladen's wooden prototypes were shipped unassembled, then put together, with all their intricate scaffolding, by the artist himself and an assistant. Murray whose steel and aluminum pieces are fabricated in Connecticut by Lippincott Inc., a factory devoted exclusively to commissions from artists, also came to Vancouver to supervise the installation.

The result was a powerful assembly which literal gobbled up the gallery space. After Dan Flavin's fluorescent light, dissolving partitions in tinted air; after the bizarre warehouse conceptist show 955,000, evocative of the identical gallery space, in which enormous structures seemed ready to burst through the walls. Some people felt the tension as discomfort; to me this situation sculpted an evocative energy.

Bladen is at this point the most impressive artist of the two. Although Murray, eighteen years his junior, more productive, versatile and driving, may have the greatest potential. Bladen has been away so long that we perhaps tended to forget his Canadian origin. Born in Vancouver like Murray but now in his early fifties, he left Canada when he was 21. He went first to San Francisco, where he followed up his year's study at the Vancouver School of Art by attending the California School of Fine Arts. He then moved to New York because, as he put it once in an interview, "if you play tennis you go where the best tennis is played."

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the Giants of Canadian Sculpture

by Joan LOWNDES

Art critic, Vancouver Province, A.I.C.A., Vancouver

Robert MURRAY Ridgefield 1967
Steel. 8 feet by 10. (243.9 x 304.85 cm).

...the presence which Bladen projects; formal concerns, such as the dividing and compartmentalizing of all the available interior space, are secondary. Size is part of that presence, his work in fact goes beyond sculpture to become indoor architecture. Cathedral Evening, which flashes again and again on the cyclorama of memory, is 10' by 27' by 24'. It is awesome. Even the chitter of first-nighters was hushed as they approached it. One thinks of Baudelaire: "Le propre de l'art est d'étonner."

The piece, which is painted black, consists of a massive arrow resting upon two pontoons and cantilevered out into space. The arrow is tilted slightly upwards, but it is only by walking under it that one discovers this: one cannot take it in by the eye alone. One must get to know Bladen's sculptures as a cat does an unfamiliar room, by brushing all around them. That is why they are architectural, because so much more time is involved in physically getting to know them than in say, walking around Rodin's Bronze Age.

Walking under the arrow, one becomes aware of its fantastic soar and of the precarious manner in which it is suspended. Coming back to its anchoring pontoons, one realizes that they must contain weights, that this is, in the words of one critic, a feat of "romantic engineering." Standing between the pontoons and sighting along the converging diagonals of the arrow, one feels the dynamic counter-pull of forces, the thrust of the arrow-rocket barely restrained. The fact that this piece...
is placed in one of the smaller rooms of the gallery, poised at one end but still without adequate "take-off", only adds to the excitement.

Michael Fried, in his oft-cited essay "Art and Object-hood" (Art Forum, June 1967) correctly apprehended the element of theatre in the sculpture of the Sixties but then added falsely: "theatrical is now the negation of art."

Why this should be so I fail to see: the nature of aesthetic experience is constantly changing. Instant theatre is created as people establish relationships with the "neo-architecture", instinctively grouping themselves and moving around it to measure it by their body scale. Yet paradoxically it is also intimate. One wishes to be alone with it, to make one's own explorations in perception.

With Untitled Sculpture, it is imperative to be alone. This is the most enigmatic work in the show: a shallow arc 9' by 15' by 23', placed not parallel to the oblong shape of the room but wedged crosswise at one end, setting up a kind of suction. One is drawn into the dazzling whiteness of the arc, losing peripheral vision, hypnotized in a point of stillness. But one is also drawn around the back of it, around its black secret side which, unlike the front, reveals itself only at a time.

Bladen comments in the catalogue: "One of the characteristics I think of all my pieces is that they have a front and they have a back. They seem very human to me—they always do. In much abstract sculpture it does not matter where you see it from but I want my pieces read in sequence... the white and black are philosophically opposed. The white of the inside of the piece is—well—it's acceptance, it's love, it's gentle, it's very moving, and the black comes slightly forbidding—totally different in experience."

