

ETC



Tumulte

Tumulte : Oeuvres récentes de Claude Millette, La Maison de la culture Mercier, Montreal. March 1995

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Numéro 31, septembre–octobre–novembre 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35812ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (imprimé)

1923-3205 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Millar, J. (1995). Compte rendu de [*Tumulte / Tumulte : Oeuvres récentes de Claude Millette, La Maison de la culture Mercier, Montreal. March 1995*]. *ETC*, (31), 43–45.

MONTREAL

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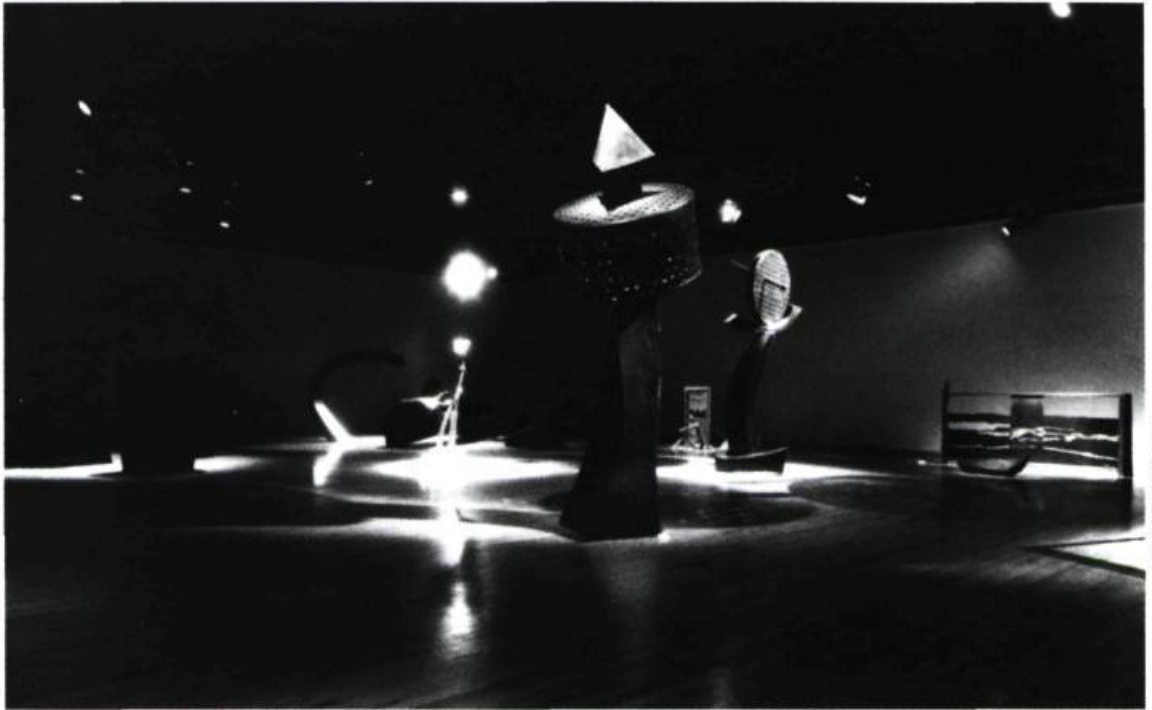


PHOTO : FRANÇOIS LARIVIÈRE

Claude Millette, Installation view of the exhibition *Tumulte*, 1995.

If, as Debussy claims, it is the spaces between the notes that define music, then it is the integration of space with the three-dimensional object that distinguishes sculpture's authenticity. In fact, the re-emergence of the object as a valid visual construct in this post-conceptual era can be seen, not as a retrogressive or reactionary shift of ideologies, but as an unrepressed reconciliation of the intellect with the corporeal. In the work of Claude Millette, space and form become the sensory stimuli that delineate this renewed sensibility.

Millette's recent exhibition, *Tumulte*, offers the viewer an unmediated sensuous experience in the interaction of object and environment. In the dimly lit setting, Millette's steel structures not only penetrate, enclose, capture and illuminate the space but act as tangible integers within it. The glow of selective spotlights on the sculpture creates a delicate overlay of projected shadows that extend the forms along the floor and onto the walls in a provocative interplay of reality and illusion.

