

Pierre Racine : *Paper in Passage (3-D)*, Maison des arts de Laval, November 11th — December 5th, 1994

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Pierre Racine.
Passage, 1993.
 Bronze, ciment.
 33,02 x 22,86 x
 7,62 cm. Photo :
 P. Racine.

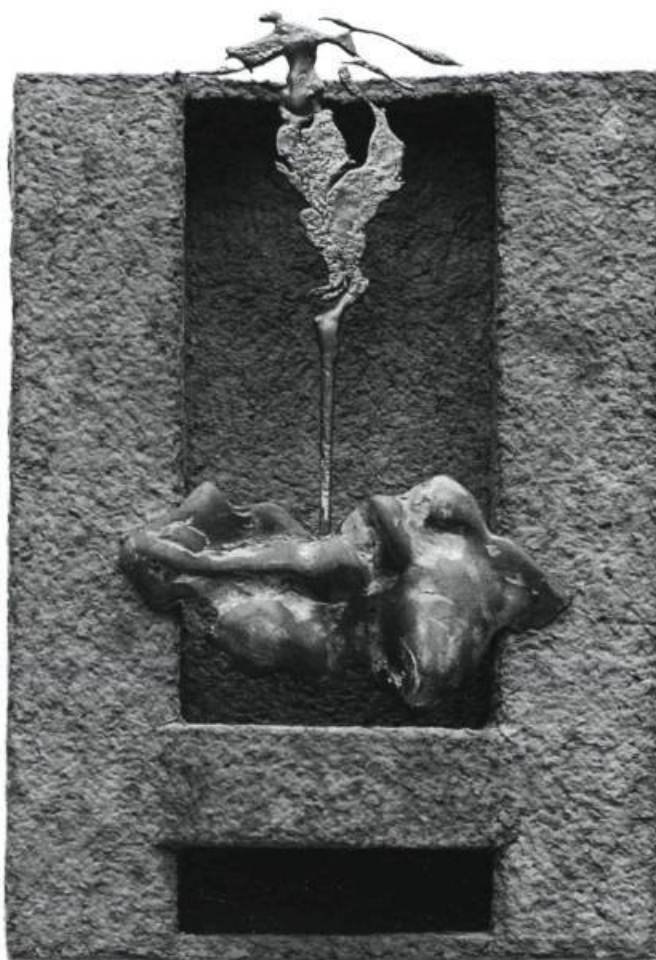
presque d'éternité, et c'est ici que le système de paradoxes prend toute sa complexité. De par le titre *Lent vol de roches*, une notion de mouvement ascensionnel est associée à la matière inerte, de même que celle d'apesanteur, de non-gravité, d'union entre air et terre. Le vol c'est le déplacement de la matière, opposé au déplacement qu'effectue le spectateur autour et dans l'oeuvre. Le vol c'est aussi le mouvement fugitif, l'instant, au contraire du temps figé, ancré dans le sol tel que suggéré par la pierre. Dans cet ordre d'idées, la disposition globale des éléments rend l'oeuvre encore plus éloquente. Alors que le parcours commence avec des pierres solidement disposées au sol, le cheminement amène la matière à s'alléger, certaines parties de roches sont en suspension. La trajectoire se termine par l'éclatement du cadre de la galerie, car le dernier élément, accroché au plafond dans un coin de la pièce, donne l'impression de traverser le mur et nie la limite de l'espace d'exposition.

La pierre se présente en général comme matière inerte. Ici, cependant, la roche devient matière vivante. L'ajout de minuscules fils d'or sur la surface crée un réseau de veines faisant vibrer la matière qui devient le lieu de passage d'une énergie, tout comme le sang circulant à l'intérieur de l'organisme humain.

Aux fausses pierres viennent se mêler des roches véritables. Celles-ci, beaucoup plus petites, sont disposées sur un lit de sable qui recouvre une partie du sol. Des images couleur y sont également appliquées, ce qui accentue l'ambiguïté entre le vrai et le faux. Où s'arrête le simulacre, où commence la réalité? Ces dernières sont disposées selon un parcours linéaire, comme des repères, un peu à la façon de ces petits galets que les personnages de contes de fées laissent derrière eux pour marquer leur chemin et éviter de s'égarer.

