

Ron Kostyniuk

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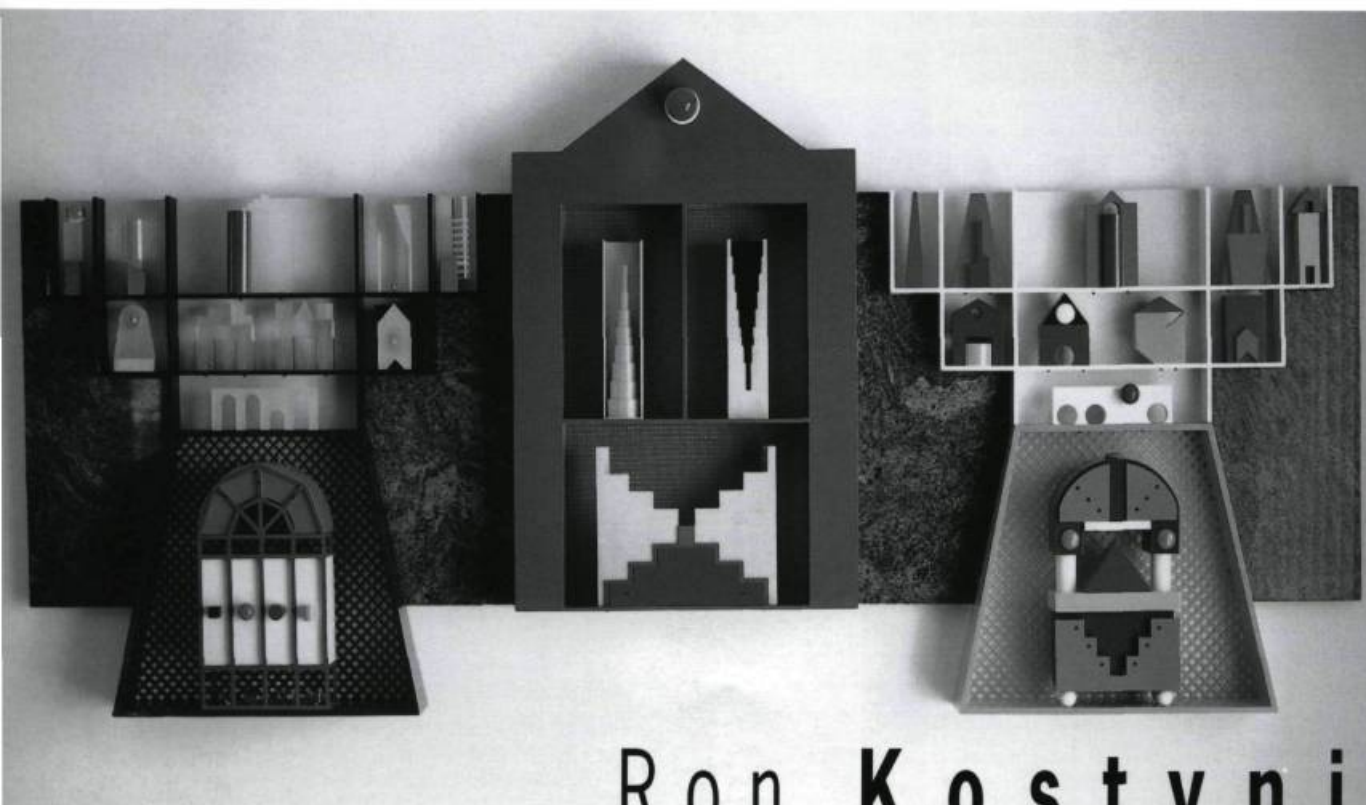
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Ron Kostyniuk, *For Mies and Paolo*, 1988. Painted wood, stone, glass, metal/Bois peint, pierre, verre, métal. 2,13,36 x 9,39 x 2,03 cm. Photo : R. Kostyniuk.



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Ron Kostyniuk's mother always checked the pockets of his jeans before putting them in the weekly wash. Reaching down inside, her hands would discover at least one rock, maybe four or five. Sometimes the contents of the pockets would include a magpie feather that flashed iridescent blue in the sun, or bits of grey, crumbly stuff — the squashed remains of a mushroom, or a bird's egg.

Other pockets would disclose other kinds of treasures. Nuts and bolts. A length of coloured wire. Shiny brass clockwork sprockets. She would smile, knowing these were essential ingredients for one of her son's innumerable construction projects.

There never was any question of keeping him amused. Whenever he wasn't out exploring the prairie terrain around Wakaw, Saskatchewan, the intensely curious young man would be busy inside his dad's tool shed, happily building or fixing things.

These parallel activities, seemingly unrelated during Kostyniuk's boyhood, are the dual baselines for this internationally-known artist's work. Since 1965, Kostyniuk's relief sculptures have been shown in over 100 exhibitions in North America and Europe.

I first encountered Kostyniuk's art several years ago in the glossy marble mezzanine of Calgary's Amoco Centre. Intrigued by the crayon-bright 17-foot architectural sculpture, I stopped for a closer look. Other visitors also paused to look at the sculpture. All of us walked away smiling.

