

Bladen and Murray The Giants of Canadian Sculpture

Joan Lowndes

Numéro 59, été 1970

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/58066ac>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (imprimé)

1923-3183 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Lowndes, J. (1970). Bladen and Murray: The Giants of Canadian Sculpture. *Vie des arts*, (59), 22–25.

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 sculptors: the Industrial Edge and had a one-man show at the Jewish Museum, to pick only the highlights.

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 Paulo, where he won one of the eight International Awards. His big Cumbria of yellow Cor-ten steel (at the moment abominably sited in front of a Shell gas station) was acquired by the Department of Transport for the Vancouver International Airport.

Canada cannot feel reproachful towards artists who have accepted the challenge of New York, any more than in the past it has repudiated Morrice, Borduas and Riopelle who all, in their day, went where "the best tennis was played". Its role must be to foster every opportunity for such New York-based artists to retain links with the land of their birth.

It was while Bladen was back in Vancouver last year because of a serious illness of his mother's that Tony Emery, director of the Vancouver Art Gallery, recognized him at the opening of New York 13 and made the first tentative overtures for a show. From then on the VAG proceeded with its customary boldness, turning over all

its main exhibition area to three mammoth sculptures by Bladen, six by Murray. Perhaps only in a place so far removed from New York with its abrasive jealousies between galleries (Bladen handled by Fischbach, Murray by Betty Parsons) and the concomitant questions of prestige, could such a joint presentation have been realized.

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.



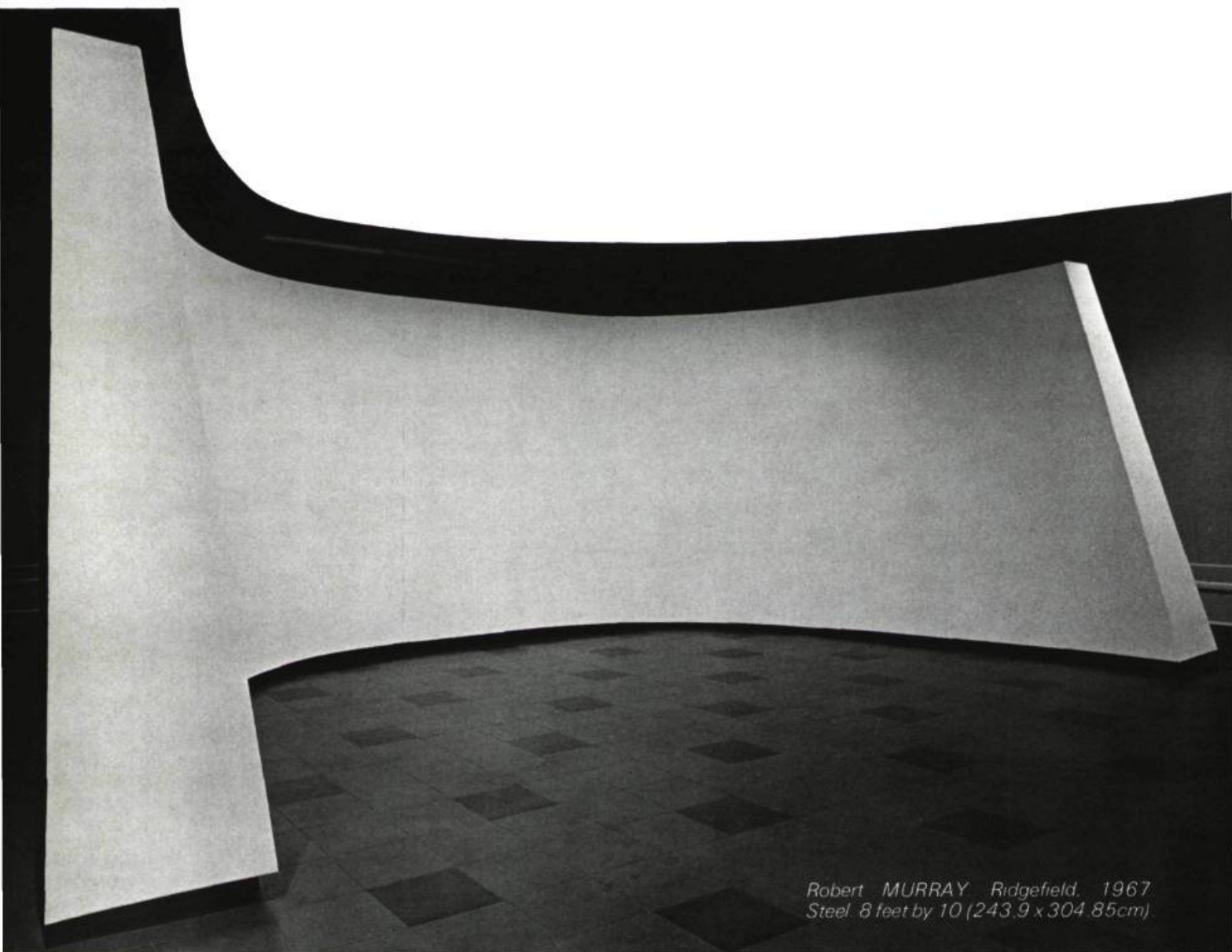
Ronald BLADEN. *Untitled Sculpture*, 1969-1970. Painted wood. 9 feet by 15 by 23. (274.35 x 457.15 x 711.1cm).