Peut-être est-ce là une des clés du travail de Diane Laurier que de servir à son tour de lieu de repère permettant d'identifier des étapes. Ce serait une marche à suivre à travers le cheminement de l'humanité, tout autant qu'un survol. ■

Michel Grenier



■
 Pierre Racine: *Paper in Passage (3-D)*
 Maison des arts de Laval
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■
 Marking a return to spiritual sources, while at the same time spurning the old-fashioned hierarchically organized religions, Pierre Racine's art draws from a variety of cultural sources, including his own Celtic background and pre-Columbian art and architecture. Whether the traditional cast cement, bronze and stone sculpture seen in his earliest work, or his latest cotton pulp paper sculptures, his works pay tribute to both his own Western heritage and cultural origins and the diverse cultural contributions of Americas' indigenous peoples. The intercultural references one finds in Racine's art are influenced by his travels abroad to Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, as well as repeated visits to Europe. Symbolic archetypes, hieratic and universal forms from a diverse range of cultures he witnessed during visits to such sites as the ancient Inca ruins and temples of Macchu Picchu in the mountains of Peru, resurface in surprisingly

unorthodox ways during the slow process of paper sculpting.

From 1976, when he began his early apprenticeship in cement casting from clay with Wolfgang Krol and John Ivor-Smith at Concordia, Racine's development as a sculptor has involved learning one material technique in depth and then moving on to the next. In the early 1980s, he began to explore sculpting in stone, and by the late 1980s he was experimenting with bronze casting using the process of *cire perdue*. The difficulties of the stone sculpting process, along with the closing of Atelier Sculpt's studio space on St. Laurent Blvd. (before the move to rue Masson) eventually prompted him to try paper cast sculpture — an infinitely lighter and more flexible medium.

Paper sculpture has enabled Racine to create larger works in a more readily accessible manner without the studio space requirements and the material costs required of heavy stone sculpture and bronze casting. Dry powder pigment dyes or naturally coloured paper pulp are carefully layered onto a form using a spatula no bigger than a table knife. After the pulp has dried, the process of painting with pulp in 3-D and cam-

ouflaging the under-form is repeated until the final form has been achieved. The colour variations and textural tensions inherent in cotton, flax and a wide variety of natural fibres have also made it possible for Racine to achieve effects less common to more conventional sculptural media.

In the late 80s, Racine met Pop artist Michel Boutet and the two became good friends. While studying papermaking in France at the *École des Beaux-arts* in Dijon with such masters as Niki de Saint-Phalle, an artist whose colourful outdoor paper sculptures created for parks in Europe have proven to be as weather resistant as they are environmentally adaptable, Boutet learned of an old papermaking recipe that combined sawdust, rabbit skin glue and cotton pulp, and passed it on to Racine. In 1988, the same year he exhibited his sculptures with Michel Boutet at the 3rd International Salon de Paris; Pierre Racine wandered into a retrospective show of works by a little known Polish multimedia artist Jean Lambert-Rucki (1888-1967) at Galerie Jacques de Vos in Paris. Lambert-Rucki's spontaneous use of simple, abstract design shapes, and unorthodox use of a variety of materials had a profound effect on Racine's subsequent work. Upon returning to Montreal, Racine produced *Guerrier sans conscience* (1989), whose neo-primitive geometries, freestanding iconic shape, and textural effects echo Rucki's eclectic *laissez faire* sense of style. Materials are used in a literal way to humanize the expression. The forthright simplicity and abstract sense of the paper sculptures from this period are reminiscent of ancient Minoan, Etruscan and Oceanic sculpture.

It was during the 4th International Biennale of Paper Art at the Leopold-Hoesch Museum in Duren, Germany in 1992, where Pierre Racine and American-born Montreal-based artist Kathryn Lipke represented Canada, that a German critic disparagingly referred to Racine as the "bad boy of paper art" because he used sawdust in his paper pulp casts. In the more progressive sculptural, painterly and installation media the criticism

would be considered redundant, but paper art circles are renowned for their traditionally purist sanctity, so much so that Racine's modest cross-over from a craft medium to sculptural exploration looks positively non-conformist.

created. Because Racine's sculpture objects do not simply appropriate and juxtapose readymade objects but instead involve an intuitive, cathartic process of transforming materials, they could be considered a more private kind of expression

formation, reincarnation and the after-life. The mottled light and colour effects in the first piece, an empty wax-covered cardboard box, suggests the formative stage of life. The empty box composed of pigmented cement that follows has a more concrete, albeit mysterious solidity to it, while the central piece presents a bronze miniature within a barnboard frame. A red paper box containing a bronze cast off from the *cire perdue* process is set above a cast cement piece that looks like a stone, while the final cast bronze box is empty and shrine-like. Despite their small scale, these sculptures seem more resolved and complete than the larger works in the show. Seen as a whole, they conjure up the image of a series of miniature windows or altars.