Nowhere is this dichotomy more fully exploited than in Millette's three wall reliefs (*Mascaret I, II and V*, 1994) and their freestanding counterparts set into footed frames (*Mascaret III, IV*, 1994 and *Les Déversements Opposés*, 1995). The steel surfaces of these works have been carved and sliced up into jagged cut-outs that evoke the continuous

ebb and flow of waves in an endless seascape. Although their physical materiality is contained, captured within the framing devices, the cast reflections they project defy all formal restraints and overflow into the surrounding space. Not only do these shadowy essences extend the dimensionality of the pictorial forms, their opacity - the cast memories of what once was - also seems to replenish the emptiness of the perforated silhouettes. Their physical presence has also been reconstructed in the stainless steel wave-like projections that protrude into the exhibition space. In *Les Déversements Opposés*, an arc-form, reminiscent of the flotsam and jetsam tossed up by the sea, has also been juxtaposed in front of the relief in a further demarcation of the space.

While the transference of image/shadow and the occupation/displacement interrelationship enhances the observer's experience of form/space, Millette's strongest statement is found in his large free-standing sculptures. *La naissance*,¹ *L'existence* and *La quittance* comprise a thematic group of totemic steel forms that not only echoes the cyclical nature of existence but personifies the powers of creation/destruction in nature. Through its burgeoning phallic form, *L'existence*'s emerging energy and strength is strongly felt. The welded steel shaft, encircled with a pre-fabricated industrial mesh "collar", stands as a

directional beacon in the tumultuous sea of patterned images that surround it. *La quittance*, on the other hand, evokes a sense of resolution. Rather than projecting growth and vitality, the curved totemic body, with its arc-shaped appendages, resembles an anchor. Its circular mesh "head" has been pierced with a steel arrow; physically and symbolically the cycle has been arrested.

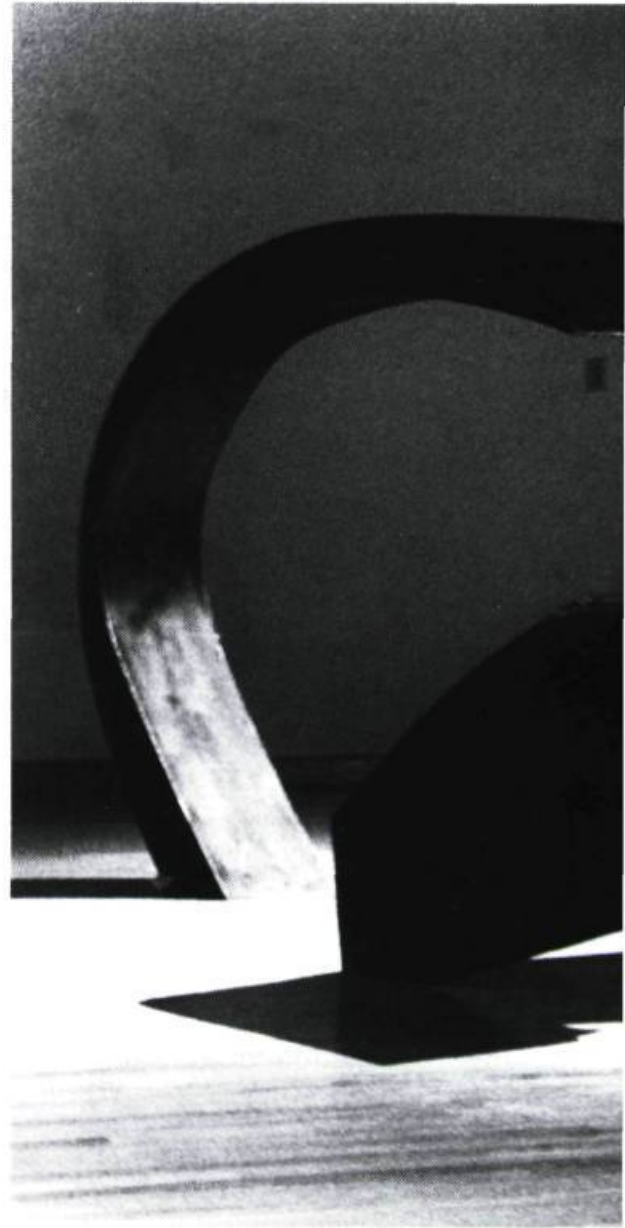
The most recent piece in the exhibition, *Les Vases Communicants* (1994), consists of three primary structures of varying height and configuration. Each has, however, been "hollowed out", revealing an inner landscape of sand, of waves, and of the sea. In this work, Millette not only acknowledges the legacy of modernism but reinvests it with interior space - a psychologically private space that has no exterior reference. Moving from a closure to an opening, it can be seen as a synthesis of Millette's concerns.