AND MURRAY

The result was a powerful assembly which literally gobbled up the gallery space. After Dan Flavin's fluorescent light, dissolving partitions in tinted air; after the black warehouse conceptualist show 955,000, evocative of Pascal's remark: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me" we were exposed to a third experience 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 sculpturally communicated exhilarating energy.

Bladen is at this point the most impressive artist I know. Murray, eighteen years his junior, more productive, versatile and driving, may have the greatest potential. Bladen is

BLADEN



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

the Giants of Canadian Sculpture

by Joan LOWNDES

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

been called a concrete expressionist and a minimalist but for all artists of real stature, he escapes categorization. In the Vancouver catalogue—which refreshingly, instead of the set prelude of praise by a name critic, gives us direct contact with the artists through conversation taped during the week or more when they were setting up. Bladen is quoted as follows: "I'm an incurable romantic—so my pieces are essentially emotional, poetic, romantic. They are not involved in geometrics. I use geometric shapes because I don't like organic ones but my purpose is to produce an emotional impact . . ."

It is a 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 chatter 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 Objecthood" (Art Forum, June 1967) correctly apprehended the element of theatre in the sculpture of the Sixties but then added flatly: "theatre 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 this "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 driven to go around the back of it, around its black secret side which, unlike the front, reveals itself only a little 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 1'9", the top and three sides enameled black, the outer surface finished with not too highly polished aluminum. About 10' apart they slant across the oblong room under a subdued light, like menhirs under a brooding sky. Their structure is deceptively simple (in that sense minimal) but as you come close to them, you note that as with Cathedral Evening they must have a mysterious internal system of counter-weights, for they are tilted upwards at an angle from the floor. On their aluminum face one's aggressive

instincts are aroused and one is tempted to try and push them over, whereas standing under their overhanging dark underside one reacts to their ominous quality. Some children in the gallery have been frightened enough to cry.

This piece, which has been commissioned in metal in three outdoor versions, brings up the whole question of indoor-outdoor environment. Bladen's pieces derive much of their effectiveness from bulkiness within a container; outdoors they would not confront one so inescapably. Bladen makes it clear in the catalogue that "prototypes" is for him an expedient term. Built by him first in his studio, largely intuitively, then dismantled and reconstructed in the exhibition space, they are not mere models for something more permanent. He says: "I start with these pieces and they are the pieces to me. This is where I'm involved and that's an end of it. When they become translated they are the same, yet they are not the same. I am wrapped up in producing these, or building them, so that they have part of my soul . . ."

And more specifically, on the matter of their being keyed to interior space, he muses lucidly: "I need these limitations—a relationship—in order to confine myself, or in order to do something—not to become chaotic—to make something that belongs to that space for that particular reason."

With Murray on 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 Prairies: 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 been influences.)

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. Crocus, maroon, dark blue, oyster are his colors in this exhibition, in gleaming epoxy enamel as inviolate as 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 build 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 Mackenzie Gallery in Regina he explained that "by participating in the making of the sculpture, it is possible to watch and react 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 came 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" that 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 an upper and lower section. All the articulations reveal similar subtleties.