A contemplative response to spiritual questions raised by modern-day life, Racine's *Passage* series, like the large-scale works in the show, question the destructive effect that organized religions have had on modern culture. Part of an ongoing trend among contemporary artists and musicians to adopt themes of ceremony and ritual in their work while rejecting the West's religious traditions, this "spiritual trend", because it is so personal and individualistic, can become a kind of spiritual shopping, something entirely at odds with the tribal or collective social sense one finds in both pagan (monadic) and organized (hierarchical) religions. Nevertheless, because it is so personal, it markedly contrasts the religious and mediatic exhibitionism one finds in Andres Serrano's infamous *Piss Christ* (1987) or his large-scale photographic series titled *The Morgue* currently on view at Montreal's Musée d'art contemporain, (ironically inspired by Serrano's reverence for the sensuous Catholicism of his Afro-Cuban roots).

Celtic Tower (1993), the latest of Racine's *Towers* series, evidences the influence of Racine's own Celtic roots and interest in Celtic mythology. The piece consists of a Celtic cross with anchor set atop a rectangular cast cement structure with sand and artificial cement rocks arranged around its base. From sand, a primary element from which rocks are formed, to a representation of a man-made carved structure and the pagan religious symbol atop the piece, Racine's *Celtic Tower* suggests that for all their so-called primitive rituals and cultural rites, pagan cultures were spiritually closer to nature than the organized

religions that grew out of them. These large scale pieces are not portable in the way ancient pagan tribal amulets or jewellery might be, but their shapes and forms engender a similar response in the viewer.

Can a profound understanding of materials ensure a greater quality of communication between artist and viewer than didactic, object-based or mediatic imagery? Racine believes the universal energy and transformative potential inherent in materials can evoke spiritual and mythological associations in the viewer and artist alike. The alliteration and quasi-poetic expressions found in his earliest stone, cast cement and bronze sculptures have evolved into a more abstract design and compositional style that, at its best, acts as an unconscious trigger for tribal and mythical associations. While the simple linear forms in Racine's larger paper sculptures enhance this feeling, the overt symbolism he occasionally adopts is less convincing. We attribute entirely different meanings to primitive or pagan symbols than those originally intended, with the benefit of hindsight. It is Racine's abstract sense of design, shape and form, his search for the transformative potential inherent in materials and the creative process, that more successfully evoke instinctual, tribal or mythical unknowns.

Racine is presently working on a major installation piece titled *Family in Crisis*, scheduled to be exhibited at the Museo dell'Arte Moderna in Mexico City in 1995. The installation comprises three elements that are intended to represent the phenomena of family disintegration in contemporary society. Three tornado-like shapes, one made of paper, another of steel wool, and the third of vines, rope and various media will be suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition space, projecting a feeling of spatial and environmental disruption. A white wooden wheel dissected by eight arched spokes, and placed beneath these at an angle on the gallery floor, will present Racine's interpretation of the family tree, while on the wall behind the installation, a photo mural consisting of three black and white enlargements of homeless people in the modern-day megalopolis will be hung. ■

John K. Grande.



Pierre Racine, *Passage*, 1993. Bronze, wood. 33.02 x 22.86 x 7.62 cm. Photo: P. Racine.

Although Racine broke the standard stereotypes associated with paper art — the

two-dimensional fixation of the craft-like paper art syndrome — by using unconventional materials to make three-dimensional sculpture, this did not stop Germany's Leopold-Hoesch Museum from acquiring one of Racine's work for its permanent collection.

One of the highlights of Racine's current show at the Maison des arts de Laval consists of a series of five intimate Joseph Cornell-type box assemblages titled *The Passage* (1992). Whereas Cornell's box presented and assembled curio objects collected for their potential to stimulate nostalgic or surreal associations, each element of Racine's sculptures is entirely self-

than Cornell's. As Racine says "It is rare that I preconceive a piece. I work with a sense of spontaneity through emotions and thoughts, whereby the slow cycle of applying and drying of the pulp allows one to evaluate the work in progress. The materials in themselves stimulate the creative process and have a life of their own. Until you properly master them, they control you. It takes years to acquire a working sensibility and competence in working with paper in three dimensions." A sort of mini-retrospective of the various sculpting techniques he has worked with over the years, the five box set that comprises *The Passage*, each box the same size, is arranged horizontally along the gallery walls, shifting materials and sculptural techniques from one piece to the next. They reflect Racine's preoccupation with trans-