A similar duality is evident in the most famous of Bladen's works: Untitled Sculpture. Three Elements. Those elements are rhomboids 9' by 4' by 19 1/2", the top and three sides anodized black, the outer surface finished with not too highly polished aluminum. About 10' apart they start across the oblong room under a subdued light, like memhirs under a brooding sky. Their structure is created as people establish relationships with the "neo-architecture", instinctively grouping themselves and moving around it to measure it by their body scale. Yet paradoxically it is also intimate. One wishes to be alone with it, to make one's own explorations in perception.

With Murray, the contrary one feels that though his work is acceptable indoors, it could be seen to better advantage in the open. This is especially true of the largest piece Becca's H (named after one of Murray's twin daughters who had a passion for making H's.) Murray remains a man of the Pranens, the sky, the atmosphere, the glancing sunlight all enhance his sculpture. He is not dealing, like Bladen, with mass and volume but with linear extensions into space (both David Smith and Caro have influence.)

Moreover he is deeply concerned with color and surface. Although both artists began as painters Bladen's color is sober, used to emphasize anthropomorphic front-back relationships but otherwise self-effacing. Murray's color has a much more positive, even aggressive value, Coccus, maroon, dark blue, oyster are his colors in this exhibition, in gleaming epoxy enamel as inlaid with the cherished surfaces of Los Angeles' sculptors. In the catalogue Murray goes so far as to say: "I would rather my pieces were seen as color than anything else", adding that the color is important to whatever emotional quality the piece itself has.

That emotional quality is scant—unless it be the aesthetic one engendered by an amalgam of energy and elegance. While the energy stems basically from Murray's temperament, it is stimulated by the vast surrounding of the steel plants in which he works. He does not buy maquettes for his sculptures but makes show drawings that can be understood by the fabricators. In a statement written for a Centennial show at the Norman Maclean Gallery in Regina he explained that "by participating in the making of the sculpture, it is possible to watch an emotional response to the stresses in the metal and details of assembly, and to edit the work as it develops. At this point the drawings lose their significance and the work emerges as something close to pure invention."

Murray is able to loft tons of steel into the air in a way that looks effortless, open and light. Talking about Becca's H for the Vancouver catalogue he says: "I come to realize that really heavy chunks of metal could have an easy flow about them and that led me to larger and larger pieces. It is in the beautiful fitting together of the parts of the sculpture, in their "flowing momentum", the essence of Murray's style lies. For example the diagonal plane that slides under the cross-bar in Becca's H is actually continuous with the bar, folding into it in an upper and lower section. All the articulations revolve around this element of theatre in the sculpture of the Sixties but wedged crosswise at one end, setting up a kind of suction. One is drawn into the dazzling whiteness of the arc, losing peripheral vision, hypnotized in a point of stillness. But one is also drawn around the back of it, around its black secret side which, unlike the front, reveals itself only at a time.

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3. Ronald BLADEN Untitled (3 elements), 1966. Plywood with aluminum facing. 9 feet by 4 by 1 3/4 (274.35 x 122 x 53.35cm).

4. Ronald BLADEN Cathedral Evening, 1969. Painted wood. 10 feet by 27 by 24 (304.85 x 823 x 731.6 cm).


6. Robert MURRAY Capilano, 1969. Steel. 6 feet 1/2 by 18 1/4 by 7 1/2 (198.15 x 556.35 x 228.65 cm).

As you peer over the table-top, a further disorientation occurs. The rippling yellow Q-decking not only gives the illusion of motion but also of being square in shape, whereas in reality it is 4' longer in the direction of the material. This optical illusionism is new in Murray's work and is something which he will surely investigate further.

Capilano (1969) enables one to follow Murray's creative process as he combines the aerial vision of La Guardia with the table-top level of Chilcotin and his favorite diagonal. This is the most complex of his pieces. As one stands behind the table-top section, one loses complete sight of the diagonal dropping down to the floor; one can only see the hoop at the end of it.

Murray's works are generally titled after they are made by his wife Diana purely for identification. In this instance he accepted a suggestion from curator Doris Shadbolt, the name of a river in North Vancouver. One should be chary of landscape interpretations but the fact that so many titles refer to water (Watershed, Surf, Wave) indicates how much he wants us to feel the downward rush of forces, here falling freely from the table-top "plateau", then driven into the narrow opening of the 'gorge' (the hoop of La Guardia).

(Traduction française, p. 72)