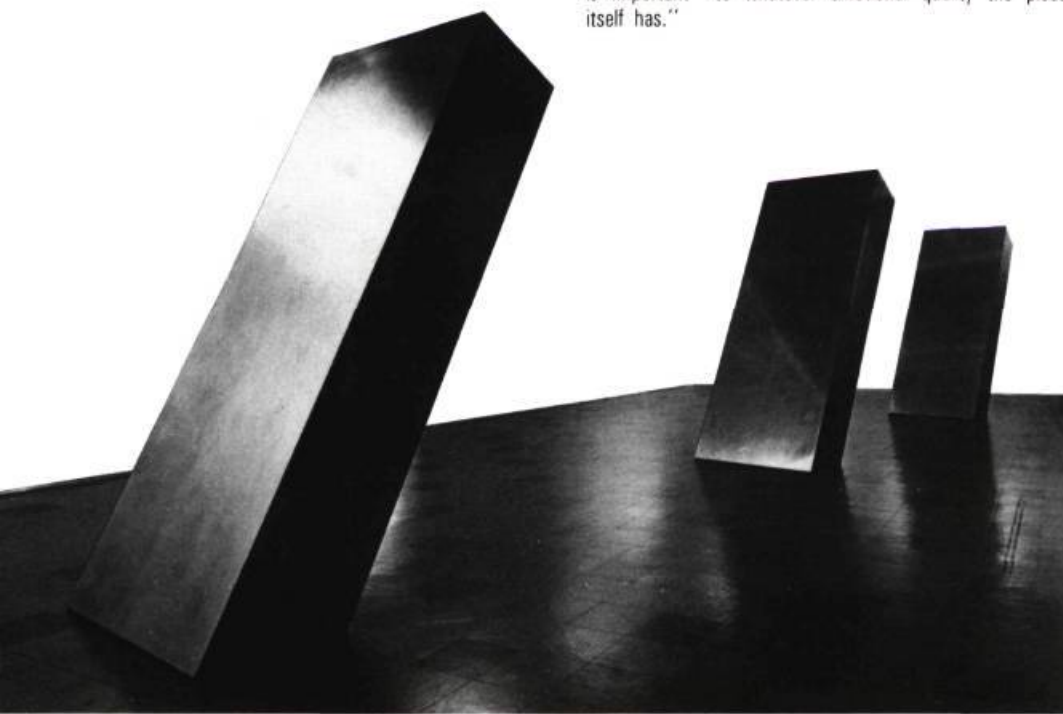
Although Murray's six pieces in Vancouver were not quite the equal of the five which the National Gallery selected for the Sao Paulo Biennial, they did demonstrate the range of his inventiveness. Athabasca (1966-67) grew in part from seeing the crimping of huge metal plates in the Bethlehem Steel Shipyard in California, when Murray participated in a sculpture symposium at the Long Beach State College. It is the only volumetric, architectonic piece: two leaning half shells, a half-tower of Pisa. (How could our period inspire any visually secure work of art?) As with Bladen the viewer must be a participant, passing through the corridor of uneven width between the shells. Athabasca was imaginatively exploited during a multi-media performance at the Gallery in which dancers slowly circled through it.

Ridgefield (1967), so named probably for the corrugated ready-made steel called Q-decking which Murray used here for the first time, erects a barrier 8' by 10' which the viewer is forced to go around. This he can do either through an attached "doorway" on the right, or a half "doorway" on the left. It is from the side that Ridgefield's thin slab, held upright by the counterpoise of the "doorways", is most interesting. On the "back" a basket-weave motif added to the memory of the Q-decking on the "front", makes an over-fussy surface unlike Murray's usual economy of means.

La Guardia (1968) exemplifies Lucy Lippard's pregnant remark that once man has flown, he can never see the world in the same way. This horizontal floor-hugging piece was built at a time when Murray, who owns his own plane, was doing a lot of flying. The narrow "runway" passing under and compressed by the hoop, was suggested by "the way a plane moves down in controlled stages during a landing."

Becca's H (1968-69) would be a gaunt skyscraper in calligraphy without its central planar diagonal, a form which recurs throughout Murray's oeuvre in such sculptures as Duet, Cumbria, Bank, Arroyo and Pueblo. The stability of the H offsets the sliding movement of the diagonal and this interplay is realized on the daringly ambitious scale of 12'9" by 16'10" by 7'6".

Chilcotin (1969) engages the viewer at an unexpected level: it is 6' high. As Murray has aptly expressed "it's literally a table-top experience . . . There's is a kind of Alice-in-Wonderland quality. It has the appearance of a table as you walk up to it, but by the time you've got there this literalness disappears and you almost feel you are shrinking."



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 731.6cm).
5. Robert MURRAY. *Becca's H*, 1968-1969. Painted steel and aluminum. 12 feet 3/4 by 165/6 (388.75 x 513.15cm).
6. Robert MURRAY. *Capilano*, 1969. Steel. 6 feet 1/2 by 18 1/4 by 7 1/2 (198.15 x 556.35 x 228.65cm).



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)