The formal qualities of Millette's work attest to his skills as a craftsman, and his knowledge of his materials and structural form. However, it is in the manipulation of these qualities, and the dualistic nature of the work, that Millette reveals the depth of his inquiry. He has created a series of sensuous objects that speak of contrasts and oppositional forces: movement/captivity, negative/positive, interior/exterior, existence/dissolution, presence/absence, permanence/mutability. Using the sea as his metaphor, Millette reflects on these factors and their elusive, paradoxical nature.

These incongruous elements are perhaps most evident in the inherent qualities of the material he uses. The connotation of cold, hard steel and the shiny sleekness of stainless steel has been transformed, in Millette's sculpture, into a warm and seductive fluidity of forms. In a similar manner, the net/mesh motif, the wave-like cut-outs, and the arc-forms set up a dialogue of opposing concepts in which the "missing" physical construct becomes as dynamic a presence as the form from which it has been displaced. The reconstitution of this negative space has been made visible through the cast shadows and in the reconstructed appendages.

The dynamics of space as a "felt" presence is demonstrated in Millette's perspicacious placement of forms in *Le Ressac* (1993). A large horizontal steel form, arched like a beached whale, is captured at one end in a mesh basket/net. To one side floats another perforated piece, sliced at an angle. Rising like a cresting wave over the form, is a large steel arc suspended in time.

The inert objects in *Le Ressac*, however, defy gravity. Their movement - vertically, as they rise/sink into the illusory sea/floor; or horizontally as they float over the calmed surface - is evoked as clearly as if they were part of



a Disney-style animation. Captive and frozen in time, the work has been activated by the interaction of the objects in space rather than by the viewer's motion of walking in, out and around each piece.

This is not to say that Millette's work operates independently of the observer's actions. In fact, it is only through a physical dialogue with each sculpture, experiencing it from a variety of positions, that its underlying vulnerability is revealed. Circumscribing the works, one is reminded of the temporal nature of human existence and the universal need, throughout history, to leave markers as evidence of man's presence. Permanence, often seen as sculpture's most enduring quality, is not, however, immutable. A contradiction, perhaps, but as I reflect on Millette's sculpture, the lines from Shelly's poem, *Ozymandias*², are evoked:

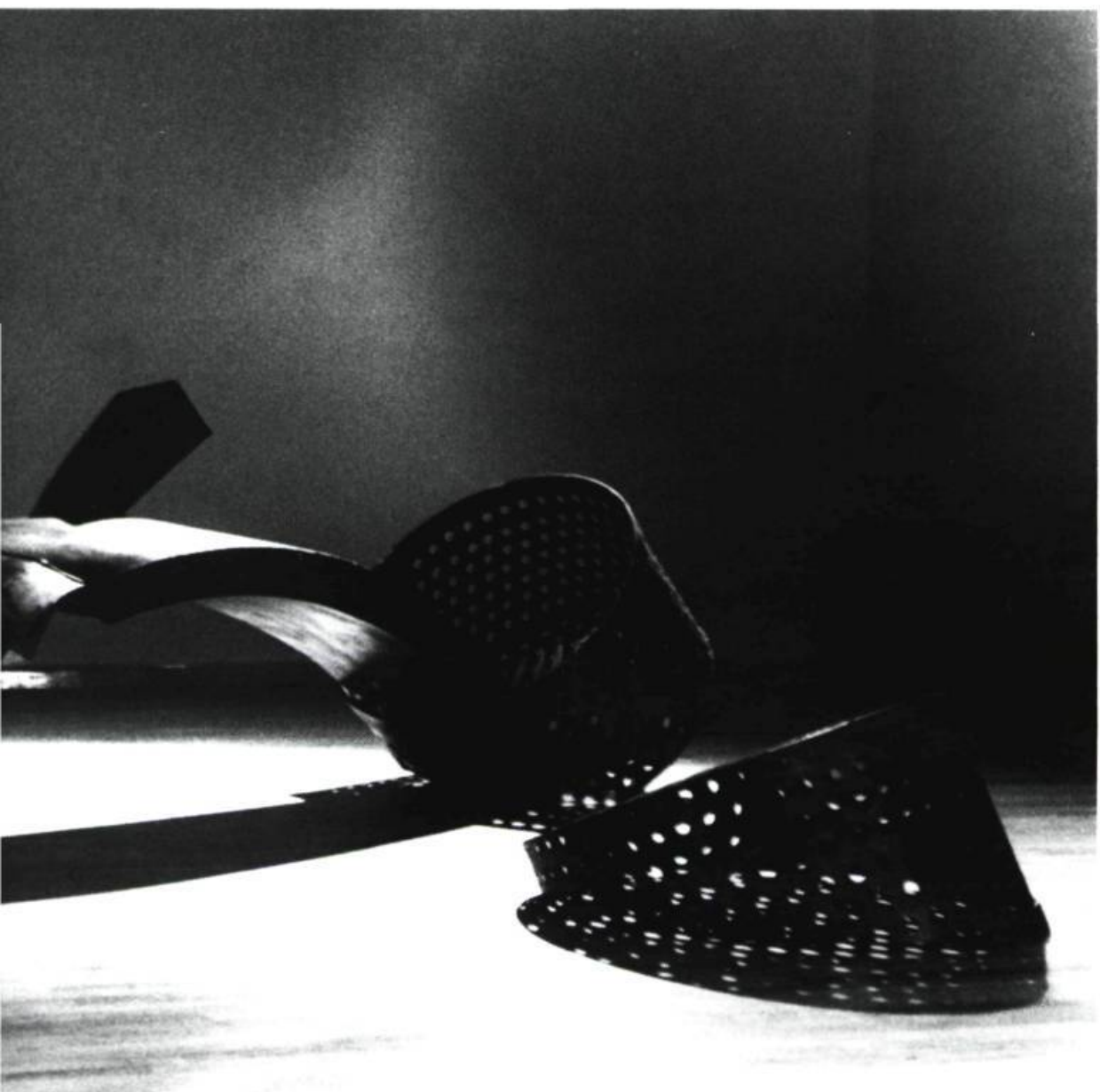


PHOTO : FRANÇOIS LARIVIÈRE

Claude Millette, *Le Ressac*, 1993. Welded steel; 165 x 320 x 320 cm.

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said - "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert [sic]...

And on the pedestal, these words appear :
My name is *Ozymandias*, King of Kings,
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

It is man's vulnerability, rather than the futility of the human condition, that Millette addresses. Reflecting on the omnipresence of nature, the sea, and the powers of creation, Millette does not deny the opposing forces of destruction and decay - that state of commotion, the *tumulte* that lies beneath both man and nature. Nor does he disavow the

complexities and restraints that each imposes. Instead, he offers the viewer Shelly's "boundless sands" in the interminable sea and infinite space.

The essence of Millette's sculpture is found in its capacity to conjure up not only absence as presence, "the space between the notes", but the intangible within the corporeal. Rather than fragments from a broken discourse, Claude Millette's sculpture celebrates the object, its own physicality and the time/space it inhabits - and within it, a human optimism that remains timeless.

JOYCE MILLAR

NOTES

1. *La naissance* is erected in front of Le Centre culturel, Ville de Verdun, and was not shown in this exhibition.
2. *Ozymandias* is the Greek name for the Egyptian ruler, Ramses II, 13th century B.C.