When I mentioned the seven-panel *Memories* relief to artist friends, they said it was one of Kostyniuk's Constructivist sculptures. Seeing my blank expression, they quickly explained that Constructivism was somewhere between painting and sculpture.

An invitation to Kostyniuk's north-west Calgary home gave me an opportunity to learn about the historical development of constructed relief as a sculpture form, and Kostyniuk's personal involvement as one of the idiom's influential practitioners.

As we toured Kostyniuk's gallery-like residence filled with immaculately displayed examples of his work over the past 30 years, the University of Calgary art professor explained the rationale for his sculptures and outlined the formal roots of the Constructivist art movement.

According to Kostyniuk, Constructivism evolved from the planar concepts of

a number of painters during the first two decades of this century.¹ As examples, he reminded me of Cézanne's fragmentation of landscape forms into tiny coloured squares and oblongs, Picasso's paintings, and Mondrian's analytical refinement of Cubism.

Although these planar innovations were appreciated and admired in North America, the first forms of relief construction were mostly explored by Russian and Eastern European artists, who, instead of painting geometric elements on canvas, used paper, wood, and other materials to construct three-dimensional, painting-sized "reliefs".

Kostyniuk's earliest sculptures, dating from the mid-1960s when he was a high school biology teacher in Edmonton, employed painted wood blocks arranged on a square or rectangular surface. To my eyes, they resembled a grownup's version of Lego pieces, or Montessori rods — clever, cerebral exercises in controlled colour and form.

Noting my hesitancy, Kostyniuk slowed our home tour to talk about his continuing interest in molecular organization, the random precision of crystal formation, the kinetics of butterflies. He explained that some sculptures were

Ron Kostyniuk,
Memories, 1989.
 Aluminum with
 enamel/Aluminium
 peint. 228,6 x
 518,16 x 40,64 cm.
 Amoco Tower,
 Calgary. Photo :
 R. Kostyniuk.



“visual analogs of cell structure”, while others were based on inorganic forms as minerals.

Suddenly I could see beyond the mathematically-inclined models to the spirit of the artist — how his deep respect for the natural world has nurtured hand and heart; how he filtered his emotional responses through an academic objectivity, transforming reality into sculptural metaphors.

In one room, sharing the space with his sculptures, is his specimen collection. Huge rock crystals. Exotic sea shells. In Kostyniuk’s mind there is no separation between art and science, between the human creative process and the manifestations of the natural world. Where other artists might take inspiration from a life experience or a psychological insight, Kostyniuk’s art is firmly based on truths that can be validated.

“If ideas are going to be truly inherent in and unique to the individual producing them, they will be evolutionary. My work grows in a step-by-step manner, with successive works being predicated on previous works, not unlike scientific methodology”, Kostyniuk has written.

He tells me he believes we can explain ourselves through objective analy-

sis, but when I ask him about the playfulness I see in the *Memories* sculpture, Kostyniuk lapses into reminiscences about long summer days during his childhood, and watching the bitterns on the lake. He recalls the clarity of light, and sunsets that “lit campfires in the sky”. He says that children today don’t have the same kind of freedom to explore and to dream. Laughing, he adds that small prairie towns of the 1950s nurtured an extraordinary generation of all-star hockey players — and artists.

We end the tour in his studio. He shows me a three-panel sculpture, almost completed. It is a companion piece to *Memories*. Unlike his reliefs based on nature’s structures, Kostyniuk’s current sculptures draw on an image bank of familiar western Canadian architectural symbols (the ubiquitous grain elevator, for instance), and the criss-cross grids of townshipline roads and transmission towers. Underlying each matrix is Kostyniuk’s finely-honed design skill and technical proficiency with materials — both at the service of a fully intellectualized sense of play. ■

NOTE :

1. The Constructivist artist strives to adopt a creative position of “transformer” or “facilitator” who,

through art, creates visual analogues to nature’s created forms, thereby producing creations about a creation. Although interested in objective reality to provide a source for visual vocabulary of colour, form, space, light and time. The artist endeavors to achieve an art parallel to nature and not an art as a mimic of nature. Nature provides the artist with a source and modus operandum which filters through the alembic of the artist to be modified by what Naum Gabo described as a “turbulent sea full of all kinds of impressions, responses and experiences as well as feelings and emotions”. (R. Kostyniuk, 1989).

L’auteur souligne le plaisir qu’elle a ressenti en découvrant pour la première fois l’oeuvre de Ron Kostyniuk. C’est au milieu des années soixante, alors qu’il travaille comme professeur de biologie, que l’artiste réalise ses premières sculptures en relief. Ron Kostyniuk abolit toute distance entre l’art et la nature. Il poursuit et renouvelle le mouvement constructiviste en s’inspirant, entre autres, des structures moléculaires que l’on trouve dans la nature, de la planéité des oeuvres de certains artistes du début du siècle et de la géométrisation des plans colorés dans les paysages de Cézanne. Ses oeuvres présentent des analogies visuelles de structures cellulaires ou inorganiques. Depuis quelques années, elles intègrent des éléments qui sont typiques du paysage de l’Ouest canadien : silo à grain, tour de transmission, quadrillage et entrecroisement de routes. Dans les oeuvres de Kostyniuk, le ludique se mêle à l’esprit rationnel et cartésien.